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**EXPLORING EFL NOVICE TEACHER'S IDENTITY
CONSTRUCTION:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL
TEACHER**

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Abstract: This study used narrative inquiry to reveal the identity construction process performed by an Indonesian EFL novice teacher through her personal experiences in a senior high school context that is still rarely explored. The interview results revealed that the teacher developed Johnston's framework based on the following three aspects of the teacher's identity: teacher-student relationship, professionalism, and religious beliefs. The results showed that the novice teacher always prioritized academic assistance for students in teacher-student relationships. In terms of professionalism, she saw it as service-oriented. Thus, she always strived to be a better teacher to her students. She also instilled religious values in her English classes. She believed instilling positive values could help socially responsible individuals. It is suggested that future research would use a solid and clear framework regarding the novice teacher's identity construction to make the research process more organized and extend some informative inputs in narrative inquiry research.

Keywords: *identity construction, Johnston's framework, narrative inquiry, novice teacher*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, teacher's identity has emerged as an important research topic in teacher education. (e.g., Izadinia, 2014; Swennen, Jones, & Volman, 2010). Teachers' identity has become increasingly important in teacher training because it influences classroom practice. Because it is related to classroom teaching practice, teacher identity is more relevant than other professions (Singh and Richards, 2006). Miller (2009) asserts that identity is negotiated, built, enacted, transformed, and transitioned via language, race, education, class, and other factors. Consequently, an individual's identity affects the identity of a teacher, who may have distinct life values, beliefs, and guiding principles. It also indicates that a teacher's performance in the classroom will be affected by their faith-based conception of what is principled, proper, and acceptable (Pennigton & Richard, 2016).

Understanding the identities of language teachers is crucial to understand who they are, what they do, and why they do it. Particularly for those who have recently graduated and are just starting as teachers. In this sense, they are classified as novice or beginner teachers. Becoming a teacher takes time and is difficult does not mean there will always be a "turnover" of new teachers. Teacher turnover is inevitable, especially with less than four years of experience. It also applies to English teachers who are new to the profession.

A novice teacher is a beginner teacher who has just started their professional career. They enter a new life stage responsible for applying what they have learned in college (Lomi & Mbato, 2020). Pennigton and Richard (2016) state that they will learn about mastering the subject content, managing learning in the classroom, and knowing themselves as teachers. Thus, inexperienced teachers face several problems in their new professional roles (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014).

Beginner teachers may have an adequate theoretical background but lack practical teaching skills (Westhuizen & Woest, 2021). They acknowledge that their professional courses in the teacher education program give too much theory with insufficient practical knowledge,

resulting in dissonance when facing the actual teaching situation during their early years in the profession. They may experience reality shock, cultural shock, practice shock and transfer shock due to a lack of preparation in teacher education (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014). People frequently consider how a person views his or her relationship with others in the world, how that relationship is constructed through time and location, and how that person views his or her future as a social construct (Norton, 2013). As such, the construction of teacher identity is an ongoing process that happens through a continuous and changing process of transformation (Varghese et al., 2005). In accordance, they often do not feel sufficiently prepared for the challenges they face in their first years in teaching (Senom et al., 2013).

The identity of a language teacher is influenced by the language they use in teaching the subject area and by being a native or non-native speaker. It also relates to one's language background and proficiency (Richards, 2021). Teaching language involves both specific pieces of knowledge about the language and specific skills for communicating since the language being taught is also the medium of instruction. Thus, all teachers must develop specific communicative skills for teaching through that language (Pennington & Richard, 2016). Teacher identity is crucial in determining how language teaching will be played out.

Ten dimensions of teacher knowledge and skill appear to be at the core of expert teacher competence and performance in language teaching, as identified by Pennington and Richards (2016): language proficiency, content knowledge, teaching skills, contextual knowledge, language teacher identity, learner-focused teaching, pedagogical reasoning skills, theorizing from practice, membership in a community of practice, and professionalism. Fani (2022) defines language learner identity in this sense as what it means to a language instructor. It involves assessing language teaching skills and knowledge and defining what it means to be a language teacher.

