

## **Understanding EFL Teachers' Identity Construction in a Private Language School: A Positioning Analysis**

**August 2021 – Volume 25, Number 2**

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### **Abstract**

*Conceptualizing language teacher identity as a reciprocal, contextual and discursive process developed by teachers' positionality in multiple social, cultural, linguistic, professional and educational discourses, this study explored identity positionings reflected in the lived experiences of two female Iranian English language teachers who learned and taught English in their home country. Drawing from Bamberg's (1997) three-level positioning approach to Positioning Theory as the theoretical and analytical framework, this study reports on the analysis of narrative interviews and written narrative journals collected throughout two restorying cycles. The findings revealed that each teacher took different approaches in positioning the various characters in their storylines. They also denote that labeling games (e.g., native vs. non-native) as well as contradictory institutional policies impacted the teachers' identity negotiation process while influencing their positioning in the given discourse. The study concludes with implications of the findings in ELT community and teacher education.*

**Key words:** *teacher identities, three-level positioning, restorying cycle, English as a foreign language, overt and covert ELT policies*

With the incorporation of social turn in second/ foreign language (L2) education, research on language teacher identity (LTI) has turned into a major line of inquiry in the existing L2 education literature. This expansion has led to conceptualizing LTI as a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various ideological, sociocultural, political, professional and personal factors (Rudolph et al., 2019). It also opened the path for the emergence of a variety of theoretical, methodological, and analytical approaches to exploring LTI (see recent special issues in *Modern Language Journal* 101/ S1; *TESL-EJ* 22/ 4; *TESOL Journal* 10/ 4; *TESOL Quarterly* 50/ 3). A fair conclusion from existing literature is that LTI is a multi-level, multifaceted and dynamic construct shaped by both spatial and temporal characteristics of the teaching and learning context leading to the multi-layered positionalities teachers acquire. In this sense, teachers' approach to positioning themselves and others in a specific context is highly tied to the existing dynamics embedded within the social, cultural and educational discourses. Language teachers' constant positioning contributes to their identity construction as an ongoing outcome of the "integration of macro, meso, and micro practices

that ultimately determines which teacher identities are legitimated in relation to language proficiency, practices, and skills” (De Costa & Norton, 2017, p. 6).

As an example of such contexts is the English language teaching (ELT) setting in Iran where a juxtaposition of overt (e.g., in textbooks) and covert (e.g., native speakerism) ELT policies put teachers in a state of iterative identity construction processes accompanied by conflicts and tensions (Mirhosseini et al., 2021; Mirzaee & Aliakbari, 2018). As an outcome of such policies, teachers have been exposed to constant labeling games, placed into groups of successful vs. unsuccessful, native like vs. non-native like and competent vs. incompetent teachers. Although there is a growing body of research on the impact of educational policies on LTI, there is little related research conducted in contexts where English education is mostly viewed as a political act rather than an educational endeavor (Eslamdoost et al., 2021). One way to explore how English teachers manage to construct their professional identity in such contested contexts is to scrutinize the narratives of their experiences in the path of becoming professional English teacher. Thus, utilizing three-level positioning theory (Bamberg, 1997) as the theoretical and analytical framework, the present study reports on a qualitative case study on the identity development of two Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers to investigate how they narrated their professional identity positionings while exposed to the explicit and implicit policies in their workplace. More specifically, the current study addressed the following overarching research question: *How do two Iranian EFL teachers construct and negotiate their professional identity within their situated teaching context?*

## Literature review

### Language Teacher Identity

Over the past two decades, research on LTI has expanded from a focus on teachers’ linguistic identities (e.g., Park, 2012; Pavlenko, 2003) to LTI construction within the situated community of practice (e.g., Tsui, 2007; Yazan, 2017) and moved toward a poststructural understanding of LTI with regard to the ideologies and discourses in a given context (e.g., Rudolph et al., 2019; Trent, 2016). The growing number of studies on LTI has supported its dynamic and ongoing nature emerging as the result of teachers’ engagement with various social, political, and cultural processes (De Costa & Norton, 2017). Thus, language teachers are part of a broad sociocultural process which contributes to the co-construction and (re)negotiation of their identities (see Yazan & Lindahl, 2020 for an overview). Considering language classrooms as a context where various identities are formed, it is obvious that neither teachers nor learners are neutral agents in this setting. Expanding on the same argument, Yazan (2017) theorized that teachers’ professional identity is positionally constructed through the “mediation of micro-interactional and macro-structural transactions via meso-level activity” (p. 40). The findings of his multiple case study suggested that teacher candidates’ identity negotiation was highly linked to their own positioning and also their assigned positions by others.

