



## Professional Identities of English as a Second Language (ESL) Teachers in State and Non-State Higher Education Institutes: A Comparative Analysis

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### Abstract

Since teacher professional identity offers valuable insights into teaching as it is practiced in actual classroom contexts, research on this topic has been gathering more and more attention over the years. However, despite its significance, there have been very few studies on teacher professional identities of ESL teachers from state and non-state higher education institutes. Thus, this study aims to identify identities that constitute the professional identity of ESL teachers and to compare the similarities and differences of the professional identity of ESL teachers in the Sri Lankan higher education sector. In terms of the research design, the study adopted a qualitative approach. As such, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six ESL teachers from state and non-state universities, and the data was then analyzed using the method of thematic analysis. According to data, the study found three identities that are common to both state and non-state university teachers: the motivator, the friendly teacher, and the advocate of communicative language teaching. Moreover, the study also found teacher identities that are unique to state and non-state university ESL teachers. The identities that are unique to state university teachers are promotor of value-based pedagogy, advocate of critical pedagogy, and ESL teacher at a state university. The facilitator, knowledge seeker, and continuous learner were found to be unique identities of non-state university

teachers. While providing insight into ESL teacher identity formation and its contributory factors in the higher education landscape, this study recommends further research to validate and expand upon these findings across different contexts and larger participant groups.

**Keywords:** ESL teachers; Teacher professional identity; State and non-state universities; Thematic analysis

### 1. Introduction

In education, teacher professional identity is an important concept which has been garnering more and more attention. During the 1970s and 1980s, educational research focused primarily on methods and techniques of teaching (Herath, 2020). However, from the 1990s, there was a shift in this thinking in recognition of the role of the teacher in the implementation of these methods and techniques in actual classroom contexts (Freeman 2009; Herath, 2020). Currently, teacher professional identity is a complex area of research which examines the teacher from multiple points of view. These points of view include investigations on “complexities of teachers’ mental lives” (Freeman, 2002) i.e. teachers’ personality, beliefs, preferences, and teaching philosophies; teachers’ professional identity development, i.e. how teachers’ professional

identity evolves as a result of their teaching/ learning experiences in different contexts (Herath, 2020), as well as how teacher professional identity intersects with classroom practices (Varghese et. al., 2005; 2016).

While there are many factors that contribute to identity development, scholars claim that “contextual specificities” of institutes (Herreño-Contreras and González, 2023, p. 187) such as “teacher educators, learners, teachers, administrators” as well as the “interaction with spaces [and] places” (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 4) have a profound influence on teachers’ professional identity development. Moreover, scholars also theorize that teachers’ professional identity is multiple, and that it is assigned or claimed. Here, multiplicity of teacher professional identity refers to the many identities subsumed within a teacher’s professional identity that may “struggle” or are in “harmony” with each other (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 4), whereas teacher professional identity as assigned or claimed refers to how teachers’ professional identity may be assigned by others “discursively in social interaction” (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 4) or created by teachers themselves by “being, doing, feeling, imagining, and storying” (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 4). Based on this theoretical premise, Herreño-Contreras and González (2023) conducted a study on teacher professional identity development in a Colombian higher educational institution. In their study involving 17 English teachers, Herreño-Contreras and González (2023) found that the teachers’ professional identity encompasses multiple identities as agents of social change and as iconic representations, and that these identities are profoundly interlinked with interests and ideologies of the institute they work at.

Even though teacher professional identity development has been studied by a few scholars with reference to various institutional aspects that shape it, there is a dearth of such studies especially in the Sri Lankan context. Additionally, there have been no studies that compare teacher professional identity development in state and non-state

university contexts. Premised against this research gap, this study compares ESL teacher professional identity development in state and non-state higher educational institutes based on the following research questions:

1. What are the identities that constitute the professional identity of ESL teachers in state and non-state universities?
2. What are the similarities and differences of the professional identity of ESL teachers in state and non-state universities?

In relation to the above research questions, the objectives of this study are to examine how factors such as teaching experience, teaching philosophies, and workplace culture have shaped the identities that constitute the professional identity of ESL teachers in state and non-state universities, and to find out the similarities and differences of the professional identity of ESL teachers in these contexts.

## **2. Methodology**

The participants of this study include six ESL teachers with three participants from a reputed state university in Sri Lanka and the other three from a reputed non-state university. The consent of the participants was obtained prior to data collection. The participants are identified in this research using pseudonyms. The ESL teachers from the state university are 1. Venura, a 31-year-old male teacher with five years of teaching experience at a state university, 2. Sapuni, a 32-year-old female teacher with four years of teaching experience and 3. Indrachapa, a 36-year-old female teacher with eleven years of experience teaching ESL at two state universities. The three participants from the non-state university are 1. Gayani, a 31-year-old female teacher with three years of teaching experience at two non-state universities, 2. Waruni, a 38-year-old female teacher with seven years of teaching experience at a non-state university, and 3. Narmada, a 34-year-old female teacher with 9 years of teaching experience at a non-state university.

