

Professional Identity Development of Pre-service EFL Teachers
through Discourse Socialization Practices

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ABSTRACT

The active participation of several pre-service EFL teachers in discourse socialization practices facilitated learning in a collaborative learning community. Their academic discourse socialization developed their professional identity in several aspects. Through involvement in discourse practices, the participants underwent the process of identity construction as a legitimate member of their discourse community. The participants shared their personal practical experiences and scaffolded their peers. As a non-stop process, the identity construction of the participants was continuously influenced by their prior learning and teaching experiences, knowledge from disciplinary materials and fieldwork experiences as pre-service English teachers. The influence of the discourse practices was overwhelming as they experienced a shift of professional identity to feel like relative experts. The participants reconstructed their identity. They felt more committed to their EFL local community, and they saw themselves as members who could be more contributing to their local community. The group discussions provided enough chances for the participants to feel like a community member and voice their professional identity through participating in discussions.

Keywords: discourse community, collegial discussion, professional identity, student teaching

INTRODUCTION

Teachers' professional development is likely to affect teachers' self-identity if they enhance their pedagogical knowledge, experience new teaching practices and engage in reflective practices (Dadds, 1993). Flores and Day(2006) suggest professional development activities are effective when they provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their beliefs and teaching practices critically. One of the significant effects of teacher professional development should be focusing on not just external enhancements in pedagogical practices but also on changing the way they see their pedagogical selves and identities as teachers through reflection (ibid).

Research on teacher identity, however, shows that there are different views concerning the relationship between identity and knowledge. One view sees identity as a constituent of teacher's knowledge (Olsen,2008) and the other one views knowledge as separate and fixed (Smith, 2007). There is a third view which depicts teacher knowledge in close connection to teacher identity (Johnston, Pawan, & Mahan-Taylor, 2005). When pre-service or in-service EFL teachers are accepted into an academic programme or any other teacher education programme, they bring along their prior beliefs about L2 learning and teaching based on their own experiences, which is highly likely to inform their understanding of their professional self and identity. After being more involved with their peers and mentors in these programs, they can assert a more complete membership in their discourse community and these results in an evolving identity transition. According to Varghese et al.(2005), we need a better understanding of "the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which teachers claim or which are assigned to them" (p.22) to find out how EFL/ESL teachers make sense of their professional goals and what their perceptions are towards their professional roles in their classrooms.

When teachers are engaged in educational practices, they bring with them their background as learners, their social, linguistic and cultural background, and their prior experiences as a teacher. When teachers form a community of learning in a teacher training class, each of them has their own specific experiences of the educational settings influenced by a large number of factors and builds meaning of teaching pertinent to the unique setting where they have experienced learning or teaching. Construction of teacher identity is a line of research which has attracted a lot of researchers in teacher education (Marsh, 2002). It includes a constant process of construction and negotiation, and can be seen as a process which is under the influence of social interactions and integrates the individual with its surrounding teaching context (Britzman, 1991). Recently, studies in teacher education have given lots of attention to identity as considerable field of research and as a means to make sense of teacher professional development though undergoing transformation and construing the effect of school dynamics on the teachers' sense of self (Gee, 2001). To support this argument, (Hammerness, et al., 2005) points that "the identities teachers develop shape their dispositions, where they place their efforts, whether and how they seek out professional development opportunities, and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role" (pp.384).

In this process, teachers develop a voice that relates to particular ways of knowing and experiencing the world, Each of our images of what constitutes knowing, and hence knowledge, is part of what structures one's subjectivity. what is valued as truth or discarded as fiction, how one defines her relationship to the world and to others, what is believed about power and

powerlessness, when one takes interpretative risks, feels the right to make interpretations and theorizes about experience, what is taken for granted in familiar and unfamiliar situations, and how one understands teaching and learning. (Britzman, 1991, p. 24). Identity, as Gee (2001) explains, is the outcome of the interpretation obtained from the interactions between the individual and his or her surrounding context. Teachers' sense of self is gained through internalization which is the result of active interpretation and appropriation of their collective relationships with the context (Britzman, 1991). As a dynamic and multi-layered process of interpretation and appropriation, "teacher identity is continually being informed, formed, and reformed as individuals develop over time and through interaction with others"(Cooper & Olson, 1996, p. 80).

It is generally believed by educational researchers concerned with teacher education (e.g. Pajares, 1992; Kennedy, 2005) that the beliefs held by practicing and even prospective teachers mainly form before they enter professional training programs (Kennedy, 2005) and the results from empirical studies have indicated that these shaped beliefs are insubordinate to future alterations (Zeichner & Gore, 1990) to a great extent unless education programs attempt to provide opportunities for the participant teachers to juxtapose their prior beliefs and new ones which are affirmed in the content of professional development materials.