In one of the early studies related to LTI development in EFL contexts, Tsui (2007) designed and conducted a longitudinal single case study to examine the identity development trajectory of a novice Chinese EFL teacher. The findings showed that LTI negotiation was a complex process and in constant and somehow unresolved tension with teachers’ doubts, school policies, and emotional states. Tsui’s findings revealed that being engaged in a community of practice is highly impacted by the power structures which can legitimize or delegitimize teachers’ practices. In a similar study and focusing on the role of workplace in LTI, Liu and Xu (2011) adopted a narrative inquiry and explored the identity development of a Chinese EFL teacher in light of the reforms in ELT policies. The authors argued that the participant’s stories of inclusion and exclusion in the community of practice made her use “different positioning strategies based on the situational meanings that she

derived from context” (p. 4595). On the other hand, Trent (2016) investigated how seven EFL teachers in Hong Kong schools constructed their identity and discursively positioned themselves within the context. Drawing upon the notions of identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice (Varghese et al., 2005), the analysis of interview data showed that teachers identity construction was reciprocally discursive, experiential, negotiated, and contested. Finally, exploring LTI from a poststructural perspective, Rudolph et al. (2019) reported on the lived experiences of two female Japanese university-level ELT teachers. They argued that the existing discourse of idealization in Japanese ELT setting distanced teachers from what they were capable of becoming and positioned them in a constant struggle to fit in that discourse.

In one of the few LTI- related studies conducted in Iranian ELT context, Abednia (2012) argued that a comprehensive account of teachers’ professional identity should be rooted in critical pedagogy in helping them to turn into transformative intellectuals. His longitudinal multiple case study research within an English language teacher education course revealed that the participants developed a “transformative and utopian vision of teaching EFL” while “looking at ELT as a tool for individuals’ mental development, social transformation, and emancipation” (p. 713). In a similar study, Sardabi, Biria, and Ameri (2018) found that their 9-member cohort of novice EFL teachers attending an MA TESOL program in Iran experienced changes in their conceptions of professional identity. The result of analyzing reflective journals, classroom observation and semi-structured interviews conducted over a semester revealed that the participating teachers moved from compliance to resistance of the existing policies. Both studies underscored the influential role of teacher learning in teacher education programs in enabling teachers act agentively and disrupt the long-held established norms of teaching.

Tying EFL teachers’ identity development to the actions that they pursue in the practices, Mirzaee and Aliakbari (2018) looked into the critical events in a teacher’s life history to investigate an Iranian EFL teacher’s identity formation from a social ecology perspective. Their findings revealed that the participant’s sense of identity and agency has been both constructed and constrained within the given sociocultural milieu. Furthermore, the authors argued that the teacher’s identity and agency were subject to marginalization due to his idiosyncratic experiences both as a learner and as a teacher. Finally, Eslamdoost, King and Tajeddin (2020) argued that “identity construction is not an individual phenomenon; rather, it is done in conjunction with and through interactions and negotiations within particular contexts” (p. 336). In their positional analysis of two EFL teachers’ written narratives on social media, the authors concluded that teachers’ professional identity and classroom practices in Iran is both socially construed and politically loaded which poses conflicts at both personal and social levels.

The common thread in the research reviewed is that LTI is not an individual attribute developed and constructed in isolation from the surrounding context. Conversely, it is tied to teachers’ social positioning and agentic roles and the dynamics present in the social contexts. The few research studies reviewed above show that being and becoming an English teacher is dependent on how teachers position themselves with regard to the existing policies, expectations and the conflicts and tensions aroused and teachers’ abilities in managing those tensions and challenges. In this sense, this study can contribute to understanding the path teachers in such contexts pave in order to construct their professional identity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Following Rudolph et al.’s (2019) argument in conceptualizing LTI, in this study I draw upon a poststructural conceptualization of teacher identity construction as a dynamic, contextual and discursive process as they position themselves in multiple social, cultural, linguistic, professional, religious, and educational discourses. This understanding of identity construction within discourses

is in line with the premises of positioning theory. Broadly defined as “the discursive production of a diversity of selves” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 47), positioning theory has been argued to enable researchers understand “explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realized in the ways that people act toward others” (Harré et al., 2009, p. 5). From this perspective, teacher identities are constructed through discourse in interaction as locally enacted, reciprocally constructed, and dynamic in nature (De Fina, 2013). The theory delves into the various storylines behind the stated social acts to uncover how various positions work within the given discourse (Barkhuizen, 2015). It argues that language teachers’ identities both inside and outside language classrooms are mutually constructed and mediated by the cultural resources, cultural repertoires, and momentary activities linked to local and social structures (Rudolph et al., 2019).

Looking at narrators’ positions in expressed storylines, Bamberg (1997) argues “in conversations—due to the intrinsic social force of conversing—people position themselves in relation to one another in ways that traditionally have been defined as *roles*. More importantly, in doing so, people *produce* one another (and themselves) situationally as *social beings*” (p. 336). To examine the social and positioning work of narrators and easing the tensions between traditional/ structural approaches and performance/ pragmatic approaches to narrative analysis Bamberg (1997, p. 337) delineated three levels of analysis including:

Level 1. How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within reported events?

Level 2. How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience?

Level 3. How do narrators position themselves to themselves?

