

Beyond Understanding English Instruction: Shaping and Balancing the Professional Identity of EFL Teachers in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: In spite of the significant presence of foreign EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia, there is limited knowledge about how they shape and define their professional identities. This qualitative research delves into this subject using identity theory as a conceptual framework. The primary research inquiry driving this investigation is: How do EFL teachers from Asian Pacific countries, working in Saudi Arabia, delineate, construct, and navigate their professional identities? The findings reveal that the professional identities of expatriate EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia are influenced by institutional norms, regulations, their experiences, qualifications, beliefs, values, and commitment. Moreover, these teachers must engage in various practices, acquire context-specific knowledge, and negotiate competence and expertise that extend beyond English teaching to be accepted as legitimate participants in the Saudi and EFL teaching communities. The study also highlights the development of culturally responsive teaching identities to accommodate the Islamic cultural and religious beliefs of their students. Notably, issues like professional development, native vs. non-native speaker status, and adherence to "standard English" do not appear to significantly impact the formation of EFL teachers' professional identities in Saudi Arabia. The research concludes by discussing its implications and offering suggestions for future studies.

Keywords: Teacher professional identity (TPI), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), community of practice, a legitimate participant and member, legitimate identity, English as a foreign language (EFL), professional development, (non-) native-speakerness, standard English.

1 Introduction

Despite the long history of both fields, it was not until the early 1990s when interdisciplinary research relating theories of language learning and teaching to social theories of identity started to flourish as a major trend of study (Beijaard et al. 2004; Block, 2007). Yet, there is still a lack of consensus on how to define the term teacher professional identity (TPI) because it has always been conceptualized differently in the literature. Therefore, the concept of TPI has become a source of discord and a site of struggle between different parties as what particularly constitutes TPI has always been open to debate.

Exploring TPI construction and negotiation becomes even more crucial in a field like English as a foreign language (EFL) where there is an existing dichotomy and power dynamics between native and non-native speakers of English [1, 2, 3]. It also becomes essential in a social context like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) where despite the large number of expatriate EFL teachers, knowledge about how they experience their identity construction is still scarce. Thus, drawing on identity theory [4] as a theoretical lens, this qualitative study is an attempt to address this issue and fulfil the gap in the literature. The main research question that guided this study was: How do expatriate EFL teachers from Asian Pacific countries in KSA define, construct, and negotiate their TPIs? Addressing this question entails uncovering the processes that expatriate EFL teachers in KSA usually engage in, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they follow throughout their journey of identity construction and negotiation to claim their status as legitimate members of the EFL teaching "community of practice" in KSA [5].

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2 Review of the Literature

This section is divided into three subsequent subsections. In the first two subsections, I review how the concepts of “identity” and “teacher professional identity” have been theorized and conceptualized in the social identity theory literature. In the last subsection, I review the more relevant and context-specific literature about the professional identity of EFL teachers in KSA.

Identity

The concept of “identity” has been studied from different perspectives and defined in various ways in the literature of social identity theory. Historically, “identity” was widely conceptualized as stable and fixed. According to this essentialist perspective, individuals construct their identity through experience, but it then remains unchanged or only slightly changes. However, this perspective has been challenged by other scholars who perceive identity as multiple, shifting, complex, and ongoing site of struggle that is constantly changing across time and space as it is shaped by the surrounding context in which a person lives [6].

It contends that there are five dimensions for the term “identity”. The first dimension, “identity as negotiated experience”, refers to the way in which people build on participation to define who they are and how they are perceived by themselves and others [7]. The second dimension, “identity as community membership”, refers to how people define who they are based on what is familiar or unfamiliar to them. The third dimension, “identity as learning trajectory”, refers to the ways in which people define themselves based on where they have been and where they are going. The fourth dimension, “identity as nexus of multiple membership”, refers to how people define themselves through the way in which they reconcile their diverse forms of identity into one identity. The fifth dimension, “identity as a relation between the local and the global”, refers to how people define their identity and sense of belonging through negotiation and manifestation of styles and discourses in different communities of practice.

