

## An insight into professional identities of Turkish EFL instructors<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*Professional identity constitutes a central concept for the teaching profession. Due to their enormous impact on the learners as well as on the whole process of learning and teaching, professional identities of teachers are worth being researched especially in the field of foreign language education where teachers' identities are also influenced by the linguistic and cultural aspects of a foreign language. Departing from the constituents of teachers' professional identity, this study aimed to investigate the professional identities of Turkish EFL instructors. The study was conducted at a major state university in Turkey in the fall term of 2015-2016 academic year. Data were collected from a total of 32 Turkish EFL instructors (28 female; 4 male). A questionnaire developed by the researcher based on the theoretical framework and expert opinion was administered to the instructors. The gathered data were subjected to statistical analyses. The results revealed that the participant instructors have highly developed professional identities. Among the dimensions of professional identity, pedagogical expertise was reported to be the most developed, followed by didactic expertise, subject matter expertise and continuation of professional development respectively. The study found no significant difference between the levels of development of professional identities based on the instructors' undergraduate area of study, latest graduation degree and teaching experience. As the present study showed that the instructors have well-developed professional identities by means of self-report data, further studies may investigate to what extent these perceptions reflect their actual professional identities and the way these identities affect the teaching practices.*

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Teaching; Professional Identity, Professional Development

### **1. Introduction**

Teacher identity is a dynamic and multifaceted construct interwoven with education from many aspects, and it therefore has an enormous potential for researchers to investigate. Apart from the complex nature of the construct, teacher identity deserves the attention of researchers due mainly to its considerable influence on changes in education policy environment (Robinson & McMillan, 2006) as well as its crucial impact on pedagogy and teaching (Korthagen, 2004). The prominent place of identity in teacher development has therefore been underlined by many different researchers in the last decades (e.g., Freese, 2006; Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf, & Wubbels, 2001; Sachs, 2005).

Foreign language education is perhaps one of the areas where the intricate relationship between identity and teacher development can be observed most extensively. This is because the identity of foreign language teachers also involves the linguistic and cultural aspects of a language totally different from the language spoken by learners apart from the didactic and pedagogical expertise required for all teachers. Therefore, identity comprises a process of formation which takes place throughout one's life (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). In other words, the identity

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of a person can be thought of as an entity which develops based on the efforts of that person during his or her whole life.

Although it is quite challenging to fully comprehend the significant constituents of identity and the relationship between these constituents, the attempts to reach a better understanding of teacher identity may improve our understanding of the ways teacher education programs are conceived (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In this sense, as an issue at the center of teaching profession (Sachs, 2005), professional identity is a promising aspect of teacher identity with a rich potential for a comprehensive understanding of teacher related issues in foreign language education. However, this professional identity cannot be restricted with knowledge and skills required for the field of study. Indeed, in order to develop and consolidate his or her identity, a teacher needs to integrate his knowledge and skills in teaching with various strategies for managing the complex processes involved in learning and teaching (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2015). Therefore, teachers' professional identity can be considered as "part of a personal identity which develops as an ongoing process" (Weinberger & Shefi, 2012, p. 262). In this sense, the notion of identity in more general terms may be an effective point of departure for studying the construct of teachers' professional identity.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. The concept of identity

Identity as a construct involves a variety of elements in itself, which makes it difficult for researchers to explain the term with short clear-cut phrases. Although it is quite challenging to exactly account for the notion of identity with all aspects present within the construct, some attempts to define the issue have been made by different researchers. For instance, Beijaard et al. (2004) refer to identity as a dynamic relational phenomenon which develops throughout a person's life. Hence, it is an unstable construct which adapts itself based on the changing conditions and experiences. The development of identity takes place in an intersubjective area, and might be represented as a person's open-ended process of interpreting himself or herself in a certain way and his or her being recognized that way in a specific context (Gee, 2001).