Most studies deal with EFL teachers who are educated in English speaking countries and there are few studies addressing their professional identity formation in a second or foreign language context (Pennycook, 1999). How the professional identity of EFL teachers are shaped or undergo transition can call for more investigation as these teachers may experience unique challenges due to their "dual identities" of being both L2 learners and teachers. However, the formation of professional teacher identity in TESOL discourse community and in particular in EFL settings has been understudied. The development of pre-service EFL teachers' own voices and identities as legitimate members of the TESOL discourse community has not been examined fully enough, especially from sociocultural perspectives.

Despite the fact that most of teacher education in Iran is carried out through university degree programs, there is a lack of qualitative studies on coursework practices in teacher's professional preparation and development programs at universities in general and those of EFL teachers in particular. There has been no ethnographic case study investigating the professional knowledge of pre-service EFL teachers, especially those who are in TEFL programs.

METHODOLOGY

The research design was a qualitative collective case study. This research approach was used to investigate the benefits of a collegial interaction model of teaching in a TEFL undergraduate programme. It could provide a deep insight into the sophisticated nature of teachers' process of learning through follow-up collegial discussion after student based on the philosophy behind the 'interactive research model'. Through a case study, a more detailed description of the phenomenon is achievable and it can be very enlightening and "build up very detailed in-depth understanding. As Ritchie and Lewis (2003) note, case studies are used "where no single perspective can provide a full account or explanation of the research issue, and where understanding needs to be holistic, comprehensive and contextualized" (p.52).

As a type of qualitative methodology, an ethnographic research design was used to provide a more holistic view of their situated acquisition of disciplinary knowledge as an ethnographic research can provide a holistic perspective of the process giving a thick description and covering various aspects of the context (Johnson, 1992). By integrating the multiple layers of the contexts, including the prior beliefs, behaviours and interactions of the participants, a more contextual perspective can be obtained.

A university in west Iran was selected as the setting for the study because of its accessibility to the researcher and his familiarity with the educational context. The university offered an undergraduate EFL program whose intake was about twenty-five students, who were contracted by the Education Ministry as future EFL teachers. The present study investigated the comments made by the whole population of third year students over ten follow-up collegial discussions over a semester. As third year student teachers, they had already taken several specialized course for undergraduate EFL teachers including the Methodology of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Theories of Learning and Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Teaching English Skills as a Foreign Language. Most of them had passed the courses and were familiar with the methodology of teaching English as a foreign language and theories of learning and teaching English.

The researcher explained to them that they were required to discuss their own student teaching experiences through ten sessions of follow-up collegial discussions. The sessions were held on Wednesday afternoons, two days after student teaching experiences. The follow-up collegial discussions were not obligatory. However, the whole student teachers voluntarily participated in the sessions and as they later expressed in their comments, they saw the collegial discussions as an opportunity to practice their English and their knowledge from the teaching books they had already studied over the past two years.

The data for the study were obtained from the audio-recorded comments made by the participants throughout the ten sessions of collegial discussions. The findings obtained from the transcript analysis of audio-recorded interviews of the participant teachers were used as primary data sources. However, to triangulate the findings and in order to achieve a better insight towards their individual ideas towards their experiences, recorded semi-structured individual interviews were used. The researcher conducted two interviews with the participants in the study. The first one was conducted before the first collegial discussion session was held. The first interview focused on their prior beliefs concerning learning and teaching English in their EFL settings and the second interview was carried out at the end of the sessions focusing more on how they engaged in the practices and their perceptions towards them.

The researcher tried to ensure the quality of data interpretation through continuous transcription checking. The data was edited and refined by deleting redundancies as some information seemed to be superfluous and unneeded. After audio-recording the interviews and oral discourse practices and then transcribing them, a constant comparative method (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) was used by the researcher to analyse the obtained data. The themes which emerged from different data sources were constantly codified and the researcher compared the data obtained over the period of the study. According to Jones et al (2006), 'the constant comparative method engages the researcher in a process of constantly analysing data at every and all stages of the data collection and interpretation process, and results in the identification

of code' (p.43). Coding of the transcribed data was carried out in two different consecutive phases of open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first phase of "open coding involves 'breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data" (p.61). In the process of conceptualizing data, the participants' utterances reflecting the same concept were grouped as a concept and then the close connection between the concepts resulted in classifying them into different categories. As categories emerged, they were continuously compared with other categories throughout the whole process of data analysis.