Likewise, it argues that there are five common characteristics of the diverse ways of how the concept of “identity” is defined [8]:

- Identity is socially constituted, which refers to how a person is recognized by one’s self and others as a kind of person;
- Identity is constantly being formed and reformed;
- Identity is multifarious, which means that it consists of a number of interrelated ways of how a person is recognized as a certain kind of individual in the different social communities in which he or she participates; and
- Identity is constituted in interpretations and narrations of experiences.

Furthermore, it contends that the term “identity” refers to the way in which an individual is being recognized as a “certain kind of person” in a given context either by oneself or others. According to him, there are four interrelated types of identity [9]. The first type, “natural identity”, refers to the type of identity that people cannot control as it develops by the forces of nature, such as being a male or female. The second type of identity, “institutional identity”, represents the one that is defined by a set of authorities (rules, laws, traditions, and rituals) of a particular institution, such as being a professor in a university. The third type, “discursive identity”, refers to how a person is identified and recognized by others through dialogue and interaction. The fourth type, “affinity identity”, refers to the one that is developed through affiliation that results from participating in certain practices and sharing the same experiences with other members of a particular group. According to [10], these are not discrete categories, but rather ways of understanding how a person’s identity is formed and sustained.

Teacher Professional Identity (TPI)

TPI has started to flourish as an emerging subfield of identity theory and specific area of research during the last 30 years [11]. However, there are numerous accounts of how TPI is theorized, defined, and developed in the literature [12]. Research in the area of TPI focuses on three main areas: the formation of TPI, the identification and characteristics of TPI, teachers’ narratives and stories about their TPIs.

The concept of TPI has been used in different ways in the literature. In some studies, TPI is used to refer to a teacher’s image of self, which determines how he or she teaches, perceives teaching, and develops as a teacher. In other studies, TPI is used to refer to the roles of teachers. However, in some other studies, TPI is used to refer to how teachers are recognized, conceptualized, and perceived by themselves and others.

Research has shown that numerous extrinsic and intrinsic factors contribute to the formation of teachers’ professional identities, some of which are social, cultural, or even personal [13,14,15]. These factors include external rewards, motivation, altruism or the tendency to serve society, occupational prestigious status, and the recognition that teachers

enjoy. Other factors also include the teaching context, the workplace policies, agency, values, beliefs, qualifications, experience, as well as conflicts and interactions between individual's multiple identities.

According to [16], research shows that TPI is complex, dynamic, ongoing, and unstable in the sense that teachers need to balance their professional identities among several other roles that they have to play. This entails continuously negotiating and redefining their roles through investing in their agency in a particular social context. In addition, research also indicates that TPI is multifaceted. That is, a person's identity may consist of a number of sub-identities that are all influenced by various historical, sociological, psychological, and cultural factors [17]. Thus, TPI can be viewed as a site of social struggle because people have to make sense of their various and sometimes competing roles. Furthermore, another key component of TPI is associated with how it is identified and recognized not only by the person himself or herself, but also by other people with whom he or she interacts.

TPI in many social contexts is defined and determined by a particular set of standards for knowledge and practice that are imposed on teachers by professional association and policymakers. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) in the United States and the Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELIA) are just two examples. These standards were developed as "attempts by the professional communities in those countries to give accounts of their work that might compete with other versions of what English teachers do" [18]. However, defining TPIs based on a prescribed set of professional standards does not account for the various types of differences that exist among the different educational settings. For example, those who teach English to students in rural communities or villages are more likely to face different challenges compared to their counterparts who teach English in modern industrial cities. Thus, defining TPI only based on particular sets of standards overlooks and undermines the impact of the various factors that surround the teaching contexts.

In terms of how TPI develops overtime, [19] argue that the development of professional identities of EFL teachers continues over a career lifespan. In doing so, EFL teachers engage in different activities. Some of these activities evolve around issues that are closely related to improving their classroom practices, pedagogical knowledge and skills, as well as professional development. However, other activities can even go beyond the boundaries of the teachers' classrooms. These activities include socio-cultural engagement, which can improve the teachers' job efficacy and satisfaction [20,21].

