

Reflection on Professional Identity: An Autoethnographic Study of a Teacher's Evolving Role Within the Classroom Context

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving professional identity of an English teacher through a reflective autoethnographic approach. Positioning the researcher as both the participant and the subject of inquiry, the study draws on personal reflective journals, narrative writing, classroom field notes, and professional experiences accumulated across different stages of the author's teaching career. Data were analysed thematically through iterative reflection to identify recurring patterns, critical incidents, and identity shifts. The findings reveal professional identity is shaped through four interconnected dimensions: early informal exposure to English, social recognition and validation, classroom interaction with diverse learners, and sustained reflective practice. These dimensions contribute to the continuous negotiation of beliefs, emotions, and professional roles within changing institutional and cultural contexts. Reflection emerged as a central mechanism enabling adaptation, resilience, and pedagogical growth. This study offers an original contribution by foregrounding the teacher's inner reflective voice and lived experience, which are often marginalized in identity research dominated by policy and external expectations. The findings underscore the value of autoethnography as a powerful methodological tool for capturing the emotional and contextual complexity of teacher identity development. Implications are provided for teacher education programs to support reflective inquiry and lifelong professional learning.

Keywords:

Teacher Professional Identity;
Autoethnography;
English Language Teaching;
Classroom Interaction.

1. Introduction

Teacher professional identity is increasingly understood as a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by personal experiences, institutional expectations, and classroom interactions. In secondary education contexts, English teachers are required to continuously negotiate their professional roles while responding to diverse student needs, curricular demands, and sociocultural expectations. These conditions often prompt reflection and identity negotiation, particularly within real classroom settings.

In the Indonesian senior high school context, English teachers face additional challenges related to multilingual classrooms, varying learner proficiency levels, and evolving educational policies. These challenges position teachers not only as language instructors but also as facilitators, mentors, and cultural mediators. As a result, professional identity development becomes closely intertwined with daily classroom practices and lived teaching experiences.

Although teacher professional identity has been widely explored in educational research, much of the existing literature emphasizes external factors such as policy, standards, and institutional discourse. Fewer studies foreground teachers' inner reflective voices and lived experiences, particularly through self-focused qualitative approaches. Moreover, research employing autoethnography to examine how classroom interaction and reflective practice shape the ongoing professional identity of in-service English teachers remains limited, especially in Indonesian secondary education contexts.

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a reflective autoethnographic approach to explore the evolution of the author's professional identity as a senior high school English teacher. By positioning the teacher as both researcher and participant, the study seeks to illuminate how personal experiences, classroom interactions, and sustained reflection contribute to identity construction and reconstruction over time.

The purpose of this study is to examine how reflective practice and classroom experiences shape the professional identity of an English teacher within a real classroom context. Specifically, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How does the teacher's professional identity evolve through reflective engagement with classroom experiences?
- 2) What personal, contextual, and interactional factors influence the construction and reconstruction of the teacher's professional identity?
- 3) How does reflective practice mediate the teacher's responses to institutional and classroom challenges?

This study is significant because it offers an insider perspective on teacher professional identity development that is often overlooked in externally driven research. By foregrounding lived experience and reflection, the study contributes to teacher identity scholarship, supports the use of autoethnography in educational research, and provides practical insights for teacher education and professional development programs seeking to foster reflective, adaptive, and resilient English teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teacher Professional Identity Theory

Teacher professional identity is widely conceptualized as a dynamic, relational, and socially constructed process rather than a fixed personal attribute. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) argue that teacher identity is continuously shaped and reshaped through interactions between personal beliefs, professional values, prior experiences, and contextual influences such as school culture and policy demands. Similarly, Danielewicz (2001) views identity as a negotiated process that develops through participation in professional practices and relationships.

