

Teacher Identity (Re)construction in the Process of EFL Teacher Education



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Abstract This study explores the concept of L2 teacher identity and the way it is shaped by knowledge and experience gained in the course of teacher education. The paper presents the results of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted via e-mail with trainee teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) who at the same time are experienced in-service teachers of other content subjects in Polish schools. Data are analysed in terms of three aspects of teacher identity formation and the associated tensions: language-related identity, disciplinary identity, self-knowledge and awareness (Pennington MC, Richards JC, *RELC Journal* 47:5–23, 2016). The results indicate that the transformation from a subject teacher to an EFL teacher is not only a matter of developing necessary skills and knowledge as a professional, but most importantly, it may redefine attitudes and beliefs that teachers hold about the nature of teaching and learning, thus changing their identity. The major source of identity tensions that such teachers experience is connected with their language proficiency.

Keywords Teacher identity · Identity construction · Foreign language teacher · L2 teacher education · English language teaching

1 Introduction

Teacher professional identity is a well-established concept in the field of general teacher education (Beijaard, 2019). In L2 teacher education, this concept is a relatively new area of inquiry with a history of approximately three decades. It has been also repeatedly emphasised that discovering and exploring one's identity, e.g., through self-reflection, should be an integral part of any teacher preparation as well

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as professional development programmes with the aim of supporting the process of becoming a teacher (Miller, 2009; Tsui, 2011; Izadinia, 2013; Goh, 2015; Singh & Richards, 2006; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Flores, 2020). What is more, due to the dynamic, context-dependent and personal character of teacher identity, possible identity tensions and conflicts may arise in the course of teacher learning. Exploring such tensions is a worthwhile endeavour for researchers, teacher educators and teachers alike because it enables them to make sense of the complex nature of L2 teacher identity. As Varghese et al. (2005) indicate, researching teacher identity not only allows us to understand how teachers see themselves, but also comprehend the process of language teaching. Most importantly, becoming aware of one's professional identity has some practical implications for teachers as they become more competent and confident, which will naturally have a positive impact on their students (Goh, 2015).

So far, researchers have investigated identity development mainly among pre-service and novice teachers, and as Cheung (2015) indicates in a research review on teacher identity in ELT, there is a need for more studies that would explore language teacher identity from the perspective of experienced teachers, teachers of diverse backgrounds or primary school teachers. The present study attempts to fill this gap by looking into identity development among in-service teachers who decided to acquire new qualifications to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) at a primary school level. As teachers' professional development is a lifelong process shaped by all their teaching and learning experiences, it seems crucial to explore how more experienced teachers construct and reconstruct their professional identity, especially when confronted with substantial changes affecting their careers, such as complying with national or school reforms, being assigned a new role, or working in a new context. In this regard, the study has the potential to inform teacher education programmes as well as pedagogical practices of newly qualified EFL teachers.

The present paper focuses on foreign language (FL/L2) teacher training in the Polish context. As L2 teaching is one of the major goals of formal education in Poland, compulsory foreign language instruction starts as early as on the pre-primary level. This, in turn, means a higher demand for FL teachers, especially those who are qualified in teaching English to young learners. However, recruiting teachers is a demanding task as there are not enough university students of English who decide to enter the teaching profession. Teacher recruitment, especially to initial teacher education programmes, seems to be facing challenges in many European countries as, due to motivational issues related to pursuing a teaching career, the number of students applying for such programmes has been decreasing (Flores & Niklasson, 2014). A remedy to such a situation might be to recruit from among experienced teachers specialising in other content areas. Investigating this particular group implies exploring teachers' identities, or sub-identities, developed as a result of gaining new knowledge and experience in the field of ELT. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to scrutinise teacher identity (re)construction as it takes place in the course of teacher education programme focused on teaching EFL in primary school.