Data was reduced by deleting data which had no connection with the subjects at issue. After the transcription of all qualitative data had been done, the transcripts were coded. Subsequently, themes emerged after examining the segments. The themes were analysed and given codes. These same codes were traced in the rest of data and simultaneously new themes were coded and added to the previous ones. Meanwhile, connections were made between the emerging themes to come up with categories. The data was classified both based on the pre-determined themes obtained from the theoretical framework and emergent codes. However, other categories appeared as the data suggested themes beyond the theoretical framework. First, all the data were manually transcribed. Some themes and categories were achieved from the notes while the transcripts were being written.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

Gaining Idiosyncratic Understanding

Engaging in collegial interactions, listening to other alternatives for learning and teaching, the participant teachers reported how they incorporated idiosyncratic teaching practices in their own classes and implemented methods which would work more effectively with the needs of their learners.

The participant teachers tried to theorize about pedagogical issues and were more dependent on their own idiosyncratic understanding of theoretical concepts with the assumption that a relative identity which could trigger more discussions and more involvement in class interactions and intertextuality. The participants constantly used their unique perspectives and practical experiences. The following excerpts from group discussions show how the participants came up with idiosyncratic understanding of some teaching and learning theories,

"I know that is consciousness-raising. You give them enough texts and there are many examples of the past simple and you try to make them pay more attention by reading the texts aloud."

"But in tasks you give more attention to communication between students while in other exercises more focus is on the forms rather than communication. so it is better to use tasks because there is more attention on dialogue and conversation."

They even suggested new practical techniques in teaching their classes based on their idiosyncratic understanding of the learning and teaching theories,

"- But one of the other ways for improving the students' communication skills is that we should work on the listening first. If the students be familiar with different

kind of listening in real life they can speak better, for example in my classes I use lots of songs and movies for the students that they can choose those sentences when they improve”

Teachers’ beliefs are interconnected to all other beliefs. They may be based on early learning experiences as students and may vary from one student to the other. In a study to investigate the pedagogical beliefs of three senior graduate students in TESL, Walsh as cited in Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000), found that each participant made an idiosyncratic knowledge system that was a combination of knowledge content learnt during the programme and previous pedagogical beliefs before entering the programme.

Making an idiosyncratic interpretation of the disciplinary concepts and theories was also seen in the interpretation of the disciplinary themes,

“To me, when a structure is automated, it is more probable to be produced and it does not need more practice. It is automated when you have seen it in many times in a lot of input again and again.”

“As far as I am concerned as an English teacher, listening can help my learners improve other skills, too. It is like stirring the English you have in your mind. I always want them to listen to the materials they have already seen its tape script because I think this is the way they remember the words and structures better and can recall them easier.”

This showed how teachers’ processes of decision-making about pedagogical practices, as EFL teachers and as learners, in their classrooms were influenced by their idiosyncratic knowledge as well as their sense of professional identity (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994). However, the idiosyncratic understandings of the theoretical notions the participants resorted to in their arguments often provoked clashes of opinions,

“- To improve their reading strategies, I think it is better to read the text yourself and you want them to listen to you. When you see a new and difficult word, you do not give them the meaning immediately, but you guess the meaning by using other words in that text and you relate it to other words.”

“I think they should look at the scripts at the end of the book the second time they listen. First, they just listen, but they just try to understand the whole message and I think it is necessary to make them listen again and this time you just want them to say what they hear. This time, it helps them to learn new vocabularies and idioms. I sometimes want them to listen for the third time and write down what they hear word by word. They can do it at home if you do not have enough time at class.”

The practical knowledge the participant teachers had garnered and their critical reflection on them in realistic scenario could act as a nexus based on which the participant teachers interpret and devise innovative ways for their local EFL discourse community. The following examples show how the participant teachers/participant teachers provided solutions to specific issues,

“Since the EFL students have rhetorical preferences because of their first language educational system, it is very difficult for them to adopt the new system. Therefore, providing samples of English writings and discussing can be very useful because it can make them familiar with the rhetorical preferences of English. Providing samples can be useful as they can imitate the way native speakers write.”

“Extensive reading can be used to improve reading fluency. Assigning extensive reading is very useful if it is done all the time. Besides, listening to an audio CD reading the text can also be useful because they can follow it and learn how they should read the text.”

Contributing innovative ideas was more likely to result in more professional learning. The idiosyncratic strategies proposed by the learners were meant to improve the pedagogical practices and deal with challenges posed by the instructor as stated by Glazer and Hannafin (2006), “reciprocal interactions, in the context of a supportive community of practice, are needed to stimulate professional learning opportunities and overcome professional development barriers” (p.161).