Interpreting and reinterpreting their life experiences, particularly their language learning and teaching experiences, help

the teachers build a sense of professional identity that serves them well in their careers (Tsai et al., 2020). In accordance, Pennington and Richard (2016) also state that teachers establish their identity as language learners and relate it to their students. Thus, teachers are urged to reflect on their prior learning experiences to make better pedagogical judgments in the classroom (Anwar et al., 2020).

Anwar et al., (2020) revealed that a particular past learning experience shapes the language teachers' identity. Their experience in learning English facilitates them to provide effective learning for students. The teachers reflect on their experience learning English, which was considered a difficult experience in order to improve their future careers (Ubaidillah & Widiati, 2021). Thus, learning English positively impacts identity construction (Sa'd, 2017).

In this study, the research framework from Johnson's book was used. Teacher identity, according to Johnston (2003), is divided into three components: teacher-student relationships, professionalism, and religious beliefs.

Firstly, *teacher-student relationship*. It is argued that teacher identity greatly influences the decisions that teachers make in relation to teacher-student relationships, teaching practices, content of teaching, and professional development (Beijaard et al., 2000). Teacher-student interaction affects students' success, involvement in school, and academic motivation (Hamre & Pianta (2005). Kayi-Aydar (2015) highlights the importance of positioning in teacher identity construction. Positioning can reveal their identities. Moreover, their identities can determine what kind of interactions that the teachers with students have during their teaching practice. Johnston (2003) differentiated caring teacher-student connections into two aspects: teacher participation and teacher authority and solidarity. Teacher's identity is shaped and reshaped by these interactions with others in various professional contexts (Olsen, 2008). From this standpoint, the classroom may represent the context where student-teachers' identity emerges since much of the teacher's classroom life involves decision making and acting in response to students' needs (Alsup, 2006). Thus student-teachers' actions and

decisions made during the day-to-day exchanges at school portray who they are as teachers.

Secondly, *professionalism*. Teacher professional identity is an individual's views, values, and commitments to teaching against another profession or type of teacher (e.g., an urban teacher, a beginning teacher, a good teacher, an English teacher, etc.) (Richards, 2021). Since teaching demands personal interaction with students, it has been difficult for educators to separate their professional and personal identities. Teachers' professional and personal lives are intertwined because they put themselves and their ideals in their job (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009)

Thirdly, *religious beliefs*. Teachers are viewed as role models in the classroom in Indonesia, where religious values are encouraged to be integrated into (character) education (Mambu, 2017). As a result, they are accountable for instilling good values such as respect, tolerance, honesty, and other values to adhere to professional behavioral ethics. Moral values are intended to influence and give meaning to one's thoughts and actions (Everington, 2019). Teachers are essential in promoting students' moral processes and assisting their learning by modeling positive values (Tanang, 2014). These moral and religious values can help an individual perform better and take on more responsibility.

Mambu (2017) states that religious beliefs have affected the way that EFL teachers design their pedagogy. Johnston (2003) argues that religious beliefs are the personal, the deepest, and the most closely linked to identity. The link between teachers' religious or spiritual selves and their teaching selves is deep and often surfaces in the classroom (Johnston, 2003). According to Tajeddin et al. (2021), religious identity refers to how one thinks of him/herself in terms of having religious beliefs and values. The significance of religious background lies in the fact that responses regarding the meaning, purpose, and sacredness of life are in the heart of religion (Dollinger, 2001). In addition, religious backgrounds make special beliefs and practices meaningful (Anthony & Ziebertz, 2012) for people marking

themselves with a religious identity, and in this way make life more meaningful (Erkan, 2013).

According to Lomi and Mbato, (2020) the identities of novice teachers are formed during the pre-service stage and then transformed into practiced identities during the first year of teaching. Understanding the identity of a novice EFL teacher is beneficial for both classrooms to practice and teacher identity. Professional identity is complicated for novice teachers to fully comprehend because new teachers must understand how they became professional teachers based on professional teacher identity. As teachers progress through the educational process and take on more positions and responsibilities as teachers in their study program, their experiences shape their identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Similarly, Singh and Richards (2016) examine teacher identity in language teaching. The findings showed that language teacher identity includes specialized knowledge and talent, as well as being part of a larger profession with specified norms, ethics, and performance accountability.