From a sociocultural perspective, Wenger (1998) emphasizes identity formation through engagement in communities of practice, where meaning-making, belonging, and mutual participation contribute to how teachers understand themselves as professionals. This perspective highlights that identity is not formed in isolation but through ongoing interaction with students, colleagues, and institutional structures. Kelchtermans (2009) further underscores the emotional dimension of teacher identity, suggesting that vulnerability, commitment, and moral purpose are integral to how teachers perceive and sustain their professional selves.

Reflective practice plays a central role in identity construction. Schön (1983) conceptualizes reflection as a process through which practitioners examine their actions and underlying assumptions, enabling professional learning and transformation. In the context of teaching, reflection allows educators to reinterpret experiences, respond to challenges, and renegotiate professional identities over time (Sachs, 2001; Flores & Day, 2006). Thus, teacher professional identity is best understood as an evolving, reflective, and contextually embedded phenomenon.

2.2. Autoethnography as a Research Method

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that combines autobiographical narrative with cultural analysis to explore how personal experiences are shaped by and reflect broader social contexts (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Unlike traditional ethnography, which focuses on observing others, autoethnography positions the researcher as both participant and analyst, allowing for an insider perspective that foregrounds lived experience and reflexivity.

Scholars such as Reed-Danahay (1997) and Spry (2001) describe autoethnography as a method that bridges the personal and the cultural through systematic self-reflection and narrative inquiry. Denzin (2014) argues that autoethnography is particularly valuable for revealing hidden meanings, emotional dimensions, and power relations that are often inaccessible through external observation alone. In educational research, this methodology enables teachers to critically examine their professional journeys while situating them within institutional, cultural, and policy contexts.

Within teacher education research, autoethnography has been increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for examining identity, agency, and reflective practice (Hickey & Austin, 2007; Starr, 2010). By legitimizing teachers' voices and experiences, autoethnography challenges positivist notions of objectivity and contributes to more humanized, context-sensitive understandings of teaching and learning.

2.3. Previous Studies on Teacher Professional Identity

Research on teacher professional identity has expanded significantly over the past two decades. Studies consistently demonstrate that identity development is influenced by a combination of personal history, professional experience, and contextual conditions. Flores and Day (2006), for example, show how teachers' identities evolve in response to changing school environments and career phases. Similarly, Sachs (2005) emphasizes teacher agency, arguing that teachers actively construct their identities while navigating competing discourses of professionalism.

In the field of English language teaching, identity research highlights the unique challenges faced by EFL teachers, including linguistic insecurity, cultural mediation, and institutional expectations (Norton, 2013). Narrative and qualitative studies reveal that reflective writing and storytelling support continuous identity negotiation, particularly in response to policy pressures and classroom realities (Putri & Siregar, 2023).

However, much of the existing research relies on interviews, surveys, or externally framed narratives. Fewer studies employ autoethnography to deeply explore teachers' inner reflective processes over extended periods, especially in non-Western and Indonesian secondary education contexts. This gap limits understanding of how teachers experience identity development from an insider's perspective and how classroom interaction and emotion shape professional growth.

2.4. Autoethnography in Teacher Education Research

Within teacher education, autoethnography serves both as a research methodology and a reflective pedagogical practice. It enables teachers to critically interrogate their beliefs, assumptions, and professional trajectories while linking personal narratives to broader educational discourses (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). Such reflective inquiry supports teacher agency, professional awareness, and transformative learning. Autoethnographic studies in teacher education demonstrate that engaging in narrative self-study enhances reflective capacity, emotional resilience, and professional commitment (Starr, 2010). By documenting critical incidents and identity tensions, teachers gain deeper insight into their pedagogical decisions and contextual constraints. Consequently, autoethnography contributes not only to research knowledge but also to professional development practices that value reflection as a core component of teacher learning.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