While the focus of analysis differs from one level to another, they are complementary of each other and can provide a comprehensive understanding of the characters in narratives. As Bamberg (1997) delineates, at level 1 positioning, researchers “attempt to analyze how the characters within the story world are constructed”. At level 2 positioning, the purpose is to “analyze the linguistic means that are characteristics of a particular discourse mode that is being employed”. On the other hand, at level 3 positioning, the aim is to understand how language is “employed to make claims that the narrators hold to be true and relevant above and beyond the local conversational situation” (p. 337). Elaborating on Bamberg’s (1997) three-level positioning, De Fina (2013) asserts that level 1 positioning is mainly about the narrated event itself by identifying the ‘who, what, and how’ about the event. On the other hand, at level 2 positioning, the aim is to understand the flow of the interaction between interlocutors or the reason of telling a story at a particular moment in the interaction. These first two levels are attained by looking at the linguistics devices stated in the story (e.g., personal pronouns) and the third level is rooted in the discourse where “narrators and audiences negotiate less locally produced sense of who they are” (De Fina, 2013, p. 43).

Analyzing language teachers’ identities from a positing theory perspective -is a suitable framework for this study since teachers as individuals accumulate certain positions over time and space to ascribe certain types of identities. In this way, teachers “commit themselves practically, emotionally, and epistemically to identity-categories and discursive practices associated with them” (Deppermann, 2013, p. 4). Hence, this study utilizes Bamberg’s (1997) three-level positioning model as a potent tool in researching EFL teachers’ identity and examines how two Iranian EFL teachers conceptualize their identity positioning in an Iranian ELT discourse.

### **English Language Teacher Education in Iran**

In the Iranian education system, English is a mandatory subject both in K-12 schools and higher education. Accordingly, as Iranian students begin their secondary schools (i.e., 7<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade) they start learning English as part of their curricula regardless of their majors in high school.

There are two governmental organizations in charge of supervising the education system at these levels. The first one is the Ministry of Education whose main mission is to supervise and plan for various educational policies and applying any curricular reforms needed for K-12 schools. The second one, is the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology which observes and sets policies for any educational activities in the higher education system. However, English education is not solely carried out by governmental organizations. In parallel to English education at K-12 schools and higher education, there are numerous private language schools and institutes which play an important role in increasing the importance of English education in the Iranian context and attracting people to learn English (Mohammadian Haghighi & Norton, 2017). The main body of teachers working in these institutes come from EFL student-teachers or individuals with varying levels of mastery in English, regardless of the presence or absence of any certifications. Instead, teacher candidates need to successfully complete the certification process run by each institute in order to be eligible to teach there. As Mirhosseini et al. (2021) argued, the major teacher recruitment process in private language institutes relies on each institute's Teacher Training Courses (TTCs) whose "quality control heavily relies on evaluations by supervisors" (p. 14). However, gaining success in one institute's TTCs in most cases does not apply to other institutes and teachers need to resume the process if they change their workplace.

## **Method**

### **The study**

The data presented in this article come from a larger qualitative project investigating professional identity development of twelve Iranian EFL teachers who transitioned from teacher education programs to full-time teaching careers. The current paper reports how two Iranian EFL teachers constructed and negotiated their professional identity positioning in a private language school. The reason for selecting a private language institute as the site of this research is that these centers have been barely recognized in official educational policy documents despite the fact that they are responsible for a major part of EFL instruction in Iran (Mirohosseini et al., 2021). The two EFL teachers participating in this research are selected based on the purposeful sampling. Several criteria were implemented to find out the information-rich cases for this study including years of teaching experiences, education level, teacher education programs, and type of classes they teach. This study utilized narrative inquiry for data collection since the stories told by each interlocutor can be regarded as acts of social practice through which researcher and participants co-construct knowledge and negotiate meaning rather than reporting facts, beliefs and practices (Barkhuizen, 2015). I first met the two participants in the second semester of 2012-2013 academic year when both attended an ELT methodology course which I taught at a female-only university. Both participants enrolled in the course as part of their degree requirements. These two cases were purposefully selected because they were the only ones who invested in advancing their careers as English teachers and sought certifications other than their formal college education.

In order to keep the participants' identity confidential, each of them was asked to pick a pseudonym to be included in any outlets where the data is reported. Samaneh (pseudonym) had an M.A. in Teaching English and had taught English for 7 years. Following the completion of her graduate studies, she attended an online teacher education program sponsored by Cambridge University and obtained Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA). At the time of this study, Samaneh was mainly involved in teaching advanced general English classes with a focus on enhancing communicative skills. Elnaz (pseudonym) held an M.A. in English literature and had taught English for 8 years. During her graduate studies she also obtained a Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (DELTA online) in order to pursue a career in teaching. Elnaz also had an overall score of 8 on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

which gave her the opportunity to teach IELTS preparation classes. At the time of the data collection for the current study, Elnaz was teaching advanced writing classes for IELTS and advanced general English speaking classes to adult learners. Both participants were in their early 30s and had been teaching in the same language school for the majority of their career. Both had started their career by teaching at elementary levels and gradually paved their ways to teach advanced classes.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for this study comes from semi-structured narrative interviews as well as narrative writings by each participant over the course of six months from October 2019 to March 2020. Following Liu and Xu (2013), I utilized ‘restorying cycles’ to collect the data for this study. Each ‘restorying cycle’ was composed of three sub-cycles each lasting for four weeks to provide enough time for participants to write and reflect on their journals. It also gave enough time to me to read and provide feedback and work on extracting the most relevant stories related to their identity positionings. Each restorying cycle ended with a semi-structured interview with participants to have a deeper conversation about the stories they wrote in their narratives. In total, there were 6 narrative journals and two semi-structured interviews with each participant. Prior to data collection, I secured the institutional review board approval from a large southeastern U.S. university, and obtained permission from the target language institute and the participating teachers. Each participant also signed a written consent form expressing their willingness to be part of this study. Data collection was started by asking each participant to write about critical moments they experienced in both their teacher education program and their classroom teaching practices. Although there was no limitation on how to write and what to write, some prompts were given to help them with framing their stories. The prompts were related to topics such as their own image of an ideal and effective teacher, challenges they have faced, negative and positive emotions, success and failure and their integration within and beyond ELT community. Both participants agreed to share their written narratives via secure and individualized Google document.