Raising Awareness on Potential Challenges

The instructor indicated the use of raising pedagogical challenges as an essential part of collegial interaction to support why most of the small-group discussion questions were based on pedagogical challenges,

“These questions make them share their experiences and provoke more arguments.

Also, they learn how to listen to other ideas and become more tolerant.”

Recognizing problematic issues and pedagogical challenges are seen as important matters in contributing to the progress of sharing personal practical knowledge and reflection. Being unsettled or in doubt about learning and teaching issues and the status of destabilization are likely to help participant teachers get involved in the learning process by actively seeking resolution to the problems. Addressing potential challenges in their small-group discussions, the participant teachers became more aware of the possible solutions.

Collaborative discussions urged the participant teachers to think about coping with the contingencies in their work. Challenging the dominant beliefs, including their own existing beliefs, in their EFL setting could show their perplexities and dilemmas over some pedagogical issues of teaching a foreign language and their efforts to figure out solutions.

The pedagogical problems raised by the instructor helped the participant teachers engage in problem-solving and even to become more conscious of their own thinking process. The importance of creating opportunities for students to develop these skills has been emphasized

by a number of researchers working on critical thinking skills (e.g., Huberty & Davis, 1998). As Dewey suggests, thinking does not happen in a spontaneous manner, but it needs a question or a problem to evoke it, resulting in reflective thinking and development of metacognitive strategies.

Listening to their peers, the participant teachers could see the problems through the eyes of their peers and also reflect over the way they offered solutions. Although they were pre-service participant teachers and they had probably encountered a number of challenges in their work, they thought opportunities to discuss probable challenges and coming up with solutions were still full of new points and helpful as the following comments show,

“Some of the solutions others suggest are very creative, sometimes they may not seem to be based on a theory but in fact they are practical and handy. You know, their suggestions are good for their own classes and may not work for others one hundred percent but you can use it with some change to fit your needs.”

The instructor saw the discussions on pedagogical problems as opportunities for the participant teachers to devise contingency plans for the probable problematic situations that EFL teachers may face,

“It is very probable that these discussions make these students get prepared for teaching challenges. Whether they are pre-service or in-service EFL teachers, listening to other colleagues can be very helpful. They learn many things from each other. They learn how to maintain their self-confidence and look for solutions when they face a problem.”

Prior educational experiences they had gained through ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Richardson, 2003) were a determining factor influencing their professional identity formation. The interviews with the participants showed that teachers’ professional identity construction were influenced more by their experiences and prior beliefs concerning teaching and learning a foreign language than accumulating pedagogical and theoretical knowledge in pre-service teacher education courses or through traditional professional development programs.

The findings obtained from the first interview at the beginning of the programme showed that the personal history and beliefs of the participant teachers affected by their learning and teaching experiences played a great role in forming their professional identity. Previous learning and educational experiences of the students and played a major role in shaping such an image. Their teaching experiences also had shaped the image as they maintained in the following excerpts from the interviews,

“I remember how I learned to pronounce the words correctly. For learning the phonetic symbols, I first tried to learn the phonetic symbols using an Oxford Advanced English Dictionary and then I wrote the phonetic symbols under each word and then tried to pronounce them according to the symbols.”

Teachers' professional identity is formed by engaging in various social and cultural discourses. Danielewicz, (2001) supports this argument by confirming the interconnection between the elements of a discourse and shaping identity,

As the participant teachers were educated in the Iranian traditional education system, they were significantly affected by the dominant teaching methods which are test-tailored, teacher-oriented, and focused on the Grammar Translation Method. The participants acknowledged the extent their prior learning experiences affected the way they saw their professional self.

Apart from collegial interactions, institutional factors can play a pivotal role in shaping their perceptions about their professional identity. This is aligned with Davis & Krajcik (2005)'s statement which assumes that "identity is in constant production and exists at the point of intersection between the individual and other determining structures and institutions" (p. 162).

The epistemic stance held by the participant teachers reflected in their preliminary interviews as well as in their small-group discussions showed how they lived up to the self-images as EFL teachers they created mainly based on their personal histories,

"My personal experiences show that"

"According to my knowledge about high school students, I can say that...."

"We are English teachers and it is obvious that"

"Because I went to English institutes, I could speak English better than most of my classmates and I knew how to improve my English by listening and reading and sometimes speaking. I have always tried to use my strategies and teach them to my students. At least I think they are practical."