In the same vein, [22] indicate that the development of TPI undergoes four stages. While the first three of these stages have to do with the teacher's own performance, the fourth stage is related to how the teacher's performance influences his or her students and their achievement. The first stage, "fantasy", occurs when a person starts teaching. Specifically, this stage takes place when prospective or preservice teachers romanticize about their experience ahead. The second stage, "survival", begins when a person starts teaching in actual classrooms. At this stage, the person usually deals with issues related to classroom management and control, content mastery and delivery, as well as concerns of how he or she will be perceived and evaluated by others. This is the stage during which teachers start to struggle to achieve a sense of worth and identity. The third stage, "mastery", occurs when a teacher gains control and mastery over subject content and teaching pedagogy. Self-reflection on his or her own performance usually takes place at this stage. The fourth stage, "impact", usually occurs when experienced teachers start to focus more on the needs, progress, and achievement of their students. Teachers at this stage become concerned mostly with their own self-evaluation as less focus is given to how others evaluate them.

Likewise, [23] theorizes how TPI develops overtime. According to the author, the development of TPI passes five essential processes. These processes are reconciling prior beliefs with reformed teaching, locating identity within a community of practice, managing emotional aspects of identity formation, integrating experiences and theory, and developing a sense of self-confidence.

It explored the complexity of the construction of TPI. According to her, there are three fundamentally distinct orientations of the professional identities of teachers as reflected in their discourses, practices, beliefs, values, and sense of who they are. These three orientations are dialogically-oriented teachers, classroom-oriented teachers, and individually-oriented teachers [24].

The professional identity of dialogically-oriented teachers is informed by their interaction with external discourses including the scholarly publications of influential authors and practitioners. They also refer to the various aspects of the social context where a person teaches, including state and national policies and how teachers conform to, negotiate, or even challenge them. Thus, the professional identity of dialogically-oriented teachers is also influenced by how they perceive themselves as active agents of change.

The professional identity of classroom-oriented teachers is informed by their classroom practices and how they view classrooms as distinct spaces that require particular responsibilities. It is also informed by the way in which a teacher's knowledge of the content area as well as his or her choice of curriculum and teaching methods to meet specific

instructional goals reflect the underlying aspects that constitute his or her TPI, including his or her values and beliefs.

The professional identity of individually-oriented teachers is largely shaped by one's personal image of teaching. It is also informed by the teacher's pre-professional experiences in education. Two types of experiences are relevant in particular: a person's experience as a student as well as his or her profession related experience prior to becoming a full-time teacher such as tutoring.

Drawing on [24], teacher professional identity (TPI) is conceptualized in this study as a teacher's sense of who he or she is, especially in relation to others. This sense of self is informed by a shared set of attributes, beliefs, values, and practices that are either defined by the teachers themselves or imposed on them from outside, such as by policymakers. In this sense, TPI defines and determines what it means to be a particular type of teacher. Also, drawing on, TPI is conceptualized in this study as complex, multiple, ongoing, and dynamic social construct, as opposed to fixed and unchanging. This is mediated by the teachers' own experiences inside and outside of schools, as well as their own beliefs and values about what it means to be a teacher and the type of teacher they aspire to be [25].

Teacher Professional Identity in the Saudi context

The number of studies in the literature that explore how EFL teachers in KSA experience TPIs is quite limited. Drawing on Foucault's theory of the four dimensions of the genealogy of power as a conceptual framework for theorizing TPI and using case study as a research methodology, [26] studied how Saudi English language teachers in tertiary education construct and negotiate their TPI. In essence, the author focused on exploring the substance and source of authority that underlie the participant's TPI, the way how the participant enacts his TPI, and finally the purpose or ultimate goal of TPI as perceived by the participant. The author's analysis of the data showed that the TPIs of Saudi EFL teachers rely heavily on religious (Islamic) and societal (Saudi) morals and values. That's why they could feel uncomfortable or insecure when they teach conflicting Western ideologies that are represented in the English language textbooks. As a result, Saudi EFL teachers may tend to efface anything that seems to be foreign to them, their students, as well as their societal and religious values. That is why some Saudi EFL teachers perceive themselves as moral agents whose role is to promulgate Arabic and Islamic values, as opposed to competing Western ideologies.