This research followed the qualitative method. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews based on questions related to the participants' views on the role and responsibilities of an ESL teacher, their teaching philosophies, and factors such as teaching experience and workplace culture (colleagues, administrative staff, institutional norms, departmental values) that have contributed to shape these beliefs about their role as an ESL teacher in the Sri Lankan university context. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyse the qualitative data obtained through the interviews. This analysis method was selected as it provides a more flexible avenue to identify patterns or themes in a set of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2005). In conducting the analysis of this data set, an inductive approach was applied to achieve more objective results. Thus, ESL teacher identities of the participant group were formulated based on the current interviews only, without incorporating existing identities discussed in previous research.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Common Identities**

Based on the data, three teacher identities common to both state and non-state university teachers were identified. These are the identities of the motivator, friendly teacher, and advocate of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

##### **3.1.1 Motivator**

The teachers in the study believed that motivating students is one of their main responsibilities. They observed that prior teaching experiences, professional development courses, student feedback, observation of senior academics, and students' knowledge of attitudes towards English, their workplace, and society have shaped their identity as a motivator. Two non-state university teachers believed that motivating students is a characteristic of a "good" teacher. Narmada stated "it's a challenge to teach those who don't like learning English. The

teacher must be a motivator." Another teacher, Waruni, highlighted that being aware of students' competency levels, learning styles, and social background is important in deciding how to motivate them. All three state university teachers in the study also identified themselves as motivators. Sapuni and Venura considered "encouraging students" and "boost[ing] students' confidence" an important part of their "role" and "duty" as teachers. Indrachapa held a similar view since she stated teachers should "prop [students] up rather than tear them down".

##### **3.1.2 Friendly Teacher**

Both state and non-state university teachers thought of themselves as a friend to their students in the ESL class. They believed it to be an effective strategy in decreasing students' learning anxiety. As such, Narmada pointed out, "a friendly environment would lead to an attitudinal change, be a friend, when necessary, but you should know your limits too". Gayani believed that being a friendly teacher helps the students to adapt to the university culture which in turn facilitates learning; "be friendly with them, get them out of their school mentality and settle them at university". Among the state university teachers, Venura and Sapuni observed students should not "look at [them] like enemies" and that students should not be "afraid of [them]" since it hinders learning. Indrachapa held a similar view since she commented that "building a close relationship" with students is important to "creating a positive teaching and learning atmosphere".

According to teachers, their identity as a 'friend' is linked strongly with their teaching philosophies which are formed based on their prior teaching experiences, observations about senior academics, institutional practices, student and peer feedback, and research experience. The participants also pointed out that their own experiences as undergraduates contributed to this identity. They felt that the learning process was less effective when their lecturers were aloof and high-handed, making them feel intimidated. They strongly believed they should

take a different approach with their students. The non-state university teachers particularly highlighted that a friendly approach was further encouraged by their workplace culture.

### **3.1.3 Advocate of CLT**

According to teachers, their identity as advocates of CLT is shaped by their prior teaching and research experiences, their tertiary education, professional development courses, observation of other academics, teaching philosophies of the department/institute, and knowledge of students' attitudes towards English, their workplace, and society.

Teachers at non-state universities advocated the use of the CLT method in the ESL classroom as they believed this method acknowledges the varying learning styles of the students while giving them the opportunity to use language in practical situations. They also held the view that this teaching method increases motivation and student autonomy. Gayani stated, "you don't just teach the language, you create a classroom atmosphere where they get the opportunity to practice the language as in real life situations". According to Waruni, "we must encourage them to practice language as much as they can [in the classroom] and show them ways to do that, using technology also increases interaction'. Similar to teachers from non-state universities, teachers from state universities identified themselves as advocates of CLT. This is primarily because they believed the true purpose of language to be communication. In fact, Venura stated students being "able to communicate whatever it is that they want to say" is more important than "grammar" while Indrachapa observed that a CLT approach makes "students happier" than a grammar-based approach. Like Venura and Indrachapa, Sapuni too promoted CLT. She explained that this is mainly because she believes in the importance of students' "self-expression" without fear of "mak[ing] mistakes" which the CLT approach endorses.

## **3.2 Identities that are unique to State University ESL Teachers**

According to data, three teacher identities that were unique to state university ESL teachers were identified. These identities are discussed in this section.