The way the participants assumed a professional identity, for example, from a stance of inclusion or exclusion can be taken as the basis of how they asserted a new identity. The roles promoted by the education office as well as by private English centres also affected the way the participant teachers saw their professional self. The conflicting perspectives between the views of administrators and those of the English teachers towards learning and teaching foreign languages had a substantial role in their image of EFL teachers' professional identity in their local context,

"It is better at institutes, at least they sometimes accept your words or they convince you why they do something, but in high schools they do not know about the purposes of teaching a language and they just insist on following the book and making the students ready for the final exams. They think if they want to learn speaking they should go to institutes and not in high schools. They have become hopeless about public schools for teaching speaking and listening. They say it is the duty of institutes."

The sociocultural setting can have an overwhelming influence of their socialization and even their professional identity formation of EFL teachers based on the expectations of the educational milieu (Beijaard et al., 2004; Golombek, 1998; Tsui, 2007). Similarly, Zeichner and Gore (1990) see teachers' socialization embedded in their 'ecological conditions',

Although there seems to be little doubt at present that the characteristics of the classroom need to be closely examined in any attempt to understand teacher socialization, the analysis cannot remain at the level of the classroom because these ecological conditions are themselves products of policy decisions, political actions, and other influences at levels beyond the classroom. (p.22)

The findings are aligned with the results obtained from the previous studies on student teacher's identity formation showing the impact of their conceptions of their professional role as a teacher (e.g. Golombek, 1998; Tsui, 2007). Over time, the learning and teaching beliefs of teachers could unconsciously influence their perceptions and beliefs of learning and teaching in their EFL setting, something which Lortie (1975) calls "apprenticeship of observation" highlighting the impact of such observations on the mental representations of teachers over their learning and teaching experiences.

Individual teachers' conceptions of their professional identity were uncovered more during the discussions and small group discussions, especially when they linked their own previous practical knowledge and pedagogical issues. This is in line with the suggestion made by Coldron and Smith (1999) on knowing teachers' identity through a holistic view obtained from interactions between individual selves of the participant teachers and their wider socio-political settings.

None of the participants was engaged in any kind of TESOL community practices during their bachelor programme or even after it. Reading professional articles for any pedagogical purpose or for being in touch with recent discussions in a wider community of TESOL beyond their local level was scarcely reported by the participants and they even did not see the necessity to participate in activities beyond their local level. Although they did their bachelor programs in TEFL, most of them felt that they are outsiders. The prospect of being a known professional TESOL practitioner or theoretician for all participants seemed inconceivable,

“I think we must know our conditions much better. I know I should understand what I am going to do. I am not a theorizer, but I can say if a task may suit my students or not and I know this is important to know your conditions. I can do research in my own class sometimes. For example, I sometimes wonder why my students make such a mistake and relate it to the interference of mother language or overgeneralization. It helps me understand them better.”

The influence of prior academic discourse socialization on the identity formation of the participant teachers was substantial. The 'apprenticeship of observation' both during their learning and teaching of a foreign language could shape how they assumed their professional identities as EFL teachers.

Voicing Professional Identity

Prior educational experiences they had gained through ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Richardson, 2003a) were a determining factor influencing their professional identity formation. The interviews with the participants showed that teachers’ professional identity construction were influenced more by their experiences and prior beliefs concerning teaching and learning a foreign language than accumulating pedagogical and theoretical knowledge in pre-service teacher education courses or through traditional professional development programs.

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“I remember how I learned to pronounce the words correctly. For learning the phonetic symbols, I first tried to learn the phonetic symbols using an Oxford Advanced English Dictionary and then I wrote the phonetic symbols under each word and then tried to pronounce them according to the symbols.”

“The way I teach grammar may be different from my colleagues because I try to make my students make sentences with the new grammar structures instead of focusing on the exercises in the book.”

Teachers’ professional identity is formed by engaging in various social and cultural discourses. Danielewicz, (2001) supports this argument by confirming the interconnection between the elements of a discourse and shaping identity,

“Discourse, which is manifested through language, consists of a system of beliefs, attitudes, and values that exist within particular social and cultural practices. Engaging in these language practices (such as conversing, analyzing, writing reports) shapes an individual’s identity” (p. 11).

As the participant teachers were educated in the Iranian traditional education system, they were significantly affected by the dominant teaching methods which are test-tailored, teacher-oriented, and focused on the Grammar Translation Method. The participants acknowledged the extent their prior learning experiences affected the way they saw their professional self.

Apart from collegial interactions, institutional factors can play a pivotal role in shaping their perceptions about their professional identity. This is aligned with Davis & Krajcik (2005)’s statement which assumes that "identity is in constant production and exists at the point of intersection between the individual and other determining structures and institutions" (p. 162).