In the same vein, it conducted a similar case study to investigate the dilemma that English language teachers in KSA have to navigate through while forging their TPIs because of the multiple and competing Islamic and Western discourses they encounter on a regular basis. The authors concluded the study by positing that this issue could be potentially resolved via the construction of a "globalized" teacher professional identity that reconciles these conflicting identities and discourses. Likewise, it explored the complexity that English language teachers in KSA face to reconcile their competing societal and institutional identities. According to the authors, the "societal identity" is the one that relies heavily on the teachings of conservative, Islamic, and Saudi morals and values. The "institutional identity" is the one that inevitably entails teaching Western ideologies and discourses. The authors concluded by arguing that in order to develop an effective TPI, Saudi EFL teachers would need to develop a reconciled "globalized identity" that is both socially and globally legitimate [27].

The above reviewed studies focused only on Saudi EFL teachers. Thus, in a different study, [28] exclusively focused on expatriate EFL teachers working in KSA. Specifically, this was achieved via investigating how Pakistani EFL teachers in a university English language institute in KSA construct their TPIs. To address this issue, the authors explored the various factors (personal, professional, social and pedagogical) that contribute to the TPI formation of Pakistani expatriate EFL teachers in KSA. The authors concluded that study by arguing that there are a number of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to the development of Pakistani expatriate EFL teachers' TPIs in KSA. These factors include the participants' lives and experiences prior to their immigration to KSA, the reasons that motivate them to become EFL teachers in the first place, being non-native speakers of English, continuing professional development, their future professional goals, as well as their interaction and socialization with other EFL teachers.

In another study with a different scope, [29] examined how EFL teachers' professional identity is influenced by the in-service professional development programs in an English Language Institute in a university in KSA. Specifically, the researchers studied the impact of these professional development programs on what they referred to as the five attributes of TPI: the teachers' knowledge of the teaching context, collegial collaboration, classroom practice, self-efficacy, and agency. The researchers concluded the study by claiming that the professional development programs that EFL teachers engage in influence the five attributes of their professional identities in different ways. Particularly, while participating in these programs largely improve the teachers' knowledge of the teaching context, self-efficacy, and practice, it has a moderate effect on their collegial collaboration, and a minimal impact on their agency.

3 Data and Methods

Drawing on identity theory [30] as a theoretical lens, the data in this small-scale qualitative study was primarily collected from written open-ended surveys. The open-ended surveys were constructed in the form of structured written interview questions. The participants in the study were recruited through using purposeful convenience sampling [31]. The inclusion criteria included being originally from the Asian Pacific region and currently teaching EFL in KSA. An invitation email was sent out to 9 male EFL teachers who were originally from the Asian Pacific region. Three participants responded positively to the invitation and offered to participate voluntarily in the study. After accepting the invitation and signing the consent forms, the written open-ended survey was sent out to the participants by email. The survey included 19 open-ended questions about the participants' experience as EFL teachers, and how they define, construct, and negotiate their TPI in the context of the study, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The participants were three Filipino male EFL teachers. All the participants were in-service faculty members who have been teaching EFL in an English language institute in the eastern region in KSA. Dan (pseudonym) is 54 years old. He has a BA in English and 33 years of experience as an EFL teacher. He has spent the last 25 years of his career teaching English in KSA. Ram (pseudonym) is 45 years old. He has an MA in ESL and 22 years of experience in teaching English. He has spent the last 16 years of his career teaching EFL in KSA. Gal (pseudonym) is 59 years old. He has an MA in English language education and 41 years of English language teaching experience. He has been teaching EFL in KSA for the last 12 years of his career.

After receiving the responses, the data were coded, categorized, and analyzed thematically. I started with open coding followed by axial coding. This continued until a saturation point was reached where no additional recurring themes emerged.