Following the collection of narrative journals at the end of each restorying cycle, each teacher participated in online interviews to elaborate on the stories written and provide additional thoughts and comments. On average, each interview lasted around 75 minutes. The questions were mostly centered on their experiences as language learners, their experiences in teacher education programs, graduate studies, and the teaching career and major stories mentioned in their narrative journals. Both participants opted to use English in writing their narrative journals and talking in the interviews. As suggested in Merriam and Tisdell (2015), to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data I used member-checks and peer examination throughout the data collection, and data analysis process. To do so, I frequently discussed the progress of the research with a group of colleagues with expertise in this line research and used their feedback on “the process of study, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 259). I also applied the member-check upon verbatim transcription of the interviews. To do so, I shared each transcription with the participants to ensure that I included the information they provided accurately. Both participants confirmed that the transcriptions were accurate.

### **Findings**

In this study, I aimed to understand how the two Iranian EFL teachers construct their identities while positioned within policy-laden discourses. In the remainder of the paper, I elaborate on how the two participants narrated their stories and discuss those narrative accounts with regard to

Bamberg's (1997) three-level positioning model as the theoretical and analytical framework adopted for this study.

### **Samaneh's Narrative**

Samaneh identified herself as a bilingual language user and professional language teacher who experienced teaching English at various levels, from teaching to kids to teaching advanced language learners. When asked to provide some background information about her exposure to English and learning experiences, Samaneh stated:

*I was born and raised here [i.e., Iran] and started learning English from 3rd grade by going to a private language school. You know, it was my parents' decision because they thought, and I believe they were right, that knowing English would help me in the future! Also, it was a trend at the time and still it is- at least among the middle and upper middle-class families, I mean sending kids to language schools! So, that was somehow an early-start for me! (Interview #1)*

Looking at Samaneh's description of her exposure to English from Bamberg's (1997) three-level positioning perspective, it is evident that her identity as a learner and later as a teacher is tied to her family's social and economic status. Positioning her family and herself within "middle and upper middle-class families," (level one positioning) Samaneh acknowledges that the privilege she had due to her family status contributed to her access to learning English at a private language school. Referring to the time when she started to learn English as "an early-start for me," Samaneh positioned herself (level two positioning) as an enthusiastic learner who could excel in her endeavor. Describing her enthusiasm for continuing to learn English, Samaneh wrote:

*At first it [learning English] was like any other school subjects! But after a while, it became more interesting! We had songs, we could watch cartoons in English, we could role-play with the songs, as if we had been the singer! It was fun! Now I think it was the culture which came with the language and kept me moving! (Cycle#1, Narrative journal#1)*

By using inclusive terms such as "we had songs, we could watch cartoons in English", Samaneh positions herself (level two positioning) and her peers (level one positioning) diverging from other ELT learners who did not belong to their specific circle of peers in the private language institute. Being a member in families with similar social and economic status, given the fact that they were all learning English in the same private language school, Samaneh implicitly draws a line between what they all had in the situated context of the institute as part of their ELT community while others in the broader scope of ELT community (e.g., public school system) might not have (level three positioning). When asked about to elaborate more on her notion of "culture which came with the language," Samaneh stated that:

*[...] I am not a religious person and religion is the last thing that I care about. This is who I am, and I think it is somehow commonly accepted among many people, at least most of the people I know. But this does not mean that I do not respect those who are not like me. I do believe that no matter what we do, we all belong to the same culture and we are all Iranians, for which I am kind of proud. Again, this does not mean that other cultures or people are inferior! Quite contrary, all cultures are great, especially the western cultures which we somehow teach in our classes and also learn. Again, this is ironic because most of us have not had a chance to experience those cultures except from the books and movies and recently from some of these social media platforms which could be somehow contorted and unreal (Interview #1).*

By using linguistic expressions such as “I do believe” and “I am kind of proud,” Samaneh shows some sense of conflicts in identifying herself in the given discourse. Looking at Samaneh boasting about her national identity and simultaneously praising western cultures denotes the fact that she views herself as a person who welcomes all thoughts and ideas while acknowledging the existing conflicts in the discourse. By using inclusive terms such as “most of us have not had a chance to experience those cultures,” Samaneh positions herself (level one positioning) and others (level two positioning) differently from other members of the surrounding context. Writing about her own professional identity and image of an ideal teacher, Samaneh added other influential characters to her narrative. Besides the influence of her family, she mainly highlighted the roles of teachers that she had in the private language institute, but not the teachers she had in public schools.