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"I think we must know our conditions much better. I know I should understand what I am going to do. I am not a theorizer, but I can say if a task may suit my students or not and I know this is important to know your conditions. I can do research in my own class sometimes. For example, I sometimes wonder why my students make such a mistake and relate it to the interference of mother language or overgeneralization. It helps me understand them better."

"I do not think it is the right time for me to do research and publish. I am still thinking about the theories, my students and my classes and what I should do. I am not a researcher yet. I think it takes time."

The influence of prior academic discourse socialization on the identity formation of the participant teachers was substantial. The 'apprenticeship of observation' both during their learning and teaching of a foreign language could shape how they assumed their professional identities as EFL teachers.

Reconstruction of Professional Identity

Negotiating their positions in the discourse community through interactions with experienced members and the assigned texts, the participant teachers formed their identity as legitimate members of their discourse community. The findings also made it evident that the process of pre-service teachers' identity formation is a non-stop reciprocal interaction between factors including prior learning and teaching experiences, knowledge obtained from academic courses and their fieldwork experiences obtained from real scenarios.

As the participants were pre-service EFL teachers, they were socialized into the activities and values of their local EFL community both inside and outside their classrooms. The participation

of the participant teachers could develop an evolving sense of belonging to their local community at the beginning and later on to the TESOL discourse community as the participant teachers were more engaged in professional interactions with their peers and their assigned texts. As most of the participants were pre-service teachers in a local EFL context, they found the group discussions as the only way to associate with their colleagues and share a sense of identity,

“Whenever I am here and I discuss the teaching problems with my friends, I feel more I am a teacher and I should find ways to help my students improve their English. I feel all teachers should have chances like this to talk and discuss. It helps a lot. This is the time you really realize you are a teacher.”

At the start of the present study, most participant teachers were willing to stay in the margin and not to participate in the discussions. Later on, they shaped an identity of participation (Wenger, 1998) and gained legitimacy for peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) by asserting a fuller membership in their discourse community as the participants socialized into the academic community culture by asserting their community membership.

Participating in collegial interactions provided opportunities for them to negotiate their own professional identity and discuss how their colleagues assumed their professional selves. The participants said they gained more self-assurance as a result of engagement in the discussions. They mentioned the feeling that they had a voice and could express it through sharing their beliefs and personal practical knowledge let them become more confident over the span of the on-going sessions,

“-As their instructor stated, it was an opportunity for them to reconstruct their professional identity and feel more committed to their professional community”

“-This is a very good opportunity for them to feel that they are part of a community and form their professional identity. Most teachers are very isolated and not willing to cooperate with others. These group discussions can help them become closer and at the same time they become aware that they have a lot of things in common with others.”

Similar comments were also made by the participant teachers themselves illustrating their journey from the margin to participate more fully in the discussions and shaping a more professional identity,

“At the start, I preferred to listen only. You know, it was uncomfortable. I just preferred to read from some of the lines from the texts to start. It was very hard for me to start. I remember I read from the text, then I said some words of my own and then I referred back to the text. I felt embarrassed.”

“It is much easier now. I feel much better and I can say my opinions about the teaching and learning problems of students”

“It was very difficult at first. It was my first experience. We had read the text before and we had some ideas, but the answers to the questions were not in the text. It was about the problems teachers had in their classes. We had to give solutions. We had to think and give our ideas at the same time, it was difficult.”

“Things have changed now. I have a very good relationship with others now. I am more familiar with my classmates. Taking part in conversations is not that much difficult. I know what to do now. Everything is much smoother.”

They could identify themselves as legitimate members of their EFL discourse community, who could make a difference although this sense of community was not seen so evident at the beginning. The participants experienced the professional transition and shift. They saw themselves as individuals who could be more contributing to their local EFL community.

Their answers to the interview question concerning the role of English teachers in their EFL community showed their attitude towards themselves as the legitimate members of their local EFL community was fostered over the first year,

“We as English teachers must continue our partnership. Facing challenges is not easy, but when you know there are others who can help you find a solution, you become more relaxed.”

“These two courses were very, I can say, instructive. The discussions were great. We have almost the same problems and we should help each other.”

The findings showed their engagement in group discussions let them voice their professional identity more freely, which helped them feel a sense of community while they were engaged in group discussions. Signs of identity transitions could be seen in their discussions and also in their reports and reflection papers. Also, their perceptions of their roles as part of the community changed positively,

“The cooperation among English teachers, I think, can make a difference. When you know there are some people like you who are concerned about the same things, it makes you take things more seriously and try to share your experience as far as possible.”

“The first time I talked to you, I was very hopeless about it but now I think I learnt how to feel like a professional person and how to feel as a member of a professional group. It was very encouraging to discuss so much about challenges and solutions.”