In any attempt to account for the construct of identity, one needs to understand the relationship of this construct to the notion of the *self*. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) assert that the development of identity requires the comprehension of self and an understanding of that self as recognized in an outside context. Within the scope of teacher identity, these contexts may include classrooms or schools. In these kinds of contexts, a teacher's notion of self is constantly reshaped as the teacher is in contact with others in the relevant professional context. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) also add that a balance is needed to be kept between these two sides of identity, namely *self* and *self within an outside context*, or in other words personal and professional dimensions of teaching. Rodgers and Scott (2008) underline the intricate relationship between self and identity by highlighting that the notion of self constantly functions at the background of a person's identity. From this perspective, self is perhaps the most important element giving meaning to the construct of identity. Accordingly, a person's sense of self from a personal dimension along with the notion of self reshaped in a wider context especially in professional terms co-construct the identity of that person. Indeed, the notion of self then stands at the core of the issue of identity.

## 2.2. Professional identity of foreign language teachers

In all kinds of professions, it is important for people to comprehend all phases related to the development of professional identities ranging from the construction of professional identity to its transformation and commitment to that professional identity (Cheung, 2008). This is of particular importance to teachers among various professions due to the fact that teachers exert considerable influence on students with their professional identities (Krejsler, 2005; Robinson, Anning, & Frost, 2005; ten Dam & Blom, 2006). The notion of professionalism is a multifaceted concept in itself. For instance, Matheson (2000, p. 64) mentions professionalism as “a complex process in which an occupation comes to exhibit a number of attributes which are essentially professional and are said to be the core elements of professionalism”. Given the relative impact of teachers on learners, the issue of professionalism for teachers turns out to be even more important. As pointed out by Sachs (2005), for teachers, professional identity can actually be placed at the center of the teaching profession.

As for the determinants of professional identity, a teacher’s personal background, priorities and experiences as well as the expectations of the society and widely accepted norms have an enormous influence on the formation and the quality of professional identity (Tickle, 2000). These two sides of professional identity develop in relation to one another (Beijaard et al., 2004). Therefore, the formation of professional identity is usually acknowledged by researchers as a struggle between different viewpoints, expectations and roles teachers need to adopt (Samuel & Stephens, 2000). Volkman and Anderson (1998) explain this interplay among the roles teachers adopt as a complex and dynamic equilibrium. Hence, it is not a fixed or stable entity (Coldron & Smith, 1999); on the contrary, it is prone to transformation depending on the efforts of the teacher and the changing conditions. Based on the work of Jansz (1991), the complex interplay between a teacher’s personal roles as a teacher and the expectations of society within the formation of professional identity is illustrated by Beijaard et al. (2004) as follows:

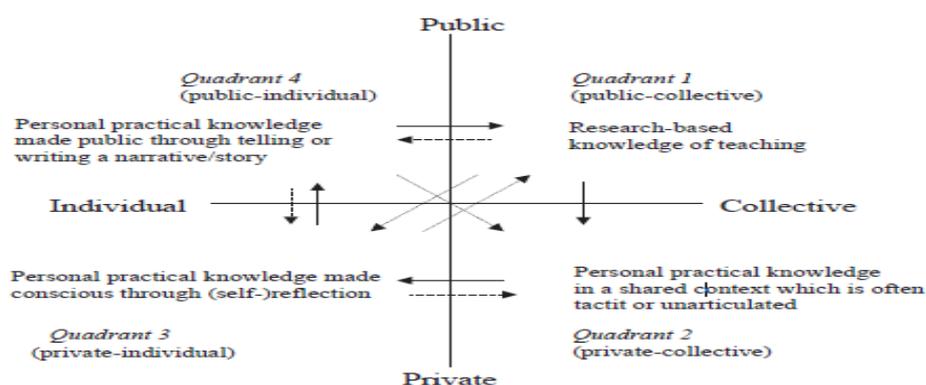


Figure 1. Representation of professional identity formation from a teacher’s knowledge perspective (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 124)

As suggested by the figure, a teacher departs from research based knowledge of teaching during the process of professional identity formation. This is especially true for novice teachers or pre-service teachers who do not have much opportunity to be present at real classroom contexts to gain experience. This research based knowledge is enriched with personal practical knowledge in time as teachers get in touch with other teachers in shared contexts. Then, by reflecting on their experiences, teachers turn their personal practical knowledge into more conscious knowledge.

Finally, they share their knowledge with others. In short, the formation of professional identity is both individual and collective, and it involves both public and private processes.