*The teachers that I had in the institute were different from the ones in the school. What we had in school was not real learning. I had an English teacher in high school who barely could speak English. Besides that, we never had a chance to practice what we were supposed to learn. All we were doing was just memorizing some words and rules of grammar and then taking a test! But the teachers that I had in the institute seemed more effective in terms of what they taught and how we learned. They taught us a new culture, they taught us new things about another language and I really liked...not just me...I think all students in the class were interested in the culture! (Cycle #1, Narrative journal#3).*

While describing her image of the ideal teacher, Samaneh positions her own teachers differently depending on the space the learning took place. While she describes her public-school teachers as less influential characters in shaping her image of a professional teacher (level one positioning), she assigns more weight to the teachers in the private language institute and speaks more highly of them (level one positioning). In other words, she distinctively distances these two groups of teachers from each other spatially while they are placed in the same positioning level. This also leads to distancing herself from peers in the public school and convening with the ELT community in the private language school (level two positioning). While asked to provide more detailed explanation for the difference in the positioning, she stated:

*You know, they [the teachers in the institute] were open-minded, they were so different from the school teachers! It gave me a good feeling of learning the language! I really loved them and I guess this is why I remember all my teachers in the institute by name, but not my school teachers [laughter]! They were just a model for me, always in my mind, even the songs they had, even the method that they used. For example, whenever they came to class knocking on the door and saying “you have a good time”! So I always remember that and I am doing the same thing in my own classes because I think it can help students learn better! (Interview #1).*

As explained in the interview, Samaneh presents herself as a kind of teacher she had in the language school (level three positioning). From this perspective, she shows an identity negotiation process to represent herself as a teacher who does “the same thing” in her own classes because she thinks “it can help students learn better.” In such a negotiation process, she also includes her own students since her own identity as an effective teacher hones into her students’ identity as better language learners (level three positioning). Reflecting on the connection between her past and present experiences both as a learner and as a teacher, Samaneh stated that:

*When I think about how I changed after so many years of learning and teaching English, I see that there is a kind of two-way impact on both my personal beliefs and pedagogical preferences. We are all teachers and we are expected to teach the language. Teaching a language on the other hand cannot be separated from its cultural content and this is when*



*I sometimes feel confused about what I should do and how I should proceed. From a professional perspective, practicing a second language has turned me into a more sociable and communicative person. However, this does not mean that I am a fan of fully supporting the cultural aspects of the L2 while uprooting my own cultural beliefs. After all, whether I like it or not, I have some mindsets which I do not like to get rid of. You get what I mean, unlike some of our colleagues and friends who completely go for the L2 culture. I think being a good teacher does not mean negating your beliefs or adopting some kind of identity which I think is fake. This is the kind of image that many people may show to impress students or their peers, which I definitely oppose (Interview #2).*

By describing herself as “more sociable and communicative person,” Samaneh positions herself as a member of the surrounding community including the ELT community (level two positioning) and acknowledges the role of other members of the ELT community in such a transition (level one positioning). However, such a membership is not conflict-free and produces its own challenges. When it comes to the level-two positioning in which the participant describe how they position themselves to the audience, Samaneh tries to distance herself from some of her colleagues (level two positioning) by sketching a contrastive line about her beliefs and practices versus their attitudes and practice. However, she appears to keep such a distance at a level where it does not detach her from the community as she uses inclusive pronouns such as “we, our.” By stating that ‘she is not willing to uproot her own cultural beliefs unlike some of her colleagues’, Samaneh seeks membership among a group of ELT community members who are on the other side of L2 cultural integration continuum (level two positioning). Reflecting on the challenges that she faced as a teacher in her workplace, Samaneh asserted that:

*The one thing that I am still struggling with after several years of teaching is that many of these institutes and even their students expect us to be native like. You can even see this in the ads that we have on boards in the hallway or even the ones published and posted on various platforms, they all look for “highly proficient, competent, and native like teacher” (air quote). I mean, how it could be possible to be born in a place where English is not the dominant language of your society and it is only used in schools and for tests, but at the same time you expect teachers to be native like. This is a paradox that I do not understand. We had a case here and she was a native like according to the criteria that the institute had, raised in Canada and fluent but after 4-5 months she left, because of what?? Because she did not know how to teach! In other words, professionally and pedagogically she was incompetent. It really makes me sick when some supervisors or school officials ask me to act like a native. Again, this is not who I am. The fun part is that you don’t see any support for this idea anywhere else, I mean while they look for native-like teachers, they tell us to use materials and texts which do not contain any signs of native speakers. Isn’t it funny? I have to act like someone else while there is no supporting evidence how that someone looks like! (Interview#2).*

With regard to level-three positioning, it is apparent that Samaneh strongly opposes the native and non-native speaker dichotomy existing in her workplace. Identifying herself a non-native language teacher by mentioning, “It really makes me sick when some supervisors or school officials ask me act like a native,” (level one positioning) despite her linguistic and pedagogical competence, Samaneh confronts the dominant native-speaker ideology supported by the language institute. By questioning the criteria of being regarded as native or non-native speaker, it is obvious that Samaneh points to the existing paradox between what is held ideal and how it is supported. Her reference to incompatibility of textbooks with the native-speaker ideology clearly shows that she

is more willing to position herself as a teacher equipped with pedagogical knowledge rather than having the privilege of being born in an English-speaking country.