4 Findings

In this section, I report the recurring themes and findings that emerged in this study. The findings offer a snapshot of how expatriate EFL teachers from Asian Pacific regions in KSA define, construct and negotiate their TPIs. This section is divided into three parts, each of which focuses on one of the three recurring themes: Defining TPI and its essential aspects, the development of TPI and the role of professional development (PD) in the process, and constructing and negotiating TPI in the Saudi EFL context.

Defining TPI and its Essential Aspects

In his attempt to define TPI and its essential aspects, the research participant Dan said that:

EFL TPI, from my perspective, is the set of beliefs, values, and commitments an individual holds toward being a teacher as a career and being a particular type of an EFL teacher [...] TPI takes into great consideration the educational background and teaching experience one has [...] I am convinced, to the highest degree, that teaching experience, commitment, values, beliefs and educational background are of great importance that form the backbone of possessing quality TPI. (Dan)

Likewise, when Gal was asked to define TPI and its essential aspects, he indicated that TPI “encompasses years of experience, significant professional and educational background, and current knowledge in the field” (Gal). Similarly, Ram stated what defines TPI and its essential aspects in the following quote:

TPI means the professional level of an EFL teacher based on his knowledge, experience, qualification, social aspect, adaptation to the environment and the people around him, cultural sensitivity, commitment and resourcefulness [...] For me, education, knowledge, and experiences are the most important aspects of TPI. (Ram)

The participants' responses quoted above indicate that according to them, a teacher's experience, knowledge, and qualifications as well as his or her beliefs, values, and commitment are all essential aspects that define and constitute his or her professional identity.

In addition, in terms of indicating who has the right to decide on how TPI is defined, Dan stated that “the teacher himself and the hiring institution are those who set the standards” of how to define the professional identities of teachers in a social context (Dan). Similarly, Ram claimed that “the hiring committee, the management, and the teacher” have the right to do so (Ram). These responses show that both Dan and Ram believe that teachers themselves as well as the hiring institutions have the right to decide on how the professional identities of teachers are defined.

Furthermore, clarifying how the participants would usually decide on how to behave, act, or respond to any particular issue that arises in the teaching context as one of the essential aspects of their own TPIs was actually a theme that recurrently emerged in their responses. According to Dan,

Experience speaks a lot [...] coupled with this, knowledge is the offset of this experience [...] I maintain diligently the standards of the Institute [...] Everything I do must all be in consonance with the policies of the workplace so as not to get into serious academic troubles [...] I adhere fully to all of the outlined policies of the institution. In this manner, I am not only perpetuating the standards of the institute, but also improving myself as an EFL teacher. (Dan)

This high emphasis on strictly conforming and adhering to the institutional policies, rules, and regulations when acting or responding to any particular issue that arises in the teaching context was also mirrored in Ram's response when he stated that:

I follow everything that management asks and says us to do. If I don't understand some, I ask questions [...] I think I can use some instruments in evaluation like teaching classroom evaluation, teacher self-evaluation, and students' assessments. (Ram)

These responses indicate that, according to Dan and Ram, there are several sources that they would usually rely on as EFL teachers to decide on how to act in the workplace. These sources include the adherence to the profession standards and policies as set by the institute where they teach. These standards and policies were viewed by the participants as guidelines to define and inform their roles as EFL teachers. In addition, these sources include the participants' experience, knowledge, as well as the feedback they receive from their students and self-reflection.