Teachers' identity topic has increasingly attracted the attention of Indonesian teachers. For instance, pre-service teachers' constructions of teacher identities may reflect the information and abilities they have acquired on their journey to becoming teachers (Kasmiran, 2019; Siswanto & Kuswandono, 2020). At the same time, potential foreign language teachers' microteaching and practicum experiences might help develop their professional identities (Riyanti, 2017; Riyanti & Sarroub, 2016; Zacharias, 2016). Hapsari and Budiraharjo (2019) discuss how government policies impact teachers and how teachers' identities change. This study investigates how zoning regulations impact the self-sense of English teachers in high- and low-achieving institutions. The policy was responded to differently by the teachers in their study. The teacher's perspectives and expectation towards the students changed after the policy implementation, while another teacher did not have any significant change of perspectives on the students, they argued that the different responses influenced the teachers' beliefs and school culture.

By reviewing the literature and previous studies, the researchers know clearly that although significant progress has been made in teachers' identity in recent years, the professional identity of senior high school novice English teachers has been little studied, much less in-depth empirical studies. Moreover, Johnson's framework regarding teacher's identity construction in discussing three aspects (teacher-student relation, professionalism, and religious beliefs) is rarely investigated. Thus, the present study undertakes to fill this gap by embarking on a narrative inquiry study of senior high school English teachers in the Indonesian context. This was because of the possible access and data accessibility and feasibility consideration. In other words, the researcher was familiar with the institution where the study would be conducted. Emilia (2010) state that the familiarity between the researcher and the research context leads to more natural research conduction and avoids any teachers' or students' unnatural behavior performances. It is worth investigating because it has the potential to impact teaching quality. This study intends to reveal novice teachers' experiences and needs during their early teaching stages. In addition, this study would add more insights into teacher education in the EFL teacher Indonesian context to evaluate and reflect on themselves as teachers, their practices, and their surroundings, affecting their decision-making, identity construction, and professional development (Kelchtermans, 2019).

As evidenced by the literature, teacher identity is strongly influenced by teachers' interactions with members of society, such as colleagues, school administrators, and students (Beijaard et al., 2000). This study investigates how an EFL novice teacher constructs her identity in terms of the teacher-student relation, professionalism, and religious beliefs in teaching practice. Therefore, this study aims to explore the process of an EFL novice teacher's identity construction in teaching practice. This study focused on the teacher's perspectives on her identity as a novice teacher and individual and how she employed her identities during the teaching process. In accordance with the research framework, this study aims to address the research question: How does the novice teacher construct her identity in terms

of relationships among teacher and students, professionalism, and religious beliefs in teaching practice?

METHOD

This study used narrative inquiry. It is utilized to comprehend one's lived experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and social circumstances in which it was (re)constructed. The narrative inquiry was considered the suitable research design to reach the objectives because it could closely explore the participant's identity construction through her lived experiences. The participant in this study was enrolled as a beginner teacher who had just started her journey as a professional teacher. This study involved a female EFL novice teacher at one of the private schools in Ciamis who has experienced less than five years in a teaching career to share her different perspectives on language teacher identity construction. One of the researchers has known the participant for seven years. We went to the same university and have kept in touch since we graduated. The participant received her Bachelor's degrees in English Education in 2019 and completed a six-month teaching internship prior to graduation. When this study was conducted, she had been teaching for two years after graduating. Because of these similarities, the researcher invited her to participate in this study, and she agreed. Because the participant and one of the researchers had known each other for years, we expected her to trust us and openly share her stories with us. Mutual trust between interviewer and interviewee is required to encourage participants' openness in recounting their experiences (Morris, 2015). The teacher has taught at the senior high school for at least two years since she graduated. Her age is 25 years old. The participant was given a guideline for conducting the interviews and communicating with the researchers regularly.