According to Beijaard et al. (2004), there are four major characteristics of professional identity. Firstly, professional identity is a dynamic entity involving an *ongoing process* of development. Secondly, it is affected by both *person* and *context*. Hence, the personal values are not the only factors resulting in the formation of professional identity. On the contrary, the shared context where the teacher stands and the norms of the society in general influence the professional identity to a great extent. Thirdly, there are a variety of sub-identities forming the overall professional identity of a teacher. These sub-identities may be of more or less significant value to the overall professional identity; however, keeping the right balance among these sub-identities is perhaps the key to the formation of a well-developed professional identity. Lastly, agency constitutes an important factor behind professional identity as it is of utmost importance for teachers to be active within the pursuit of professional development.

As for the specific constituents of professional identities of teachers, Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) depict the construct of professional identity from three perspectives: (1) the teacher as a subject matter expert, (2) the teacher as a pedagogical expert, and (3) the teacher as a didactical expert. According to this distinction, as a subject matter expert, a teacher needs to base his or her profession on the specific subject matter knowledge about his or her area of expertise. Didactical expertise, on the other hand, involves the skills and knowledge covering all phases of learning and teaching ranging from planning to implementation and evaluation. Lastly, as a pedagogical expert, a teacher also needs to facilitate the personal, social, emotional and academic development of the learners. These three factors constitute quite important elements of teacher professional identity.

As for the research studies conducted in the field, Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2013) examine the studies on teachers' professional identity under three headings: (1) studies with a focus on teachers' professional identity formation, (2) studies investigating the characteristics of teachers' professional identity, and (3) studies examining the professional identity of teachers as represented by their stories. The majority of the studies on teachers' professional identity conducted in the field have a qualitative nature (Cheung, 2008). Taking the other route, this small scale study followed the quantitative research paradigm.

Departing from the constituents of teachers' professional identity, the present study sought to investigate the professional identities of Turkish EFL instructors. To do this, the following research questions were formulated.

1. What kind of a professional identity do the English instructors have?
2. Do the development levels of the instructors' professional identities differ significantly based on their undergraduate area of study?
3. Do the development levels of the instructors' professional identities differ significantly based on their latest graduation degree?
4. Do the development levels of the instructors' professional identities differ significantly according to their teaching experience?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Setting and participants

The present study was carried out at a major state university in Turkey in the fall term of 2015-2016 academic year. A total of 32 Turkish EFL instructors (28 female; 4 male) working at the School of Foreign Languages took part in the study. While 28 of the participant instructors were female, 4 were male. When it comes to their ages, 19 instructors were between the ages of 20 and 29; 7 were between 30 and 39; and lastly 6 were between 40 and 49. The instructors held a BA degree from different departments. However, more than half of them ( $n = 20$ ) were graduates of English Language Teaching. While 8 participants were graduates of English Language and Literature, 1 was graduate of American Culture and Literature. 1 instructor held a BA degree in Translation and Interpreting Studies while 2 had a BA in English Linguistics. As for the instructors' latest graduation degrees, 19 participants held a BA degree while 12 had an MA. One of the participants held a PhD degree. The participants' teaching experiences were as follows: 1-5 years ( $n = 19$ ), 6-10 years ( $n = 7$ ), 11 years and more ( $n = 6$ ).

#### 3.2. Instrument

In the current study, data were collected by means of a questionnaire developed by the researcher. For this purpose, the theoretical framework behind the concept of teachers' professional identity was investigated. Beijaard et al.'s (2000) representation of the construct of teachers' professional identity with three major constituents as (1) *the teacher as a subject matter expert*, (2) *the teacher as a pedagogical expert*, and (3) *the teacher as a didactical expert* was taken as the point of departure for the questionnaire. However, along with subject matter expertise, pedagogical expertise and didactic expertise, continuation of professional development was included as the fourth domain under teachers' professional identity based on expert opinion. The pursuit of professional development was deemed necessary to be incorporated into the construct since teachers also need to make attempts to preserve and develop their existing professional identities. Thus, the following four major domains explaining the concept were revealed: (1) subject matter expertise; (2) didactic expertise; (3) pedagogical expertise; and (4) continuation of professional development.

Based on these four domains, items with a potential to explain the construct of professional identity of English instructors were written. After the addition of the section of demographic information, the first draft of the questionnaire was formed. Then, expert opinion was received from three academic members specialized in English language teaching again. Departing from the feedback received through expert opinion, the necessary changes, additions and corrections were made. By this way, the final version of the questionnaire was constructed.