The Development of TPI and the Role of PD

Another important theme that recurrently emerged in the data is the way of how the participants' TPIs have developed overtime and throughout the years, and the role of professional development (PD) in this process. According to Dan,

The conglomeration of solid 33 years of EFL experience really aided me in accelerating through the years of continued success in this profession. This experience includes among others some techniques acquired in the process of becoming one of the known EFL instructors at [Eastern Institute] (pseudonym). (Dan)

In the same vein, Gal indicated that:

I would say it [TPI] is developed by means of consistency, that is, constant steady years of experience in teaching English, keeping oneself always updated and informed about the developments and trends in the field. The results on a time to time basis may not be evident, but in the end, there is progress in oneself. (Gal)

Similarly, Ram said that:

They say, education is a lifelong learning process. It is a way to improve our knowledge and competence in our field to have a good life. For me, while I was teaching here, I forced myself to finish my MA. Also, I attend seminars and workshops [...] Moreover, I participate in group discussion regarding EFL teaching experiences with my batch mates who are also teaching abroad. Lastly, I go out from my flat and talk to people. It's my way of learning the people's values and culture [...] this is another tool for me in teaching English. (Ram)

The participants' responses show that, according to them, their experience, the professional development programs they attended, and their interactions with other colleagues were all important factors that have in one way or another shaped their TPIs over the years.

However, it is noteworthy mentioning that some of the participants had different opinions about how they perceived the role of attending professional development activities in constructing their TPIs. Dan, on the one hand, believed that all the PD activities in which he participated have positively influenced his identity as an EFL teacher in one way or another. He stated that:

PD plays an important role in molding myself holistically as an EFL instructor. Every PD is a good learning experience [...] All PDs (locally and internationally) have been instrumental in improving my being in this career of EFL teaching. (Dan)

Gal, on the other hand, indicated that he felt no difference neither in himself as a teacher nor in his way of teaching as a result of attending the seminars and training provided by the department in the institute where he works. Gal stated this clearly in the following quote:

Change! I don't really know, not much, I think. I, like the rest of the teaching staff, are grateful for the seminars and training provided by the department, but I don't see the results in me and my teaching now. Nothing. Nothing. Not yet at least for now. (Gal)

Constructing and Negotiating TPI in the Saudi Context

Another theme that appeared recurrently was about how the participants constructed and negotiated their status as legitimate members of the Saudi and EFL teaching communities of practice. The results showed that in so doing the participants engaged in some practices including obtaining some context-specific knowledge about the Saudi context and culture. Ram indicated these practices in the following quote:

I involve myself in some committees [...] I also attend the seminars and workshops being conducted by [Eastern Institute] (pseudonym) apart from reading some journals sometimes [...] and like what I have said, I talk with the people in [Eastern city] (pseudonym) to learn about the people's values and culture. (Ram)

Likewise, Gal addressed these practices in the following quote:

If I were to be a legitimate member or participant of your community here in KSA, English would only cut me off. As a foreigner, I would have to learn Arabic instead. (Gal)

This shows that the practices that the participants engaged in to construct, negotiate, and claim their status as legitimate participants or members of the Saudi and EFL teaching communities of practice included socializing and interacting more with Saudis to increase their knowledge about the Saudi culture and Arabic language. They also included attending professional development activities and joining different committees at work to access the EFL community of practice in KSA as legitimate members.

However, achieving this legitimacy and having access to the EFL teaching community of practice in KSA were not straightforward processes. Specifically, while forming and claiming their status as legitimate members of the EFL teaching community of practice in KSA, the participants had to repeatedly try to overcome and navigate through a number of challenges using different strategies. These challenges included issues related to culture, nationality, ethnicity, and conformity to workplace institutional policies. Dan demonstrated these challenges and how he tried to overcome them in the following quote:

At first, I was alarmed because when I began teaching in [Eastern Institute] (pseudonym) in 2001, I discovered myself to be the sole Filipino instructor who was teaching EFL to Saudi students. However, I felt calm and positive because I blended easily with my colleagues. In the end, I was quite successful in honing my teaching skills because of these worthwhile EFL exposures in KSA [...] There are some hindrances that I have to overcome in crafting my EFL legitimacy as a teacher in KSA. Among the considerations are the academic culture of the students, being an Asian who will be teaching English, policies of the institution, and the academic environment. (Dan)

Likewise, Ram shed light on these challenges and how he tried to overcome them in the following quote:

Culture. I remember my first year of teaching here in KSA. I was at [Prince College] (pseudonym) before. I really wanted to teach the different parts of the body to the soldiers. I wanted to be creative, so I made the different parts of the body into a song. I saw the positive response of the soldiers. However, at the end of the class, I was advised by the Mutawa [religiously conservative people] not to use that method again. So, I changed my method. I used the drill method and made it as a competition. That was my first lesson as an EFL teacher. From now on, I never stop reading about the culture of KSA. (Ram)

This quote shows that Ram's lack of competence or awareness of the students' Islamic cultural and religious beliefs and identities in the host community was one of the challenges that he encountered as an expatriate EFL teacher. However, he overcame this challenge by becoming a culturally responsive teacher. That is, he modified his way of teaching to recognize and accommodate the students' Islamic religious beliefs and identities.

In addition, the data indicate that the participants followed other strategies to overcome the challenges they faced to construct, negotiate, and claim their status as legitimate participants or members of the EFL teaching community of practice in KSA. These strategies included attending professional development activities regularly, obeying the institutional policies strictly, and improving their teaching practices continuously. This was revealed by Dan in the following quote:

I did my homework well, attending local and international EFL conferences and workshops, peer observations, reading professional EFL-related articles and essays, following the institute's laws and policies strictly, maintaining good rapport to students, quality lesson planning, using the available supplementary materials, constantly improving my classroom management, and incorporating technology in all of my lectures. (Dan)

Likewise, Ram stated the strategy he followed in the following quote:

So, what I did was, I adjusted my level way of teaching to suit to the level and need of my students. (Ram)

To sum up, in this section, I reported the recurring themes and findings that emerged from my data analysis. These findings will be discussed in the subsequent section.

5 Discussion

The main goal in this study was to investigate how expatriate EFL teachers from the Asian Pacific regions in KSA define, construct, and negotiate TPIs. The findings in the study have indicated that expatriate EFL teachers from the Asian Pacific regions in the Saudi context conceptualized TPI as the way in which a teacher is perceived by himself/herself or others as a particular type of teacher. This perception was informed by several aspects including the teacher's experience, knowledge, qualifications, beliefs, values, and commitment. In addition, the findings have shown that the mandated institutional norms and policies that the teachers conformed to have played a significant role in shaping their professional identities. In this way, the findings in the current study support the findings in previous research that have repeatedly demonstrated that the professional identities of teachers refer to how one is viewed by oneself or others [31]. In the same vein, the findings in this study support the claims in previous research which stress the point that the professional identities of teachers in KSA are constrained and influenced by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors, i.e. the institutional policies, norms, and hierarchy that are imposed on teachers as well as their own morals and values [32,33].

Thus, it could be claimed that the formation of the professional identities of EFL teachers in KSA lies in the negotiation of various competing factors. At the same time, it is also influenced by the reconciliation of the "assigned" professional identity of a teacher, the one that is imposed on him or her, as well as his or her "claimed" professional identity, the one that is acknowledged or achieved by him or her [34].

As explained above, TPI research distinguishes among three types of TPI orientations each of which is informed by different sources and has distinct characteristics: dialogically-oriented teachers, classroom-oriented teachers, and individually-oriented teachers (Hsieh, 2010). The findings in the study have indicated that the TPIs of expatriate EFL teachers in KSA are mostly both dialogically-oriented and individually-oriented. Specifically, the professional identities of the expatriate EFL teachers in the Saudi context could be characterized as dialogically-oriented because the way in which the teachers acted was largely informed by the institutional policies and standards as set by the policymakers in the teaching context. The large emphasis the teachers put on conforming to these policies and standards as guidelines that define their roles as teachers has reflected the dialogical orientation of their professional identities. At the same time, the professional identities of expatriate EFL teachers in KSA could also be identified as individually-oriented because they sometimes relied on their own experience in determining how to act as EFL teachers.

Furthermore, the study has shown that TPI formation is a life-long complex process that is multifaceted and influenced by various factors both inside and outside the classroom. Thus, all the activities that EFL teachers engage in, such as pursuing higher education and their cumulative teaching experience, contribute in one way or another to forging their professional identities. In this way, the findings in this study support the claims in previous research which have repeatedly indicated that TPI construction and development are ongoing processes and shaped by different factors [35].