Guided by sociocultural identity theory and reflective practice theory, this study conceptualizes teacher professional identity as an ongoing process shaped through the interaction of four key elements: (1) personal and linguistic history, (2) classroom interaction, (3) institutional and sociocultural context, and (4) reflective practice. These elements interact dynamically to influence how teachers construct, negotiate, and reconstruct their professional identities over time. Reflective practice functions as a mediating mechanism that enables the teacher to interpret experiences, respond to challenges, and align beliefs with practice. Autoethnography provides the methodological lens through which these processes are examined, allowing the researcher to connect individual lived experience with broader cultural and institutional structures. This framework positions teacher identity as fluid, context-sensitive, and emotionally embedded, forming the basis for the analysis presented in this study.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using autoethnography to explore the evolution of teacher professional identity through reflective practice. Autoethnography is employed to systematically examine personal lived experiences and connect them to broader cultural, institutional, and educational contexts. This design is appropriate because the study seeks to understand identity development as a subjective, dynamic, and contextually embedded process rather than to generalize findings across populations.

3.2 Researcher Position and Reflexivity

In this autoethnographic study, the researcher assumes a dual role as both participant and researcher. The author is an in-service senior high school English teacher whose professional experiences constitute the primary data source. This insider position enables deep access to emotions, reflections, and meaning-making processes that are often inaccessible to external researchers. At the same time, reflexivity is central to managing subjectivity. The researcher engages in continuous self-questioning, critical reflection, and analytical distancing to acknowledge personal biases, assumptions, and positionality throughout the research process.

3.2 Data Sources

Data in this study are drawn from multiple autoethnographic sources to enrich depth and credibility. These sources include: Reflective journals documenting teaching experiences, emotions, challenges, and identity negotiations. Retrospective personal narratives and memories related to language learning and teaching across different career stages. Teaching artifacts such as lesson plans, instructional materials, and feedback from students or colleagues. Informal field notes recorded after classroom interactions, professional meetings, and training programs. The use of multiple data sources supports data triangulation and provides a richer representation of professional identity development.

3.3 Time Frame of the Study

The autoethnographic reflections span a prolonged period of professional development, covering approximately fifteen years, from the researcher's early experiences as an English learner and pre-service teacher to her current role as an in-service senior high school English teacher. This longitudinal perspective allows the study to capture identity formation as an evolving and cumulative process rather than a single moment in time.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred iteratively and reflexively. Reflective journals were written regularly during teaching activities, while retrospective narratives were constructed through systematic reflection on significant past experiences. Teaching artifacts and field notes were collected continuously as part of routine professional practice. Data collection and analysis overlapped, allowing emerging insights to inform further reflection and documentation.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. The analysis involved several stages: (1) repeated reading of journals and narratives to achieve immersion; (2) initial coding to identify significant events, emotions, and identity-related moments; (3) grouping codes into broader themes related to professional identity development, classroom interaction, and reflective practice; and (4) interpretive analysis linking personal narratives to theoretical concepts from teacher identity and reflective practice literature. This process enabled the identification of recurring patterns and critical incidents shaping identity evolution.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Credibility

To enhance trustworthiness, this study employs strategies consistent with qualitative and autoethnographic research. Crystallization is used by integrating multiple data sources and perspectives to illuminate complex experiences. Critical friends, including fellow teachers and academic peers, were consulted to review interpretations and challenge assumptions. Prolonged engagement with the data and transparent narrative construction further support credibility and depth.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are carefully addressed in this autoethnographic study. All individuals mentioned in the narratives, including students, colleagues, and institutions, are anonymized through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details. The researcher critically considers the boundaries of self-disclosure to balance authenticity with ethical responsibility. As the study focuses on the researcher's own experiences, consent issues are minimized; however, respect for others' privacy and dignity remains a priority.

4. Findings: Evolution of Professional Identity

This section presents the findings of the autoethnographic study by organizing the narrative data into clearly defined phases and cross-cutting themes. To strengthen analytical clarity, each phase combines *thick description* of lived experience with explicit reflective analysis. The findings demonstrate that professional identity development is longitudinal, emotionally embedded, and continuously negotiated through reflection and classroom interaction.