The questionnaire administered to the English instructors involved a total of 35 items and aimed to explore the professional identity of English instructors. It consisted of two main sections: (1) demographic information; (2) professional identity. After indicating their personal and professional characteristics in the section of demographic information, the instructors indicated the extent to which they agreed with the statements about their professional identities. The questionnaire had a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

### 3.3. Data collection and analysis

After the construction of the questionnaire, the paper-based questionnaire was initially turned into a web-based questionnaire, and posted out to the instructors through e-mail. Data analysis was conducted by means of SPSS 21. For reliability purposes, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for the whole questionnaire and the four domains in the questionnaire. The overall alpha value was calculated as .94 for the questionnaire. The alpha values calculated for each domain were as follows: 0.88 for the first domain (subject matter expertise); 0.88 for the second (didactic expertise); 0.83 for the third (pedagogical expertise); and 0.82 for the fourth (continuation of professional development). Accordingly, these values along with the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient belonging to the whole questionnaire indicate a high level of reliability.

Following the reliability analysis, the data were checked for normality. Although the data did not deviate from normal distribution, non-parametric tests were preferred for data analysis as the sample size was inadequate for using parametric tests (Ravid, 2011). As for the specific statistical analyses carried out to answer the research questions, the first question investigating the kinds of professional identities possessed by the instructors was answered by means of descriptive statistics. In order to test the group differences for each of the remaining research questions, a Kruskal-Wallis Test was performed.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. The instructors' professional identities

The first research question aimed to elucidate the nature of the professional identities of English instructors. Descriptive statistics used for this purpose are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics about the professional identities of English instructors

Domain	N	Mean	SD
Subject Matter Expertise	32	3.93	.63
Didactic Expertise	32	4.09	.51
Pedagogical Expertise	32	4.22	.51
Continuation of Professional Development	32	3.88	.59
<i>Overall</i>	32	4.03	.47

As demonstrated in the table above, the mean value pertaining to the development level of instructors' professional identities was calculated as 4.03 out of 5 ( $SD = .47$ ). The mean values belonging to four dimensions of professional identity ranged from 3.88 to 4.22. The dimension of professional identity reported to be most developed by participant instructors was pedagogical expertise ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = .51$ ). The second dimension of professional identity of significant value to participants was didactic expertise ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = .51$ ). These were followed by subject matter expertise ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = .63$ ), and continuation of professional development ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = .59$ ). Thus, the participant instructors reported to have well-developed professional identities based on the mean values received for both overall professional identities and the four domains underneath.

### 4.2. The instructors' professional identities based on their undergraduate area of study

The second research question sought to investigate whether the development levels of the instructors' professional identities differed significantly according to their undergraduate area of

study. A Kruskal-Wallis Test was performed for this purpose. The result of the test can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. The difference between development levels of professional identities based on undergraduate area of study

<b>Undergraduate Area of Study</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mean Rank</b>	<b>Chi-Square</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
English Language Teaching	20	4	16.43	4.504	4	.342
English Language and Literature	8	4.34	19.94			
American Culture and Literature	1	3.66	9.00			
Translation and Interpreting Studies	1	2.71	1.00			
English Linguistics	2	3.96	15.00			

As illustrated in Table 2, the Kruskal-Wallis Test revealed no significant difference among the development levels belonging to the professional identities of the instructors that are graduates of English Language Teaching (Md = 4, n = 20), graduates of English Language and Literature (Md = 4.34, n = 8), graduates of American Culture and Literature (Md = 3.66, n = 1), graduates of Translation and Interpreting Studies (Md = 2.71, n = 1), and graduates of English Linguistics (Md = 3.96, n = 2);  $X^2(4,32) = 4.504, p = .342$ .

#### 4.3. The instructors' professional identities based on the latest graduation degree

The third research question sought to unearth whether the development levels of the instructors' professional identities differed significantly based on their latest graduation degree. For this purpose, a Kruskal-Wallis Test was conducted. The result of the test is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. The Difference between Development Levels of Professional Identities Based on the Latest Graduation Degree

<b>Latest Graduation Degree</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mean Rank</b>	<b>Chi-Square</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
BA	19	3.97	14.61	1.948	2	.377
MA	12	4.41	19.13			
PhD	1	4.29	21.00			

As demonstrated in Table 3, no significant difference was detected among the development levels belonging to the professional identities of the instructors with a BA degree (Md = 3.97, n = 19), the ones with an MA degree (Md = 4.41, n = 12), and the ones with a PhD degree (Md = 4.29, n = 1);  $X^2(2,32) = 1.948, p = .377$ .