It contend that when newcomers join a new community of practice, they usually do so through maneuvering and navigating through several stages to claim their status as legitimate participants or members in that community. The findings have indicated that expatriate EFL teachers in KSA were not any different [36]. They engaged in different practices and obtained particular context-specific knowledge to overcome the social and professional challenges that they have faced during their attempts to forge and claim their status as legitimate participants or members of the Saudi community as well as the EFL teaching community of practice in KSA. These practices included reading about KSA, socializing with Saudi people, joining some social groups to better access and understand the Saudi culture and social context, attending professional development activities, conforming to institutional policies, consulting other colleagues, and trying to continuously improve teaching practices. Thus, it could be claimed that achieving this legitimacy or membership in these communities of practice required expatriate EFL teachers in KSA to acquire competence and expertise that were beyond those that are firmly related to the subject matter they teach, English.

The study has indicated that the lack of competence or awareness of the students' Islamic cultural and religious beliefs and identities in the host community was one of the challenges that expatriate EFL teachers in KSA encountered. However, it could be argued that they were able to overcome this challenge by developing culturally responsive and sensitive teaching professional identities. Specifically, they adjusted and modified their way of teaching to recognize and accommodate the students' Islamic cultural and religious references in all aspects of teaching and learning.

TPI research has indicated that professional development and the formation of teacher identity were inextricably connected. This was the case because the professional development programs in which EFL teachers participated have played a significant role in shaping how they could form their professional identity. The findings in the current study have challenged this claim to a certain extent. While some teachers believed that attending professional development activities contributed positively to the development of their TPIs, other teachers indicated that attending professional development had no positive impact neither on them nor on their teaching practices.

TPI research in the field of English language teaching has indicated that “Standard English” and “(non-)native speakerness” are two essential issues that inevitably influence the identities of English language teachers. This should not be surprising, especially in a field like English language teaching where the teachers who speak English as a non-native language outnumber those who speak it as a mother tongue. None of the teachers who participated in this study believed that their status as a non-native speaker of English hindered their ability to shape their professional identities as legitimate EFL teachers. On the contrary, they perceived themselves as equivalent to their counterparts who speak English as a native language because they believed that they had received the proper preparation and education that qualified them to be English language teachers.

6 Conclusion

This study promotes knowledge on how expatriate EFL teachers from the Asian Pacific regions in KSA define, construct, and negotiate teacher professional identity. Supporting the conclusions in other previous studies in the field, the current study shows that the professional identities of expatriate EFL teachers largely inform their discourses and practices. It also shows that the construction of these identities is a life-long complex process that is shaped by various extrinsic and intrinsic factors. These factors include the institutional policies in the teaching context as well as the teachers’ experience, knowledge, qualifications, beliefs, values, and commitment. Thus, it could be argued that the professional identities of expatriate EFL teachers in the Saudi context are both dialogically-oriented and individually-oriented.

In addition, the current study demonstrates that not all expatriate EFL teachers in KSA believe that professional development always has a positive impact on the development of their professional identities. Furthermore, the study indicates that the construction of professional identity and getting access to the Saudi as well as EFL teaching communities of practice in KSA as legitimate participants or members are not straightforward processes. They entail the teachers’ meaningful engagement in a number of practices and obtaining particular context-specific knowledge. They also require expatriate EFL teachers to acquire competence and expertise that are beyond those that are firmly related to the subject matter they teach, English.

Though the study has provided key insights into the issue under investigation, it nevertheless has several limitations of which the most significant may be the small sample size. Thus, it is highly recommended to replicate the study with a larger sample in future research. In addition, despite its importance and relevance, exploring how issues of gender influence the professional identity of expatriate EFL teachers in KSA was beyond the scope of the current study. This issue could be addressed in more detail in future research. Finally, since the current study shows that not all expatriate EFL teachers in the Saudi context believe that professional development has a positive impact on their TPI, it is highly recommended to address this issue further in future research taking into account the content of the professional development programs in which teachers participate.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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