The purpose of this study was to discover how she used three aspects of teacher's identity in her teaching practice. This study collected the data through narrative interviews to elicit participants' stories and life histories. The researcher invited the teacher to participate in this study in September 2021. Then, the researcher

interviewed her in October 2021 to obtain the data for the research. In this study, the researcher used a semi-structured interview format. It is the most popular form of an interview in narrative inquiry, as supported by Barkhuizen (2014). He also said that the researcher received a set of questions to use as an interview guide when conducting a semi-structured interview. Additionally, the researcher could offer follow-up questions throughout the interview to elicit additional information or clarification. In addition, the participant could share her detailed and nuanced experiences in teaching practice that influenced her identity construction. This study used Google Meet to assist in gathering data recorded by the OBS application. In the same view, Creswell (2012) states that the essential process in an interview is recording the information.

The researchers prepared interview questions that consisted of 14 questions in four parts to obtain the data. Questions 1-3 were about the teacher's experience at the beginning of the teaching profession. Questions 4-6 concerned teachers' relationships with students in teaching-learning. Questions number 7-11 were about the teacher's professionalism. Questions 12-14 were about the teacher's religious beliefs.

After collecting the interview data, the researchers analyzed by transcribing the interviews (Leavy, 2017). The goal of the analysis is to make some inferences or come to some conclusions by breaking down many data into smaller, easier-to-understand the information (Liu & Xu, 2011). In this case, to make the participant feel comfortable, the interview lasted about 30 minutes and was done casually. After each transcription, a preliminary analytical framework was established. The researchers highlighted and coded transcriptions based on the study topic and analyzed the results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data analysis, the findings of this study are structured in the following ways: (1) Teacher's Past Experience at the Beginning of Teaching Profession; (2) Teacher's Relation with

Students; (3) Teacher's Perception on Professional Identity; (4) Teacher's Religious Beliefs.

Teacher's Past Experience at the Beginning of Teaching Profession

When the participant became a novice teacher, it appeared that she began to construct her identity. Her first challenge was understanding how her workplace taught English to her students. This is depicted in her narrative accounts:

"For my first time, I was not confident, and I thought it would not be easy to adjust to the school environment and teach the class for the first time. And I felt doubtful with my abilities that would not appropriate with the characteristics of an English teacher organized by the school."

This statement is supported by Lomi and Mbato (2020), who stated that novice teachers enter a new stage of life responsible for applying what they have learnt in college life. She was doing that by observing the practices of other teachers. Due to her struggle, she realized the need of becoming a teacher who always had pre-teaching preparation. Aside from that, she most certainly had to contend with her inadequacies, which affected her professionalism. It was demonstrated by how she felt about herself after viewing the performances of others. In addition, she was a full-fledged teacher-in-training who was in the process of becoming a fully-qualified teacher (Beijaard et al., 2000). This finding is linked to the previous study by Caspersen and Raaen (2014), who stated that novice teachers experience numerous challenges in coping with their new professional role.

Furthermore, she likely underwent an identity shift as a novice English teacher. This shift was caused by her encounter with a new teaching context different from what she had experienced. She struggled to modify her teaching beliefs and perspectives to her present situation. This is seen in her narratives:

"For the first time I taught, I lacked confidence because I didn't know the characteristics of the students in the class. Because the students have different characters and abilities. I worried about handling noisy students in the teaching-learning process. In addition, I felt confused designing the learning material to teach students effectively using technology during teaching practice. I was not used to teaching English with good preparation, so I learned from the other teachers to cope with this problem. Finally, after several months as a novice teacher, I adapted to the environment and the entire school community. I began understanding how to handle classes and what teaching methods could be applied to learning in the classroom."

From those statements, it can be concluded that English teachers have to be able to adjust to existing developments, such as by implementing innovative methods and strategies in teaching so that students do not feel bored learning English (Jannatussholihah & Sugirin, 2020). Besides, novice teachers are now facing an era of disruption. The rapid digital era changes require people, including English teachers, to be productive.

During her teaching career, she always tried to become an English teacher professionally by preparing a learning design for her students. She said:

"Sometimes I have a hard time; I find it difficult to choose to be a friendly or strict teacher that students fear. We may be underestimated or not appreciated if we are too familiar with students. However, if we become frightened by the students, it makes them not enjoy studying with me. Therefore, in the class, I am always strict about the rules that students have to obey, such as coming to the class on time, doing assignments, paying attention to the teacher's explanation, and so on. But during teaching, I try to be personally friendly to motivate them in the learning

process, and I don't hesitate to ask questions when they have difficulties."