2 The Concept of L2 Teacher Identity

Despite rich theoretical and empirical considerations on teacher identity in the literature, finding one comprehensive definition of the construct is a challenging task. As Beijaard et al. (2004) notice in their review of research on teacher professional identity, the term is not uniformly defined or it is not defined at all. It has been for example described as teacher's self-image, the teacher's perception of their role, or a sense of belonging to a specific group. In a general sense teacher identity can be understood as being 'a certain "kind of person" in a given context' (Gee, 2001, p. 99). Instead of giving a precise definition, researchers tend to represent teacher identity in terms of some distinctive features, thus focusing more on its nature (Barkhuizen, 2017; Beijaard et al., 2004). Accordingly, in the L2 teacher education literature, the following descriptors of the nature of teacher identity can be found: *relational*, i.e., recounted from different perspectives, and *experiential*, i.e., shaped by one's experiences (Tsui, 2011), or *discursive*, i.e., constructed and negotiated through language (Trent, 2015). In this section some essential features of teacher identity are discussed.

First of all, teacher identity is conceptualised as a dynamic construct undergoing constant negotiation and transformation, so its formation is an ongoing and lifelong process (Beijaard et al., 2004; Varghese et al., 2005). Secondly, every experience, be it individual or social, contributes to one's sense of identity (Sachs, 2005). Teacher identity is therefore unique and personal as well as context-dependent (Miller, 2009; Pennington, 2015; Varghese et al., 2005). These features are captured in Lasky's (2005, p. 901) explanation of teacher identity as 'professional self that evolves over career stages, and can be shaped by schools, reform and political contexts.' Some researchers also stress the fact that individuals actively construct their identity by interacting with others, thus indicating the central role of agency in identity formation (Beijaard et al., 2004; Varghese et al., 2005; Zhang & Zhang, 2015). In addition, it is important to mention the role of language and discourse in teacher identity formation, development and negotiation as it is considered to be a primary means allowing us to express our identity (Varghese et al., 2005; Olsen, 2011).

What is more, identity is a multifaceted concept; hence, every person develops multiple identities, and then within those identities a number of sub-identities are formed. Beijaard et al. (2004) suggest that all of them should be well-balanced so as to ensure one's well-being as well as to prevent possible identity conflicts. For example, identity frictions may appear when one's personal identity is far removed from one's professional identity, or they may be induced by the substantial changes in the working environment. What has been also indicated in the field of social psychology is the fact that one's identity or multiple identities may undergo significant modifications (Burke, 2006). Such modifications can be observed in how a person understands oneself and one's role within a particular group. For instance, learning a new language (Yihong et al., 2005), assuming a new role in a professional context (Caihong, 2011; Achirri, 2020) have been found to produce identity changes.

As can be seen, teacher professional identity is a very broad notion. The features presented in this section seem to be universal, that is, they are acknowledged by the researchers in the field of both general teacher education and L2 teacher education. However, it needs to be emphasised that teacher identity is also influenced by the subject and the content of instruction (Pennington & Richards, 2016); hence, the investigation of L2 teacher identity requires looking into the specifics of language teaching.

Taking into account the distinctive character of second language teaching, Pennington and Richards (2016) have proposed a model in which they provide an insight into the nature of L2 teacher identity. In this framework, L2 teacher identity is conceptualised in terms of two groups of competences: *foundational competences* of language teacher identity, which include language-related identity, disciplinary identity, context-dependent identity, self-knowledge and awareness, student-related identity, and *advanced competences* of language teacher identity, which comprise practiced and responsive teaching skills, theorizing from practice, and membership in communities of practice and profession. For the purpose of the present study, only the former group is discussed since advanced competences result from continuous professional development and they begin to play a more prominent role only when foundational competences are well-established. Since the study participants are new to the field of ELT, the group of foundational competences is used as a point of reference in data analysis.

Language-related identity is the first, and the most distinctive, foundational competence. The level of L2 proficiency determines how confident the user of that language feels, which is vital for language teachers who are supposed to communicate with their students in L2. Pennington and Richards (2016, p. 12) indicate that for those teachers who are not fully competent L2 users, improvement in their proficiency is considered as central to 'their identity as knowledgeable professionals.' Developing a strong language-related identity may require revisiting one's professional values and making adjustments in one's identity in relation to the vision of an ideal teacher. Any identity tensions relative to teacher's linguistic competence may be resolved by accepting and appreciating their status of lifelong language learners and transcultural L2 users.