Regarding her motives of obtaining CELTA while having a graduate degree in TESOL, Samaneh wrote:

*I did not want to get a CELTA because I thought there is no need for that and because I already had an M.A. in teaching English. However, it became clear that the safest way for promotion and having more advanced classes and hence becoming more well-known was having some kind of teaching certificates issued by a foreign organization. This way I could make sure that I could step up and run the classes I wanted to have as I somehow do now (Cycle#2, Narrative journal # 2).*

When asked to elaborate more on her attitudes toward obtaining a CELTA, Samaneh stated:

*As a teacher working in a top-notch language school, I did not want to be left-out! I mean, I did not want to feel that I was not qualified for teaching advanced courses. We have a bulletin board in the hallway and the courses taught by every teacher are listed under his or her name. There is another board which has only the names of those who were teaching advanced courses such as IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses. To me it was disturbing, because it implicitly labeled teachers! You know, some teachers are advanced and some are not! And interestingly, that was something supported by the institute! I could also sense this feeling of separation among teachers. For example, in break rooms, most of the time I used to see those whose names were on the other board were talking together while we were talking to our own group members. So, I had to go for that. (Interview #2)*

In order to prove herself as an effective or “more well-known” language teacher, Samaneh had to make a choice between what she believed to be right and what the context imposed on her as the right thing to do. By having a certificate “issued by a foreign organization,” she had to concede to a form of identity imposed on her by the institute. Similarly, she also needed to integrate with part of the surrounding ELT community and seek a new form of membership which could only be sought by having access to such a certificate and subsequently the advanced classes that she could teach. From a level-three positioning perspective, Samaneh’s identity construction is conflict-laden here. On the one hand, she criticizes the implicit biases and policies supported in the workspace. On the other hand, in order to build a new form of identity, she had to succumb to the existing power in order to be able to integrate in the higher status ELT community.

### **Elnaz’s Narrative**

Elnaz (pseudonym) identified herself as a multilingual teacher because she had an intermediate mastery level in German as well as “near-native mastery” in English in addition to her mastery in Farsi and Azeri as her mother tongues. When asked about her exposure to English and learning experiences, Elnaz stated:

*Although I was born and raised in Iran, unlike many other kids I had a chance to be raised as a multilingual, thanks to my parents of course! You know, they moved to the UK immediately after their marriage because my dad was planning to continue his education. Unfortunately, I was born after they returned to Iran, just kidding (laughter)! Otherwise I could be a UK citizen and did not have to live here (laughter)! I can say that I had some opportunities to interact and make friends with some people from the UK, due to my dad’s career. Moreover, I had the chance to travel abroad a couple of times to visit some of my family members which was great to see how they live and how they behave. You know, kind of comparing what we value here and what they stand for there. (Interview #1)*

Describing her early exposure to English and language learning experiences, Elnaz ties her identity as a learner and a teacher to her family's social and economic status. Positioning her family and herself as the ones with the capability of living abroad and hence distancing herself from the majority of her peers, Elnaz acknowledges that the privilege she had due to her family status contributed to her access to learning English and with having access to people and friends abroad. Using linguistic expressions such as "I had a chance to be raised as a multilingual," Elnaz points to some potential conflicts that exist in her situated discourse. Trying to draw a line between "what we value here" (level two positioning) and what they stand for there" (level one positioning), Elnaz dichotomizes herself from others as the two diverse groups of language users. Moreover, she affirmatively positions herself as a person defying the common social setting by imagining herself as a "UK citizen" as a sign of her desired ideal self. Her narrative of travelling and communicating others and belonging to a different social milieu is a sign of her imagined positions through which more prestige and value could be gained.

Reflecting on her endeavor as a successful language learner, Elnaz tied such a success to knowing about the culture of the target language and in fact practicing it in her own professional and personal life:

*The fundamental part of learning a foreign language is the culture first and foremost! It is extremely important to me to be able to speak the language exactly the way that native speakers do regardless of the phonological and the phonetic aspects of it. What I mean is that I want to be extremely aware of the cultural and social lines that there might be, so I tried to look for examples when I was learning English! However, as a student in the public-school system I didn't have the privilege. I think culture and language, regardless of the setting that you're talking about or you're placing limit are intertwined and so interconnected that cannot be separated. So, one cannot claim that they have mastered a language without knowing the culture or that culture to a certain extent (Cycle #1, Narrative journal #1).*

In the follow-up interview, she further mentioned that:

*I am an English teacher and my success in my career depends on how professional I can be, which I think you call it professional identity in scholarly terms. Professionally, I believe that teachers should be as close as possible to the various aspects of the language they are teaching. Part of it is how they are familiar with the culture of the L2 and how they can teach it to the learners. As an English teacher, I try to act as an English speaker, like an American or a British person, but preferably like a British person. Because this way I can show how knowledgeable and professional I am. You know that some educational settings have dress codes and both teachers (especially female ones) and learners need to obey. I try to bypass those rules by wearing something which is more western like while still holding to the boundaries defined. It also depends on how comfortable I am with the students (Interview #1).*