Phase 1: Early Informal Exposure to English (Affective Foundations)

Description of Experience

My earliest engagement with English occurred outside formal schooling through Western music and films. Listening to English songs and mimicking movie dialogues generated enjoyment rather than anxiety, allowing English to become part of my personal identity long before it became a professional one.

“English felt natural and enjoyable because I learned it through songs and movies, not through pressure or exams.” (Reflective journal)

Reflective Analysis

This phase illustrates that professional identity formation can originate in affective and informal learning spaces. Early emotional attachment to English fostered motivation, confidence, and a sense of ownership over the language. These affective foundations later influenced my teaching philosophy, particularly my use of music and multimedia as pedagogical tools. The finding aligns with sociocultural perspectives that view identity as emerging through meaningful engagement rather than institutional roles alone.

Phase 2: High School Recognition and Emerging Teacher Identity

Description of Experience

During senior high school, I assisted classmates in understanding English grammar, particularly tense usage. My peers perceived my explanations as clearer than those provided by the teacher, and this recognition marked the first time I was positioned as a “teacher.”

“When my friends understood after I explained, I started to believe that I could teach.” (Reflective narrative)

Reflective Analysis

Social recognition functioned as a powerful identity-affirming moment. Being acknowledged by peers validated my emerging professional self and strengthened my commitment to teaching. This phase highlights the role of interpersonal interaction and external validation in shaping early professional identity.

Phase 3: University Education and Identity Tensions

Description of Experience

At university, exposure to diverse lecturers, including international instructors, expanded my linguistic and pedagogical awareness. However, these experiences also triggered feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, particularly when comparing myself to more proficient peers.

“I admired my lecturers, but at times I questioned whether I was good enough to become an English teacher.” (Reflective journal)

Reflective Analysis

This phase represents identity tension, where aspiration and insecurity coexist. Such tension prompted critical self-reflection and encouraged identity negotiation rather than withdrawal. The findings suggest that professional identity development is not linear but shaped through struggle, reflection, and gradual confidence-building.

Phase 4: Teaching Practice and Classroom Reality

Description of Experience

Teaching during Micro Teaching II and early professional practice required adapting instruction to students with varied abilities. Managing acceleration and regular classes challenged my assumptions about teaching effectiveness and preparedness.

“I realized that knowing English was not enough; understanding students mattered more.” (Teaching reflection)

Reflective Analysis

Classroom interaction emerged as a central site of identity construction. Through daily engagement with students, I developed empathy, flexibility, and responsiveness—key components of my evolving professional identity. Teaching became a relational practice rather than a technical one.

Phase 5: In-service Teaching and Postgraduate Professional Growth

Description of Experience

As an in-service teacher, participation in professional development programs and teaching communities strengthened my confidence and pedagogical creativity. Training supported by RELO and international educators introduced new instructional media and global perspectives.

“Professional training helped me see myself as a capable teacher who continues to grow.” (Reflective journal)

Reflective Analysis

This phase reflects identity consolidation through reflective practice and professional recognition. Ongoing learning reinforced my sense of agency and commitment, positioning professional identity as a lifelong process of growth rather than a fixed achievement.

Table 1

Timeline of Professional Identity Evolution

Phase	Career Stage	Key Experiences	Identity Outcomes
1	Early exposure	Music, films, informal learning	Affective attachment to English
2	High school	Peer tutoring, recognition	Emerging teacher identity
3	University	Academic & intercultural exposure	Identity tension & reflection
4	Teaching practice	Classroom interaction	Relational teaching identity
5	In-service teaching	Professional development	Identity consolidation & agency

Cross-Cutting Themes

Across all phases, four major themes emerged: (1) affective engagement with language, (2) social recognition and validation, (3) classroom interaction as identity space, and (4) reflective practice as a mediating mechanism. Reflective practice consistently enabled reinterpretation of experiences and adaptation to changing professional demands. Overall, the findings demonstrate that teacher professional identity evolves through layered experiences and sustained reflection. By separating narrative description from reflective analysis, this section clarifies how lived experiences are transformed into professional meaning.