The next component of language teacher identity, i.e. disciplinary identity, is based on the knowledge specific to the field of language teaching (Pennington & Richards, 2016). This kind of knowledge, which is both theoretical and practical, is usually acquired through formal education. By getting acquainted with language learning theories as well as particular methods and techniques used for language instruction, student teachers gain disciplinary knowledge that provides a solid base for becoming expert L2 teachers. Formal teacher education is thus a vital step in laying the foundation for teacher professional identity. However, it needs to be pointed out that teacher cognition, i.e., knowledge, values and beliefs concerning the nature of learning and teaching, is not only developed through education but also determined by their past experiences as learners (Borg, 2003).

Context-dependent identity, the third aspect of L2 teacher identity, is shaped by various situational factors, such as administrative support, class size, available

facilities, which can either foster or hinder the development of a strong professional identity (Pennington & Richards, 2016). In negative conditions, such as stringent state-level requirements, inappropriate facilities or large groups, teachers are less likely to stay motivated and avoid any consequent identity tensions. On the other hand, positive conditions enable teachers not to compromise on the educational principles they value.

Moreover, being a competent teacher requires self-knowledge and awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses. This, in turn, translates into effective teaching. As Pennington and Richards (2016, pp. 15–16) observe, 'one's identity as a language teacher should involve developing experience and an image of oneself that is built on self-awareness in relation to acts of teaching and that incorporates one's personal qualities, values, and ideals into effective teaching performance.' Self-knowledge, however, is not enough and it needs to be accompanied by student knowledge and awareness (student-related identity). This final element of language teacher identity is constructed over time through learner-centred pedagogy. Because of a strong link between teacher identity and student identity and their complementary nature, one cannot be developed without the other. This facet of L2 teacher identity is reflected in many teachers' concern with their students' achievement as well as psychological well-being.

In conclusion, Barkhuizen (2017) in his comprehensive description enumerates all integral components of language teacher identity, which can serve as a summary of the construct:

Language teacher identities (LTIs) are cognitive, social, emotional, ideological and historical – they are both inside the teacher and outside in the social, material and technological world. LTIs are being and doing, feeling and imagining, and storying. They are struggle and harmony: they are contested and resisted, by self and others, and they are also accepted, acknowledged and valued, by self and others. They are core and peripheral, personal and professional, they are dynamic, multiple, and hybrid, and they are foregrounded and backgrounded. And LTIs change, short-term and over time – discursively in social interaction with teacher educators, learners, teachers, administrators, and the wider community, and in material interaction with spaces, place, and objects in classrooms, institutions and online. (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 4)

3 The Study

The research methodology applied in this study is qualitative as its aim is to investigate teacher professional identity (re)construction, which is a dynamic and multi-dimensional process. As such, it requires research methods that allow the researcher to get insight into this complex phenomenon and at the same time deal with individual variability (Dörnyei, 2007). Apart from exploring the process of L2 teacher identity formation, some distinctive characteristics of EFL teacher identity were also scrutinised. In addition, there was a practical dimension added to the study because the participants were engaged in reflection on their professional identity development, which is a core component of teacher learning (Michońska-Stadnik,

2019). This experience was intended to help them understand themselves as L2 teachers and their new roles better. Having this in mind, the following research questions were put forward to guide the study:

1. How is teacher professional identity (re)constructed in the process of acquiring ELT qualifications? How does it influence three facets of L2 teacher identity: disciplinary identity, language-related identity, self-knowledge and awareness?
2. What are possible tensions in the process of identity (re)construction that newly qualified EFL teachers experience? How are those tensions released?