As the excerpts above show, Elnaz clearly distances herself from other members of the community (level two positioning) by imagining herself at the extreme end of the continuum by clearly expressing her interest in acting like a westerner, both in language use and appearance. Such a distance is clearly visible in her excessive use of first-person singular pronoun "I" to mark us-vs.-them dichotomy as she points to the educational policies implemented in the language institute. Additionally, trying to "act as an English speaker, like an American or British person" is a reflection of her beliefs about an ideal teacher. Via seeking a native-speaker identity by expressing "to speak the language exactly the way that native speakers do", Elnaz positions herself (level two position) as a person who equates success in learning and teaching to the degree of 'nativeness' in the target

language. For her, a successful language user and language teacher is the one who is “extremely aware of the cultural and social lines”. This way, she is able to “show how knowledgeable and professional” she is and present herself to her audience (level three positioning). As it is evident, Elnaz pursues a form of professional identity by positioning herself within the discourse of idealization depicted in the form of binaries (i.e., native vs. non-native).

Talking about her image of a successful teacher, Elnaz stated that:

*You know, one aspect of being a successful language teacher in my opinion is how a teacher can represent the L2 to her students. One way to do this is acting as native-like as possible. As I mentioned earlier, my experience in learning both Farsi and English simultaneously made me regard myself a native speaker in the sense that I am able to use the language in the same way that it is used in a country where English is a dominant language. I understand that this is a privilege that I have, but achieving it is not impossible and we have teachers here and many other places that act like this. I can call them native speakers not by birthplace but by their expertise in using the language. For example, in my classes, I try to do more than what is needed and required by the school. I try to use some authentic materials such as texts, video clips, movies through which I can show how English is used in native contexts. I think students also like this approach because they want to learn the language for the sake of communication but not taking tests. If they wanted to pursue that goal, why bother themselves attending these classes? They could easily go to test-preparation classes. With that saying, I guess it makes sense if language schools require native-like language command as a requirement for recruiting language teachers (Interview #2).*

Once again, Elnaz attempts to position herself as a proficient language teacher by “acting as native-like as possible” (level two positioning). However, she does so by underscoring the role of her students (level one positioning) and the ways she presents “L2 to her students.” Interestingly, she takes the same position with regard to some of the members of the ELT community by calling them “native speakers not by birth-place but by their expertise in using the language” (level one positioning). Positioning herself and “teachers here and many other places that act like this,” Elnaz simultaneously converges with a subgroup of the ELT community and diverges from the non-native members of the community (level three positioning).

When asked about the motivation for getting a DELTA certificate while having a graduate degree in English, Elnaz stated that:

*I always wanted to have a degree like that, simply because it could help me be a better teacher and be seen as a professional teacher! I mean, my students, my colleagues and school officials. I mean, everything comes with a price and being a professional teacher also requires some investment especially in our society. For example, I did not need an IELTS score, but I felt I should have it because I wanted to teach IELTS courses and without having that, I could not prove that I could be a good IELTS tutor. It is almost the same thing in all institutes. Having such a degree can expand the opportunities that you have and I am completely fine with that. Besides that, I learned a lot from the courses that I had for this diploma, I mean the knowledge is practical. It is different from what we studied in undergraduate and graduate programs, which were mostly theoretical. I am also planning to attend some other certificate programs in order to stand at the top of my career (Interview #2).*

For Elnaz, having an advanced certificate from a renowned organization outside her local context was a means for pursuing a successful career path. With that, she could be “a better teacher and be

seen as a professional teacher” (level two positioning) within the ELT community (level three positioning). Similarly, she criticizes the theory-laden teacher education programs and invests in obtaining diplomas and certificates outside the locally developed teacher education programs. From the level three positioning perspective, Elnaz envisions tying her professional identity development to the capital she gains through such investing in professional development programs mostly offered outside the Iranian educational context. Additionally, she prioritizes her institutional responsibilities and recognition over her own identity development in order to be a better language teacher. In other words, Elnaz adopted a compliance strategy with regard to the existing discourses in her workplace where achieving the ideals sought by the institute is what she assumes as the utmost level of professionalism.

## **Discussion**

The current study reported how two female EFL teachers working in a private language institute in Iran constructed and negotiated their identity from Bamberg’s (1997) three-level positioning theory. The analysis of narrative journals and interviews collected throughout two restorying cycles revealed that the two teachers took different identity positions at each of the positioning levels acknowledged in the adopted theoretical and analytical approach. These positional identities were reciprocally and discursively shaped by participants’ learning experiences, their image of a professional teacher, their attitudes toward the existing policies, their interaction within ELT community, and the expectations held by their students and school officials. When asked to describe themselves to the interviewer and comment on their sense of self, both teachers clearly proclaimed that they experienced identity conflicts with regard to their social background and cultural integration. Samaneh was more cognizant of preserving her own national identity and constructing her professional identity by boosting her pedagogical knowledge. On the other hand, Elnaz has sought to construct her professional identity by distancing herself from the ELT community and investing in building a “native-like teacher image.” In line with Tsui’s argument (2007), the findings showed that teachers’ “identity is relational as well as experiential, reificative as well as participative, and individual as well as social” (p. 678). Both teachers in this study reported to have their own individual and collective identities while taking various levels of positioning with regard to their own image of a successful teacher, their own history of teaching and learning, and their interaction with the members of their professional community.