#### 4.4. The instructors' professional identities based on teaching experience

The fourth research question aimed to examine whether the development levels of the instructors' professional identities differed significantly from each other based on teaching experience. For this purpose, a Kruskal-Wallis Test was carried out. The result of test is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The difference between development levels of professional identities based on teaching experience

<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mean Rank</b>	<b>Chi-Square</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
1-5 year(s)	19	4	15.53	.509	2	.775
6-10 years	7	4.4	18.07			
11 years and more	6	4.07	17.75			

As can be understood from Table 4, no significant difference was found among the development levels belonging to the professional identities of the instructors with a teaching experience between 1 and 5 years ( $Md = 4$ ,  $n = 19$ ), the ones with a teaching experience between 6 and 10 years ( $Md = 4.4$ ,  $n = 7$ ), and the ones with a teaching experience of 11 years and more ( $Md = 4.07$ ,  $n = 6$ );  $X^2(2,32) = .509$ ,  $p = .775$ .

## 5. Conclusion, discussion and implications

Teachers' perceptions related to their professional identities have a great potential in terms of their influence on their efficacy as teachers, efforts for professional development, their willingness and ability to deal with changes in education as well as their efforts to apply the innovations to their teaching practices (Beijaard et al., 2000). In this sense, bearing in mind the prominence of this construct in foreign language education, the present study aimed to investigate the professional identities of Turkish EFL instructors. The study further explored whether the development levels of the instructors' professional identities differed from each other depending on their undergraduate area of study, latest graduation degree and teaching experience. Departing from the self-report data reached through the questionnaire, the study revealed that the participant instructors have highly developed professional identities. The dimensions of professional identity reported to be most developed by the instructors were pedagogical expertise, didactic expertise, subject matter expertise and continuation of professional development respectively. With this finding, the current study corroborated a previous research finding in that teachers attribute more importance to pedagogical aspects of teaching than didactic aspects and subject matter knowledge (Beijaard & De Vries, 1997).

Apart from investigating the nature of the instructors' professional identities, the study also revealed that the development levels of their professional identities did not differ from each other based on undergraduate area of study, latest graduation degree, teaching experience. This result indicated that although the instructors had different characteristics, they did not have a significant difference in terms of development levels of their professional identities. Although this finding was reached through self-report data, the instructors' having a highly developed professional identity despite the differences they have in terms of their educational backgrounds and personal characteristics signifies an important step taken towards an effective process of foreign language learning and teaching. This is because teachers' professional identity is a significant determinant of their commitment to their profession and adherence to the norms related to that profession, which indicates that the identities they develop guide their dispositions, the effort they place, the way they look for opportunities for professional development, and their own responsibilities as teachers (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005). When teachers boost the strength of their professional identity by nurturing and reinforcing the development of this identity, this might have a crucial impact on their whole lives by providing a sense of continuity with the past, giving meaning to the present, and paving the way for the future (Levine & Cote, 2002).

To conclude, the present study revealed that although the instructors had different characteristics, they reported to have well-developed professional identities with no significant difference among themselves based on undergraduate area of study, latest graduation degree, and teaching experience. This is a quite promising result in that teachers' professional identities have a crucial impact on the actual teaching process (Beijaard et al., 2000). The results of the research indicate that the instructors feel themselves comfortable in all four domains of professional identity, namely subject matter expertise, didactic expertise, pedagogical expertise and continuation of

professional development. However, they also pointed out their weak sides in their professions while filling out the questionnaire although this study did not specifically report the findings related to individual questionnaire items. Therefore, English instructors need to endeavor to improve themselves in terms of their weaknesses about their professional identities. The efforts they make for the development of their professional identities will surely reflect on the quality of education provided in the institutions where the instructors work. Moreover, further studies may investigate to what extent the instructors' perceptions about their own professional identities reflect their actual professional identities and the way the instructors' professional identities affect their teaching practices through the use of some other data collection instruments.

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