Discussion

This discussion critically examines the findings of the study by situating them within established theories of teacher professional identity, reflective practice, and autoethnographic research. Rather than reiterating narrative descriptions, this section focuses on interpreting how the findings extend, confirm, and challenge existing scholarship, while highlighting the unique contribution of the present autoethnographic inquiry.

Professional Identity as Dynamic, Emotional, and Contextual

The findings strongly support the conceptualization of teacher professional identity as dynamic, relational, and continuously negotiated, as proposed by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009). The longitudinal nature of the teacher’s experiences demonstrates that identity is not a stable outcome of teacher education but an ongoing process shaped through interaction with learners, colleagues, and institutional demands. Consistent with Flores and Day (2006), the study illustrates how identity evolves across career phases, influenced by shifting contexts and emotional responses to teaching realities. Importantly, this study foregrounds the emotional dimension of identity development, reinforcing Kelchtermans’ (2009) argument that vulnerability, moral purpose, and emotional investment are central to teachers’ professional selves. The affective foundations established through early informal exposure to English reveal that emotions are not peripheral but foundational in shaping long-term professional commitment and pedagogical choices.

Imposter Syndrome, Vulnerability, and Novice Teacher Development

Experiences of self-doubt and imposter syndrome during the university and early teaching phases resonate with literature on novice teacher development, which highlights insecurity and identity tension as common transitional experiences (Flores & Day, 2006). Rather than positioning vulnerability as a weakness, this study aligns with Kelchtermans’ (2009) view that vulnerability can function as a productive space for reflection and growth. The findings suggest that identity tensions act as catalysts for deeper reflective engagement, enabling teachers to renegotiate their sense of competence and legitimacy. By documenting these emotional struggles through autoethnography, the study contributes nuanced insight into how novice teachers internally experience professional becoming—an aspect often

underrepresented in interview-based studies that privilege retrospective rationalization over lived emotional processes.

Reflective Practice as the Cornerstone of Identity Development

Reflective practice emerged as the central mechanism mediating identity evolution throughout all career phases. Schön's (1983) concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action provide a useful lens for understanding how the teacher continuously interpreted classroom experiences and adjusted pedagogical beliefs. Reflection enabled the transformation of experience into professional knowledge, supporting identity reconstruction rather than stagnation. Beyond Schön, the findings also resonate with Sachs' (2001) notion of teacher agency, where reflection empowers teachers to actively shape their professional identities amidst competing discourses of professionalism. In this study, reflective journaling and narrative self-inquiry functioned not merely as documentation tools but as identity-shaping practices that fostered resilience, adaptability, and professional agency.

Dialogues with Autoethnographic Studies on Teacher Identity

This study contributes to a growing body of autoethnographic research in teacher education that emphasizes voice, emotion, and lived experience (Hickey & Austin, 2007; Starr, 2010). Similar to these studies, the present research demonstrates how autoethnography provides access to internal identity negotiations that are difficult to capture through external observation. However, the unique contribution of this study lies in its longitudinal scope and its focus on classroom interaction as a recurring identity space. By tracing identity development from early language exposure to in-service teaching, the study extends existing autoethnographic work that often focuses on single career stages or isolated critical incidents. The Indonesian senior high school context further enriches the literature by offering insights from a non-Western educational setting that remains underrepresented in teacher identity research.

Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development

The findings offer several actionable implications for teacher education programs. First, reflective practice should be embedded systematically across pre-service and in-service teacher education, not treated as an optional activity. Structured reflective journaling, narrative inquiry, and guided reflection sessions can help teachers articulate and negotiate their professional identities. Second, teacher education programs should explicitly address emotional dimensions of teaching, including vulnerability and imposter syndrome. Mentoring systems and peer reflection groups can provide safe spaces for novice teachers to normalize self-doubt and transform it into professional growth. Third, professional development initiatives should value informal and experiential learning pathways, such as classroom experimentation and collaborative reflection, recognizing these as legitimate sources of professional knowledge.

Methodological Limitations and Transferability

As an autoethnographic study, this research is inherently subjective and context-specific. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable, and the researcher's dual role as participant and analyst may introduce bias. However, transparency, reflexivity, and crystallization were employed to enhance credibility. Rather than generalizability, the value of this study lies in its transferability. Readers are invited to determine the relevance of the findings to their own contexts by engaging with the thick description and analytical interpretation provided. The identity trajectories and reflective processes documented here may resonate with other English teachers navigating similar institutional and emotional challenges, thereby offering conceptual and pedagogical insights beyond the immediate research setting. In sum, this discussion demonstrates that teacher professional identity is a fluid, emotionally embedded, and reflective process. By integrating theory, autoethnographic insight, and contextual analysis, the study advances understanding of how teachers construct professional meaning over time and underline the importance of reflective practice in sustaining professional growth.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to explore how a teacher's professional identity evolves through reflective engagement with classroom experiences using a reflective autoethnographic approach. Addressing the research questions, the findings demonstrate that the teacher's professional identity develops as a dynamic and ongoing process shaped by affective language experiences, social recognition, classroom interaction, institutional contexts, and sustained reflective practice.

First, in response to the question of how professional identity evolves, the study shows that identity construction occurs longitudinally across different career phases, from early informal exposure to English to in-service teaching. Identity is continuously reconstructed through critical reflection on experiences rather than formed as a fixed outcome of teacher education. Second, regarding factors influencing identity development, the findings highlight the central roles of emotional engagement, vulnerability, classroom interaction, and professional learning opportunities. Third, reflective practice functions as a mediating mechanism that enables the teacher to interpret challenges, manage self-doubt, and align pedagogical beliefs with practice.

Theoretically, this study contributes to teacher professional identity research by extending sociocultural and reflective practice perspectives through a longitudinal autoethnographic lens. By foregrounding the teacher's inner reflective voice and emotional experiences, the study enriches existing identity theories that often privilege external structures over lived experience. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of autoethnography in capturing the nuanced, emotional, and contextual dimensions of identity development that are difficult to access through conventional qualitative methods.

Practical Implications

For teacher educators, this study underscores the importance of embedding structured reflective practices—such as reflective journaling, narrative inquiry, and guided reflection—throughout pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. These practices can support teachers in articulating and negotiating their professional identities. For school administrators, the findings suggest the need to create supportive professional environments that acknowledge emotional challenges, including vulnerability and imposter syndrome. Mentoring systems, peer reflection groups, and collaborative learning communities can help teachers transform self-doubt into professional growth. For policymakers, the study highlights the importance of recognizing reflective practice and experiential learning as legitimate components of professional development. Policies should support continuous, reflective, and context-sensitive teacher learning rather than focusing solely on standardized performance indicators.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. As a single-case autoethnographic study, the findings are context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization. The subjective nature of autoethnography and the researcher's dual role as participant and analyst may also influence interpretation. However, these limitations are balanced by the depth, reflexivity, and transparency of the analysis.

Future research could extend this work by employing collaborative or comparative autoethnography involving multiple teachers across different educational contexts to explore shared and divergent identity trajectories. Longitudinal narrative studies focusing on novice teachers or transitions between career stages would further deepen understanding of identity development. Additionally, mixed-methods studies could integrate autoethnographic insights with interview or observational data to enhance transferability and theoretical refinement.

Overall, this study affirms that teacher professional identity is a fluid, reflective, and emotionally embedded process. Supporting teachers in developing reflective capacity is essential for sustaining professional growth and improving educational practice.

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