3.1 Participants

The sample consisted of eight participants: seven females and one male (pseudonyms are used) and it constituted half of the whole student group enrolled in the three-semester programme preparing them to teach EFL in primary school. The participants volunteered to take part in the interview that was conducted during the final semester of the programme. What is more, all of them possessed qualifications in other than EFL areas and were experienced teachers of other subjects; however, some of them were already foreign language teachers (the sample includes three teachers of German as a foreign language). Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 22 years. In Poland there are four successive teaching posts that teachers can apply for through a merit-oriented promotion structure: trainee, contractual, appointed, chartered teachers. Accordingly, the participants' experience was reflected in the posts they were holding (see Table 1). Seven participants worked in

Table 1 Participants' profiles

Pseudonym	Sex	Experience (years)	Qualifications/Subjects taught	Teaching context/post
Agata	F	10	German, science, maths	Primary school/appointed teacher
Beata	F	5	Early primary education	Primary school/contractual teacher
Ewa	F	9	PE, special needs education	Primary school/appointed teacher
Jola	F	14	Early primary education, special needs education	Primary school, secondary school/chartered teacher
Kamila	F	21	German	Secondary school/chartered teacher
Maria	F	10	Early primary education	Primary school/appointed teacher
Roman	M	22	German	Primary school/appointed teacher
Sara	F	21	PE	Primary school/chartered teacher

primary schools, one teacher in secondary school, and one participant was employed in both primary and secondary schools.

3.2 Data Collection

The data were collected by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted via email. This research method is seen as a viable alternative to traditional interviews and a valid way of capturing narrative data (James, 2007). Apart from that, email interviewing offers numerous advantages, such as providing research participants with ample time for considering questions, alleviating participants' inhibition which may be an issue in face-to-face interviewing, facilitating the process of data storage, processing and analysis due to automatic transcripts (Klimas, 2016). Before the proper interviews started, the participants were introduced to the purpose and nature of the study. This was done in the first email containing the e-interview guide, which was sent to all the teachers willing to take part in the interview. The following ethical issues were also addressed in the guide: obtaining the consent of the participants, granting them the right to withdraw from the interview at any time, respecting and ensuring confidentiality. In addition, the participants were informed about the interview procedure based on receiving one question at a time, sending replies within two days, keeping all emails as one exchange. It was anticipated that the interview would be completed within two months. By organising the interview process in such a way, the researcher intended to engage the participants in a conversation-like exchange that would give them enough time for deep reflection.

The interview was organised around three time-related aspects. First, teachers' current self-perception and self-evaluation were addressed, so the participants were asked to specify their motivation to acquire new qualifications to teach EFL and to reflect on how they see themselves performing their basic role of subject teachers as well as their new role of EFL teachers. Then, because teacher's biography is an integral part of professional identity formation (Knowles, 1992), the participants' past teaching experiences and language learning experiences were addressed in order to identify underlying patterns in the development of language teacher identity. As the last part of the interview the issue of the participants' hopes and aspirations, their future goals and ways of achieving them in addition to their worries concerning EFL teaching were considered.

3.3 Data Analysis

As the interviews were conducted via e-mail, there was no need to transcribe them. Thematic analysis was based on identifying and coding elements related to identity (re)construction and possible tensions in L2 teacher identity formation. Pre-ordinate categories were used for coding the data (Cohen et al., 2017). The analysis was

limited to three above-described components of L2 teacher identity: disciplinary identity, language-related identity, self-knowledge and awareness (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Context-dependent identity and student-related identity were not included in the analysis owing to the participants' lack of relevant ELT experience. The three categories were guiding themes and the data were coded to indicate the aspects of identity formation, identity modification, and identity tensions. Significant similarities and differences in the interviewees' accounts were identified which led to drawing some conclusions concerning patterns of EFL teacher identity formation. In order to ensure that the process of data analysis was reliable, the results of classifying data into the categories were discussed with a colleague.