The findings of this study revealed that language teachers’ identity positionings are in a constant state of flux due to their personal experiences as well as the available ideologies in the social contexts. As stated in previous studies (e.g., Mirzaee & Aliakbari, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2019) EFL teachers’ identities are shaped through their dynamic interactions with the context. In other words, there is no universal pattern for teachers to position themselves in such a context. Quite contrary, it is highly subjective and varies across teachers and contexts (Eslamdoost et al., 2020). While Samaneh strived to negotiate her identity through seeking membership within the larger ELT community and resisting the overt policies implemented at the workplace, Elnaz adjusted her identity development with the institutional agendas and policies. Samaneh sought her professional identity development through juxtaposing her identity positionings with the ones adopted by some of her colleagues and students (positioning levels one and two). However, she faced challenges in maintaining her preferred identity positionings due to the hidden discourses of idealization and marginalization. While contested, she had to seek ELT certifications outside her own context. Elnaz, on the other hand, mostly aligned her identity positioning with the one supported by the institute. To do so, she presented herself as a professional teacher by pursuing a discourse of idealization and willingness to invest in extending this discourse (level three positioning).

The findings also showed that teachers' personal ideologies and the way that they integrate themselves in their social context highly influences the various levels of positioning they adopt. Accordingly, transitioning from one identity position to another depends on how compatible teachers' sense of self is with the existing social and contextual dynamics (Eslamdoost et al., 2020). Although both teachers were facing identity conflicts, their negotiation processes were different. While Samaneh mostly identified herself with the surrounding community of teachers who were not native speakers but highly competent (level one and two positioning), Elnaz distanced herself by integrating herself in the language learners' community and using her native-speaker capital to position herself in the community (level three positioning). As evident from the findings, EFL teachers have their own unique interpretations of the surrounding social context and enact accordingly. These unique interpretations will influence teachers' socialization process by which they become members of the ELT community within their situated context. Research has shown that teachers' professional context or the space where they practice their teaching is a determining component of their socialization process and hence the identity positionings they adopt and the coping strategies that they pursue (Farrell, 2006; Kubanyiova, 2012). In this sense, the two participants stepped in different socialization path based on the positionality they reported in their stories. While Samaneh was more resisting to the norms of the institute, Elnaz was more welcoming to those norms and took a different positionality from her peer. So, it is of great importance to meet these interpretations and teachers' possible ways of enactment and engagement in their teacher education courses.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the current study are noteworthy with regard to the context of the research. There is a general consensus among L2 researchers and practitioners that L2 teaching and learning is context-dependent, and each individual context has its own specific characteristics. In other words, adapting the findings of any studies needs to be done with regard to the exiting contextual sensitivities of the educational context. Accordingly, it is of great importance to understand how educational policies work best in a given context. In line with such argument, context should be interpreted as a policy-laden environment in which teachers are one group of stakeholders among others such as learners, school managers, and educational policymakers. It is of great importance to try to align the policies with what teachers believe and value. A dissonance could lead into idealizing some teachers (e.g., the case of Elnaz) at the cost of marginalizing some others (e.g., the case of Samaneh). One way to make this alignment possible is considering teacher's lived experiences in designing teacher education programs and refining the policies. In this sense, the findings of this study can be useful for L2 language teacher education programs in designing proper courses to increase the awareness among EFL teachers to be more cognizant of their subjectivities and directing them in a way to enhance their instructional practices.

The findings denote the necessity of fundamental changes in Iranian teacher education programs to diminish the overt policies related to language education. These covert policies, as depicted in the cases of Samaneh and Elnaz, could favor one group of teachers while exerting extra pressure on the other group. Moreover, in light of the findings, it is evident that teacher education programs, offered by universities and colleges or run by private language schools, are impacted by the dominant transmission model of education. Hence, these programs mostly aim to train teachers capable of transmitting the linguistic knowledge rather than equipping teachers with critical knowledge of language teaching. This approach to teacher education has led to instilling the mentality that a successful L2 teacher is the person who can meet the standards set by the educational organization or achieving high scores on international language tests (Abednia, 2012). Additionally, most of these programs fall short in training autonomous teachers and keeping

student-teachers committed to their profession and their students (Sardabi et al., 2018). These shortcomings in local teacher education programs have led private language institutes to require additional expertise in the form of diplomas and certificates issue by non-local academic organizations. The current study, however, has its own limitations. First, it focuses on the experiences of only two teachers in a private language school. Similar studies need to be conducted with larger groups of participants and other educational settings such as public-school system. Additionally, the current study reported on each participant's personal narrative accounts while overlooking their teaching practices. Future studies are encouraged while including observational data in their design.

## About the Author

**Behzad Mansouri** holds a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. He is mainly interested in researching language teacher identity and agency and has published in major scholarly outlets including *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *TESOL Encyclopedia of ELT*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Current Psychology*, and *The Asia Pacific Education Researcher*.

## To cite this article:

Mansouri, B. (2021). Understanding EFL teachers' identity construction in a private language school: A positioning analysis;. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, 25(2). <https://tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej98/a3.pdf>

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