The participants reported that they reconsidered their role and transitioned to a more expert position. They said they experienced a new self-image and assumed new prospective practices in the community. The prior language learning and teaching experience provided the pre-service participant teachers with an appropriate space to assume their pedagogical selves (Bakhtin, 1981). Through dialogical interaction leading to more reflection on their pedagogical beliefs,

they were able to voice their professional-self more academically. Assimilating the accepted ideologies of their affiliated discourse community which was likely to help them shape their own personal pedagogy, the participant teachers could assert and also voice their position in their EFL community more confidently.

The following excerpts from their group discussions show how the participants assumed their professional positions:

“It is very important to change the views of EFL teachers about teaching grammar. Grammar should be taught during communicative interactions not in isolation.”

“I think we must take the responsibility for any weakness. Most teachers do not hold themselves responsible. The problem is when they do not feel responsible, they do not try to deal with their teaching problems or learning problems of their students and therefore, nothing changes. They just teach the book, nothing else.”

The results of this study have shown that the participant teachers formed their professional identity as EFL professionals by active engagement in disciplinary practices (Wenger, 1998). Active participation in disciplinary practices transforms and changes their identity from an pre-service EFL teacher to a relative expert in TESOL discourse community. This sense of professional identity, although was present in some of the group discussions from the beginning, it became stronger over time.

The group discussions during the period helped them to reconsider their understanding of their professional identity and assume a new one. This confirms Cooper and Olson’s (1996) findings that teacher’s identity is a continuous process which is subject to change over time mostly through having interactions with other participating members of their discourse community and also through reflection over teaching practices. Also, the findings of the study showed that the notions like self-perception and professional identity are dynamic and are subject to change over time due to situational factors (Tsui, 2008; Varghese et al., 2005) as it was specifically seen in cases of high school teachers whose attitudes changed from high schools to English institutes.

Over time, the participant teachers began to make claims, arguments and recommendations like relative experts as the following epistemic markers such as: “I personally think”, “As an English teacher”, “As far as I know” which can show their epistemic stance signalling their identity negotiation and positionalities. Morita (2004) has suggested that the way students in discourse communities negotiate their roles and identities is part of their academic socialization. The concept of community of practice sees identities as co-constructed through the on-going collective negotiation of competence and practice in the process of learning and becoming (Eckert & Wenger, 2005; Wenger, 1998).

The following excerpts from their second semester discussions shows how they positioned themselves as more professional members of their community after their first year of their programme. The perceptions of the participant teachers of their professional identity varied as their self-images as an EFL teacher differed:

“I think we have been discussing a lot of things during this time. I myself have learned many things. I have more confidence now and with no doubt I have become a better teacher, not just because of the texts I have read but I have learned many things from my classmates.”

“The discussions helped me a lot. I learned many things. As an English teacher, I must say, I have become more qualified and more knowledgeable.”

According to social theory of identity formation proposed by Wenger (1998), dialogical interaction between the members of a discourse community plays a pivotal role in forming and shifting the identities of community members. Since the students contributed their ideas on some pedagogical issues raised in the group discussions, they made use of their foreign language teaching and learning experiences. This could help them to form their professional identities as relative theorists, decision-makers and experts in their local discourse community, which could confirm the situated nature of their identity formation in discourse communities. Engagement in group discussions had a very significant influence on the identity construction of the participants. Based on sociocultural perspective towards teacher education, the process of learning to teach is more concerned with identity construction and transition rather than a process in which knowledge is accumulated by student teacher (Varghese et al., 2005). Therefore, the reconstruction of participant teachers' identity in teacher education programme can be seen as a major purpose in these programs (Singh & Richards, 2006).

Constructing a Critical Identity

Over time, the small-group discussions of the participant teachers as well as their discussions demonstrated they gradually developed critical reflection towards their own professional identity and how they could see their own positions in their own local EFL community. The democratic and relaxing nature of the oral discourse practices created a space for the participant teachers to have critical dialogues. The engagement of the participants intrigued the critical awareness of the participants towards their educational settings in which they taught. Apart from developing critical reflection towards their own practices and beliefs, the oral discourse practices resulted in stimulating critical thinking towards the status quo of their educational context.

They were harsh critics of the traditional method of teaching in public schools and the participants teaching in high schools reported how their practices and beliefs were far apart due to situational constraints. The traces of contextual factors and the micropolitics (Van den Berg, 2002) of the settings where they were engaged in teaching could be detected when it came to their recommendations regarding their challenges in their EFL settings. As stated by Hargreaves (1988), teachers' practices can be associated with their contextual factors in which they participate,

Teachers do not just decide to deploy particular skills because of their recognized professional worth and value, or because of their own confidence and competence in operating them. Rather they make judgments about the fit between particular skills, constraints, demands, and opportunities of the material environment of the

classroom; about the appropriateness of particular styles or techniques for present circumstances (p. 219).