4 Findings and Discussion

Findings are discussed in reference to the three aspects of L2 teacher identity: disciplinary identity, language-related identity, self-knowledge and awareness (Pennington & Richards, 2016). In each of the following sections, the results of data analysis are presented and supported with some comments given by the participants during the interview. The extracts presented in the paper were translated into English by the author.

4.1 Findings: Disciplinary Identity

Constructing disciplinary identity required the teachers to establish a clear connection with the specific field of ELT. This could be achieved by acquiring the knowledge and skills of teaching the English language. Not surprisingly, it was this aspect of identity that was most strongly developed throughout the programme during which the teachers completed a number of ELT methodology courses.

The participants admit that they learned a lot about foreign language education in general as well as about approaches, methods and techniques specific to teaching EFL, so in this way, they gained confidence as ELT professionals. Interestingly, in the participants' accounts of how they see themselves as EFL teachers, two distinctive factors related to disciplinary identity could be noticed: teacher's own language learning experiences, and the working methods that they developed in other subject areas. This observation confirms what we already know about how teacher cognition is shaped, namely that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes are formed through schooling, their classroom practice, and only partially professional training they undergo (Borg, 2003). Thus, the participants feel well-prepared to fulfil their new role of English teachers as a result of not only a sound disciplinary knowledge they acquired but also relevant personal experiences they can draw on in their teaching practice. As one of the participants noticed, her own history as a language learner shaped her perception of how she should teach the language:

I remember myself learning English at school and how difficult it was for me to open up and speak English. The older I was getting, the more difficult it was for me to overcome this inhibition. That is why I'd like my students to become confident users of English. It's not an easy goal, but I think it's achievable. I can do this by allowing them to make mistakes, stimulating them to talk, motivating them to communicate with others and encouraging them to watch films and TV programmes in English. (Beata)

In addition, most participants mentioned their former L2 teachers, who taught them at different stages of their education, as crucial figures in shaping their identity as EFL teachers. The interview analysis revealed that their disciplinary knowledge and beliefs about language teaching are based on the observation of those early role models, which corroborates the description of teacher identity as derived from all personal and professional experiences (Sachs, 2005; Tsui, 2011). For example, one of the participants considers that her most important role in language teaching is making the learning experience attractive for her students so that they stay motivated throughout the whole process of learning the language. Then, in the recollection of her former English teachers we find an explanation for this attitude:

I remember my English teacher from secondary school very well. He was a truly great teacher! He encouraged us to act out Shakespeare's plays in English. Back then I felt impressed by his approach and now I think he's still a great inspiration to me as a teacher. (Sara)

As regards the second factor contributing to the formation of disciplinary identity, i.e., the teacher's tried and trusted working methods, some patterns among specific groups of teachers could be noticed. Namely, the teachers with a background in early primary education, special needs education as well as physical education believe that effective language teaching should be based on such ground rules as creating positive atmosphere in the classroom, adopting a holistic and individualised approach, developing pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem, forming appropriate attitudes towards learning in general and language learning in particular. It means that teaching methods specific to EFL will work if teachers provide a stimulating environment for their students. This can be seen in the following excerpt from the interview:

I'd like my students to learn English well. However, I do believe that I should stimulate other spheres of their development, too. I want my students to feel successful and capable. In order to achieve this, I need to create appropriate conditions during my lessons and appreciate students' effort. I'd also like to make my students happy so that they are motivated to learn English in the future. (Marta)

Another pattern could be discerned among the teachers of German as a foreign language. Namely, they rightly claim that there are no major differences in methods and techniques applied in teaching both languages, but they also notice that studying EFL methodology is for them a very enriching professional experience due to the access to unlimited teaching resources, interesting materials, or methodology books in English. In other words, theoretical and practical knowledge that the participants had a chance to develop during the ELT programme not only helps them create stronger disciplinary identity but also informs their educational practice in

other subjects they teach. This observation aligns with the claims that language teacher identities are dynamic, multiple, and complex (Barkhuizen, 2017), and constant interaction among different identities may result in identity modifications (Burke, 2006). The impact of new knowledge and skills on their perception of teaching was a recurring theme in the participants' accounts:

ELT methodology is a mine of information and a great inspiration for me as a teacher. I use the newly acquired knowledge and skills in my other classes as well. For example, discussing the benefits of collaboration and cooperation in EFL classrooms helped me realize that I should arrange pair and group work activities more often. I've also noticed that I'm more willing to try out and experiment with new teaching techniques and activities. This gives me increasing confidence in my professional skills. (Agata)

The interview analysis also revealed some tensions that the teachers were experiencing in the process of constructing disciplinary identity, such as not being suited for teaching English in general or not being the right person to teach younger students. These tensions, however, could be reduced by acquiring new knowledge and building relevant expertise:

I have to admit that, at first, I felt confused as to me being an English teacher. I wasn't sure whether it was the right thing for me, but then I gradually realised (thanks to learning about, e.g., shared reading or multisensory approach) that I can find something for me in English teaching, something that suits my personality, my interests, and my life philosophy as well. (Sara)

I've realised that I can also teach younger children. When I first started working as a teacher, I didn't even consider it to be possible. Now I've learned how to work with children and I have to admit that my knowledge about teaching this age group was very limited. I found many useful sources of information on how to teach young learners and I discovered that teaching them is not as difficult as I'd envisaged. Teaching children can be a very pleasant and rewarding experience for a teacher. (Kamila)

Moreover, what helped the participants overcome the tensions was the fact that, as they all revealed, it was their own decision to acquire new qualifications and that they were driven by intrinsic values, such as personal growth or satisfaction of curiosity. This seems to align with Flores and Niklasson's (2014) study in which student teachers more often indicated intrinsic reasons for pursuing a teaching career rather than extrinsic motivations. In the present study only one participant (a German teacher) mentioned that she also felt a growing pressure to add a new language to her teaching repertoire so she would be able to respond to the requirements of educational authorities as well as parents, which can be treated as a manifestation of extrinsic motivation. Because almost all participants were intrinsically motivated, the complex process of coming to terms with the new role of teaching EFL was not as difficult as it would have been if their motivation had been driven by purely extrinsic factors.

4.2 Findings: Language-Related Identity

Developing language-related identity depends not only on one's language proficiency, but also on one's attitudes as well as values associated with being a proficient user of the language. This facet of L2 teacher professional identity required the most thorough consideration on the part of the participants whose educational background was not directly related to English. Hence it also generated the most evident tensions.

On the one hand, all participants admit that a high level of language proficiency is crucial, but on the other hand, they point out that other factors, such as one's personality, enthusiasm, or empathy, are equally or even more important for foreign language teachers than mere fluency in the language. They also notice that teachers can compensate for their lower L2 proficiency with the aid of authentic materials, audio recordings and other resources. In other words, they feel that, regardless of their linguistic deficiencies, it is possible to fulfil the role of EFL teachers successfully when appropriate teaching strategies and materials are implemented. The following extracts illustrate two teachers' views on the relationship between teacher's language proficiency and effective teaching.

I think that it's a bit like teaching someone to sing – you don't have to be an opera singer to do it. Teaching English seems to be the same in this regard. (Beata)

So far, I've had a chance to observe many qualified teachers of English whose lessons were by no means successful. That is why I believe that the complete mastery of the language is not necessary. I am the best example myself. Despite my far-from-perfect proficiency in English, I feel I'm capable of sharing my knowledge with students and I can be a good English teacher. If I'm always fully prepared for my lessons, I can make up for this deficiency. (Ewa)

At the same time, most teachers state that improving their language skills is a vital aspect of building strong language-related identity. One participant, for example, indicated that greater exposure to the language in the English-speaking environment helped her establish what Pennington and Richards (2016, p. 12) call 'an "insider" identity of a language teacher.' She comments on this in the following way:

When I was living in the UK, I got to know a lot about English culture. It helped me realise that language and culture are closely connected, e.g. I could learn about the origins of Peter Piper and other nursery rhymes. I think teaching culture will be one of my priorities. Oh, and one more thing – thanks to my experience of living abroad, I'm not afraid of speaking English. What I've observed so far is that many English teachers do not use the language in the classroom as much as they should, probably because they lack necessary confidence in their linguistic skills. (Sara)

As regards tensions in language-related identity construction, certain deficiencies in English skills as a source of uneasiness were frequently revealed. In their accounts, a lower level of proficiency is often considered to undermine their performance. For example, in the following excerpts the teachers express their worries concerning their language skills:

I know that I'm not ready as my English, especially my pronunciation, is not good enough. I need to work hard on improving my language skills to feel more confident as an English teacher. (Roman)

I don't want my students to notice that I'm not confident about my language skills. (Jola)

My biggest worry is that I'll make some kind of a language mistake and my students will remember it. I'd like to be fairly proficient, but I know it requires a lot of practice and time. I'll be fully ready to teach English only when I have enough contact with the language. (Beata)

As can be seen, the participants show a clear understanding of the fact that they act as models for their students, and their professional performance in the classroom is, to a large extent, dependent on their command of the language. Nevertheless, the interview analysis did not reveal any patterns related to a language status (native or non-native), which is believed to be the main source of identity tensions for many L2 teachers (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Since the formation of teacher identity is determined by a wider socio-political context (Lasky, 2005), the feeling of self-doubt might be heightened by external requirements or unrealistic expectations about English teachers that other people tend to hold. However, in the present study, none of the teachers expressed any concerns about being a non-native speaker. Teaching English in the foreign language context rather than the second language environment, which is the case in Polish primary schools, means that teachers are not required to be fully proficient but to know the language reasonably well (at least B2 level of the CEFR). Besides, being able to teach in a bilingual mode usually helps L2 teachers compensate for their lack of fluency and consequently allows them to feel more self-assured.

Fortunately, the feeling of uneasiness that the participants expressed is not perceived as an insurmountable obstacle in the path of constructing a strong identity and the teachers realize that the way to relieve this kind of tension is to seek opportunities for intensive language practice and language-related professional development. This, in turn, is directly linked to the last aspect of teacher identity discussed in this paper, i.e., self-knowledge and awareness.

4.3 Findings: Self-Knowledge and Awareness

Being experienced in their content areas, the participants did not find it problematic to openly and clearly identify their strengths and weaknesses. The whole interview, as they indicated, allowed them to reflect not only on different aspects of their teaching practice (both in relation to their regular roles and a new field of ELT), but also on themselves as English teachers and their personal characteristics. In naming their assets, the participants focused on, first of all, some important personality traits that allow them to be effective language teachers, e.g., flexibility, creativity, inventiveness, and secondly, on specific skills all teachers should possess, e.g., being able to

work with difficult students or fostering positive attitudes among learners. The analysis of the interviews revealed that they all needed some time to discover what they are good at, and what they think they do right. This self-awareness is clearly visible in the following extracts:

There were times when I had my doubts about the way I assess students. My supervisors, or even some parents, called into question my approach (I was perceived as too lenient). Now I'm convinced it's the right thing to do because proper assessment plays a crucial role in motivating students to learn. (Jola)

During my teaching practice (as an English teacher) I understood that I quickly respond to my students' needs and I am able to stand the pace. It confirmed me in my belief that I can be very creative in difficult situations. I can easily improvise and create a relaxed atmosphere during lessons. (Ewa)

Despite having some considerable classroom experience, the participants still were able to indicate certain areas for improvement. It could be noticed that those areas would allow them to feel more self-assured as EFL teachers. Hence, apart from the above-mentioned different aspects of linguistic competence, such as pronunciation, grammar, or spelling, which in their view call for further development, they focused on becoming more familiar with the latest trends in ELT. The analysis of the interview data led to the conclusion that there is a mutual relationship between participants' self-awareness, their language-related identity, and their developing disciplinary identity. Gaining new knowledge of ELT and applying it in practice was the trigger for an in-depth analysis of their strengths and weaknesses and allowed them to set further development goals. For example:

During the course I've realised that there are two aspects of my teaching I need to work on: 1.giving students more autonomy, encouraging them to speak (I noticed that I talk too much during my lessons) 2.responding to students' needs by introducing these teaching tools that they find attractive (e.g. applications) so that the learning process is more motivating in the long term. (Roman)

In general, the data derived from the interview did not indicate any particular tensions among the participants in terms of this aspect of language teacher identity. However, in one case, the participant's self-reflection on her early experience as a language teacher resulted in the conviction that she needed to adjust her personality to the new role, which might be interpreted as a potential source of identity stress:

Teaching English in the classroom makes me think that I'm too loud and the classroom is too small for me. As a PE teacher and an athlete, I've always focused on being fast. Language learning, however, is not a race. I should work on setting a slower and more relaxed pace of my lessons. I've also come to the conclusion that I have to verify my personality traits. On the one hand, I should make the most of those aspects of my personality that are desirable for an English teacher, and on the other hand, I should minimize or even eliminate those aspects that are undesirable. (Sara)

It needs to be pointed out that identity frictions are particularly likely to occur when personal identity and professional identity are fairly distinct from each other (Beijaard et al., 2004), which might be the case here. The participant considers her character to be problematic in a sense that it might not be entirely suitable for a

language teacher, yet it has always been at the core of her work as a PE teacher and an integral part of her professional identity. Gaining new experiences in teaching English raised her awareness of what kind of language teacher she should be. It also made her negotiate her new identity by aiming to develop such a model of teaching that would effectively exploit her personality.

5 Conclusion and Implications

The present study served to examine and thus provide some understanding of the complex process of identity (re)construction among eight in-service teachers of diverse backgrounds involved in acquiring additional qualifications to teach EFL in primary school. Three facets of L2 teacher identity were scrutinised and some patterns of L2 teacher identity development were identified. The findings indicate that such teachers are able to build a strong disciplinary identity thanks to the knowledge and experience gained in the process of EFL teacher training, but at the same time some significant influences of their previous educational and professional backgrounds on their identity formation were observed. Developing language-related identity, in turn, was the most difficult part of the process and it generated the most visible tensions. In this case, an important element of identity construction was not only recognizing and accepting their own linguistic limitations but also understanding that it should be the key aspect of their professional development. The data derived from the interviews also revealed that the teachers possess a strong awareness of themselves as teachers, which is considered to be a contributing factor in the construction of EFL teacher identity.

Owing to the fact that the participants were actively engaged in negotiating their own identities, the interview served a number of important practical purposes. Namely, they could develop and make use of the skills of reflectivity, which are seen as the key component of teacher development at all stages of their careers (Zawadzka-Bartnik, 2014). In addition, all the participants evaluated the interview as a positive and enriching experience because it raised their awareness of crucial elements of their professional identity, allowed them to explore their strengths and limitations as well as consider areas of their practice that they need to work on. Increased awareness and self-assurance will certainly be reflected in the quality of their teaching practice and the kind of relationship they are able to establish with their students.

Reflection on one's identity should be an integral part of any teacher education programme, and it is particularly essential for those teachers who want to change their career path, for example, to teaching EFL. It is vital that such programmes facilitate and guide the process of identity formation, thus allowing teachers to consciously shape their identities. Finally, what seems to be of utmost importance is addressing and responding to the challenges and tensions inherent in the process of identity reconstruction by, for example, allowing teachers to give voice to them.

The study contributes to the research on language teacher professional identity by offering some insights into the process of identity (re)construction in the course

of teacher education. However, some limitations of the study need to be considered. First of all, due to the small number of participants, the study results cannot be generalised to other contexts. A larger sample would undoubtedly allow us to better understand the issue of identity. Secondly, due to the fact that the interview was carried out during the final semester of the programme, it enabled us to observe only selected aspects of language teacher identity development. A longitudinal study should be undertaken to thoroughly examine the changes in teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and modifications in teacher identity.

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