This statement is linked to the previous study by (Anwar et al., 2020). They said that their prior knowledge of learning shaped their perspectives on how the teachers might improve the learning environment for the class.

Teacher's Relation with Students

The relationship between teacher and students is described in the following discussion. Novice teacher believed that a teacher-student relationship should be harmonious. She accounted that:

"Sometimes I have a hard time; I find it difficult to choose to be a friendly or strict teacher that students fear. We may be underestimated or not appreciated if we are too familiar with students. However, if we become frightened by the students, it makes them not enjoy studying with me. Therefore, in the class, I am always strict about the rules that students have to obey, such as coming to the class on time, doing assignments, paying attention to the teacher's explanation, and so on. But during teaching, I try to be personally friendly to motivate them in the learning process, and I don't hesitate to ask questions when they have difficulties."

Hattie and Yates (2014) argued that good interactions between teachers and students promote trust and affection from those statements. He also argued that teachers should be ready to help students with problems in line with this.

She also built relationships with her students both inside and outside the classroom. She kept in touch with them. In a pandemic situation, she enabled face-to-face and phone communication virtually. At school, she frequently approached and monitored the students. Moreover, she opened a private communication for consultation in this online learning. To increase students' motivation,

she maintained the students' communication. This is seen in her narratives:

"The experience of dealing with students in the classroom must be related to the teaching-learning activities like reminding them to do homework and discussing the materials that confuse students.

In my experience outside the classroom, maybe I try my best to guide them via WhatsApp group, Zoom, or personal chat to maintain good relationships and communication. Especially for the twelfth-grade students who want to continue their studies, I am always ready to help them prepare for that."

Teacher-student relationships are important; they established harmony and improved teaching and learning in the classroom. Besides, a harmonious relationship between students and teachers will also impact students' academic results. This statement is supported by the previous study by Hamre and Pianta (2005) who stated that the teacher's role affects student achievement, engagement, and classroom participation.

Teacher's Perception on Professional Identity

Some opinions from practitioners and the education bureaucracy say that improving education quality is difficult. This is because some of the education problems in Indonesia have not been resolved, such as the low quality of teachers, curriculum, education budget, and education regulations. According to PISA, these four problems are crucial factors and affect the ranking of Indonesia's education in the world. These may relate to a physical space of educational condition: a school ethos and departmental culture (Brooks, 2020). Contrarily, context and identity reveal how a teacher's identity is shaped by circumstances. It is also written in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education Number 16 of 2007, which explains that the competency standards of educators (teachers)

are fully developed in the following competencies: pedagogic, professional, social, and personality (Istikaroh, 2019).

To be a professional, the teacher also needs to meet several competencies, such as (1) academic disciplines, (2) knowledge of student characteristics, (3) mastery of learning methods, strategies, and models, (4) understanding of philosophy and educational goals, (5) understanding of learning technology, (6) understanding of learning assessment and evaluation, (7) understanding of planning and mastering classes for smooth learning processes (Ginting & Kuswandono, 2020). Meanwhile, in the interview, the teacher answered several characteristics based on her perspective.

First, she tried to be a professional by applying the following things:

"The fact is that I always prepare relevant and actual learning materials. I always provide a variety of learning and opportunities for students to think in my class, arrive on time and also evaluate learning objectives with student performance."

Second, she mentioned that a teacher must always be willing to learn and hone English skills as mentioned in the third competence.

"I keep trying to improve my knowledge of teaching methods and improve my English skills so I can teach and deliver English better."

Third, a teacher must be able to give motivation and conviction in learning English as mentioned in the fourth competence.

"I am also a teacher who is not only concerned with academic grades but also appreciates the efforts and motivation of students because I believe that there are many roads to Rome. I also feel that I am a teacher who

always wants to motivate and convince students that English is not difficult to understand."

Fourth, based on her experience during school and observations this far, she believed that English is very likely to be liked by students.

"This made me believe that English is actually not hated, it's just that maybe many people thought this language was difficult at first and not many people were able to find an enjoyable way to learn."