The participant teachers' identities were shaped and transformed under the influence of the educational institutions imposing certain regulations and expectations on them. In relation to their positioning within an educational context and the way they were legitimized by decision makers in that role, their identities were shaped. Based on the initial interviews conducted at the beginning of the study with the pre-service teachers, the unresponsiveness of education authorities in the Ministry of education towards proposed modifications in the textbooks finally led to hopelessness so that the policies regarding EFL instruction are less discussed in pre-service teachers' meetings. Contextual factors were seen as hindering factors preventing the participant teachers from adopting and embracing pedagogical practices in harmony with their conceptual images of modern ways of learning and teaching a foreign language. The findings of previous studies (Smith, 1996) provide evidence for the role of contextual factors in the decision made by language teachers. These studies show how contextual factors including administrative and institutional ones influence their decision-making processes.

The dialogical atmosphere present in the courses and practicum discussions helped the participant teachers express their opposing views towards the status quo of their teaching and educational context more freely in a democratic way to adopt a transformative approach towards teaching English as a foreign language. The following excerpts from the interviews show how group discussions encouraged their critical thinking,

“There is not enough time to spend on speaking and the book is not suitable for speaking skill, you know. Just one small conversation in each lesson, which is out of context and very boring. The students memorize it for the final exam and that's all.”

“It is very ridiculous. This book has been taught for more than 15 years without any change. No photo, no color. It is very boring. I have been teaching the same lessons again and again for many years. And no one listens. So many complaints. Who listens? No one likes the book but they still prefer to continue with that book with that very low quality paper.”

The viewpoints of the participant teachers reflect the idea supported by educational researchers dealing with the specificity of education in various contexts (eg., Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Pennycook, 1999). They state that a discourse community has its own specific policies, conventions and disciplinary conversation. For example, in an EFL context, unlike EAL or ESL, English is mainly used for instructional purposes and academic achievements.

The participant teachers also made inter-contextual connections between their own teaching experiences in various teaching settings, which raised their awareness towards various contextual factors in different educational settings resulting in more critical thinking of the existing educational status quo and more need for EFL theories. The following excerpts from

group discussions show how the participants compared the various contexts in schools and private institutes.

“But students’ motivations are different in learning. My students in high schools are not very interested while at English schools it is very different. They come to learn but it isn’t the same in English institutes.”

“I remember that I taught this at another institute, but the manager did not accept this method. He said you shouldn’t waste so much time and you should focus more on the book itself. I did not insist.”

The participant teachers who were also high school teachers expressed a bitter criticism over the policies of teaching English as a foreign language,

“It is very difficult to change how English is taught as a foreign language in Iran. The education system is traditional. It is teacher-centred and test-centred. This is true for English, too. People and even those people in the education office expect you to make the students ready for the university entrance exam. It means that more attention is given to grammar, vocabulary and reading.”

Several researchers (Freire, 2005) have focused on the role of teachers as individuals who should think critically and try to act transformatively in their own context. The discussions and small group discussions provided such an opportunity for the learners to criticize their status quo and uncover the realities in their EFL context,

“ Grammar-translation and sometimes audio-lingual method are used to teach books. Although the teachers should use communicative methods to teach the books, they find it easier to use the mother tongue of the students to explain the grammatical rules.”

“Sometimes they use it to clarify the meaning of the new words, even in the conversations. They prefer the L1 equivalent to using examples in English.”

“Maybe it is easier because if they want to explain, they should have a good knowledge of English and you know sometimes it is difficult to explain and clarify the meaning of some new words in English”

The power-infusing hierarchical structure in their local EFL context and their positioning as it was implied from their conversations made them pessimistic. Although most of them showed a critical stance towards the policies of teaching English as a foreign language in public schools, they were apparently hopeless at any change as they thought their positioning as EFL teachers were practically ignored by the policy makers.

As the participant teachers were trying to problematize the status quo of their educational settings, they were also figuring out more solutions to their challenges in the EFL context,

As you follow the same material at the institute and there is no opportunity for intermediate and upper-intermediate students to use their English out of their classes, I think the best way is to make a list of their grammatical errors in writing and in their speaking and providing them with the most frequent ones. This may stop them from repeating the same errors all the time. Since I do not stop them to correct their errors, this can help them greatly.

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