Fifth, the teacher stated that many challenges and goals that must be achieved by English teachers, especially those in small areas.

"When it is happening, it turns out that being a teacher in Indonesia is difficult because it has something to do with a lot of paperwork, and not many students have good English learning. ... So, there are many challenges and learning objectives to be faced by English teachers here, but again, sharing knowledge is still fun for me."

Broadly, the teacher's participation in the class cannot be divided from a teacher's services. The competency standards set by the Minister of National Education and the teacher's perception indicate that she has undergone and understood several actions from a teacher referred to as a professional. Professional teachers must have defined competency standards so that the quality of teachers is guaranteed; they can produce and improve the learning process. Professional teachers have valuable competencies to make the teaching-learning process more enjoyable (Irfiana et al., 2021)

Teacher's Religious Beliefs

Mambu (2017) states that religious perspectives have affected the way that EFL teachers design their pedagogy. Teacher participates in religious values for learning in private senior high schools where

students come from different religious backgrounds. Interview data show that teachers sometimes incorporate religious values into teaching and learning, depending on the subject. This is seen in her narratives:

"I think it depends on the material being taught, and it's better to relate to the religious aspect. The materials are usually linked to the attitude aspects because having an attitude is a must, and it's essential to build the students to have a good character."

In line with the education regulations in Indonesia, it encourages the integration religious and character values in education in the curriculum 2013. The Spiritual Attitude Competence formulation is *"Receiving and carrying out the teachings of the religion he adheres to."* Before connecting religious values, teachers must be able to decide carefully because religion is one of the sensitive topics which is afraid to make a difference in perceptions that will emerge between a student with students or students with the teacher. One form of applying religious values in the classroom is to start learning by praying.

Every school always has a praying routine before and after receiving lessons every day. She said, *"I always start the class by praying because I think we should start something with a good value."* This routine activity has significant meaning because it can help students become tolerant of friends with different beliefs. In line with that, Murod, (2022) stated that the planting of multicultural pillars in educational practice includes the process of developing a tolerant attitude, one of which is in the religious aspect, building mutual trust, maintaining trust, maintaining a sense of understanding, upholding mutual respect.

Furthermore, Johnston suggested that teachers change students to be better (Johnston, 2003). ELT teachers must develop social and moral values impact their lives regarding the suggestion. It was implemented by the teachers who reflected on it as an example of

behavior towards students, which is also one of the values of their religion:

"...students see teachers as mature people and parents. This means students see their teachers as examples of acting and behaving. Both good and bad attitudes can affect students' behaviour with others. Of course, it makes teachers have to maintain their attitude to set the best example...the teacher plays a role in correcting this attitude. Do not scold; just remind them that students have a bad attitude. It's better to provide them more positive alternative actions".

Changes in behaviour that can be shown must be influenced by religion, educational background, and experience possessed by an educator. In other words, educators influence changes in student behaviour. For this reason, educators must be role models for students. Educators represent a group of people in a community or society who are expected to be role models in respecting differences, especially religious tolerance.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the implementation of three facts in terms of teacher's relationship with students, professionalism, and religious beliefs in teaching practice. Besides, it was explored and compared the novice teacher's past at the beginning of her teaching career and present experiences. An EFL novice teacher had formed and carried her identity when she experienced the teaching-learning process. This study affects teachers' identities in several ways. The novice teacher has incorporated Johnston's framework (2003) based on the findings and discussion. In teacher-student relationships, the novice teacher always prioritized academic assistance for students. Communication could impact student engagement. In terms of professionalism, she saw it as service-oriented. Thus, she always strived to be a better teacher for her students. She also instilled religious values in her English classes. She believed instilling positive values could help

socially responsible individuals. Due to her teaching experience, the novice teacher could quickly implement three facts of teacher identity. She also had no identity crisis because she understood her roles. It is suggested that future research use a solid and clear framework regarding the novice teacher's identity construction to make the research process more organized. The data for this study came from a single participant, which may not reflect the majority of novice teachers' identity construction. Hence, more instruments are still recommended to supplement rigorous data for future research and to extend some informative inputs in narrative inquiry research.

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