### **3.2.1 Promotor of Value-Based Pedagogy**

According to the teachers, one of their responsibilities as teachers is inculcating values in students. Sapuni in fact commented "I believe in teaching not only the subject but also values to students. Values like honesty, hard work, being open minded", while Indrachapa observed that she finds the lesson material she teaches "effective" and "interesting" to students since they "follow a value based pedagogy". The two teachers also explained that their identity as promotors of value-based pedagogy is informed by the teaching philosophy of their department. They explained that the pedagogical approaches and beliefs of senior academics of the department have had a formative influence on the departmental philosophy promoting value-based pedagogy.

### **3.2.2 Advocate of Critical Pedagogy**

Among the ESL teachers from state universities, Venura and Indrachapa identified themselves as advocates of critical pedagogy. They claimed that their identity is shaped by the teaching philosophy of their department as well as their on-the-job training. As advocates of critical pedagogy, the teachers believed that they should encourage students to challenge existing power structures and to become critical thinkers. Thus, Indrachapa stated "real education is all about questioning things, may it be what they are taught by their teachers or certain ideologies", and Venura commented "I want my students to think for themselves. They've been taught all their lives to think within a box. It's not really their fault actually, it's the fault of our education system, but I want them to be critical thinkers. That's important."

### **3.2.3 ESL Teacher at a State University**

Given the teaching philosophy of their department and the ideologies of the institute where they work, Indrachapa and Sapuni identified strongly as ESL teachers of a state university. As ESL teachers at a state university, Indrachapa and Sapuni claimed that they are against the 'commercialization' of knowledge, and that they advocate teaching of English for academic purposes as well as for communication in the local context. These views emerge clearly in the following comment made by Indrachapa:

"The fact that I am from a state university also has an impact on who I am as a teacher, I believe. For example, what kind of English do we teach? Is it this so-called elite or posh English or the type of English that most Sri Lankans use? Do we think of English as this marketable, profitable product or as a medium of communication that all Sri Lankans should have access to? These are some of the questions that we have been trained to think about both as learners and as teachers."

### **3.3 Identities That are Unique to Non-State University ESL Teachers**

According to data, three teacher identities that were unique to non-state university ESL teachers were also identified. These identities are discussed in this section.

#### **3.3.1 Facilitator**

Teachers believed that they should be facilitators in the class who assist learners to develop their ability to practically use the language. They also believed that there should be a visible positive outcome of the teaching and learning process. Narmada stated, "I think with the maturity gained through age and experience, I have the need to see the positive results of my teaching...If they are given the chance to speak at least broken English, they will get over the fear".

The importance of facilitating positive attitudinal changes was also brought forth by another teacher, Narmada: "One of my main responsibilities is to facilitate learning and to help them improve. We have to go to their level and try to change their attitudes towards English". According to teachers, prior teaching experiences, professional development courses, observation of other academics, knowledge of attitudes towards English of students, their workplace, and society, and teaching philosophies of the department/institute have played a significant role in shaping this identity.

#### **3.3.2 Knowledge Seeker**

Teachers were very supportive of continuously updating and enhancing their knowledge of their subject area. Teachers claimed that their teaching experience, research experience, institutional expectations, and educational and professional courses have made the 'knowledge seeker' a crucial part of their professional identity. Gayani pointed out that "A teacher is a knowledge seeker, a teacher should be a researcher, [a teacher] must be updated all the time". The participants highlighted how this identity is closely linked to their recognition and status within the institute, which is highly supportive of a strong research culture.

#### **3.3.3 Continuous Learner**

Teachers firmly believed that their identity is shaped by experience; that they have learnt a lot about the teaching/learning process through experience. Teachers explained that their university education, professional courses, and staff development programmes have contributed to strengthening this identity apart from everyday teaching experiences and the influence of senior colleagues. According to Gayani, "with the students I teach, the places I've worked, with everything I'm changing. Sometimes we learn from students about language updates. A teacher should be a life-long learner". Narmada also stated, "other lecturers, what I gained from them, their experiences...I learnt a lot

observing the behaviour of senior members. I am continuously learning”.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study was based on interviews with six ESL teachers, evenly divided between state and non-state universities, to examine how workplace culture, teaching philosophies, and experience shape their professional identities. The findings revealed both common and unique identity markers among these educators. The motivator, friendly teacher, and advocate of communicative language teaching constitute common identities. The different identities of the state-sector university teachers are promoter of value-based pedagogy, advocate of critical pedagogy, and ESL teacher at a state university. For the non-state university teachers, the unique identities are facilitator, knowledge seeker, and continuous learner. Based on the current data, it is noteworthy that the ESL teachers of the state sector forefront critical and value-based pedagogy underlining their focus on instilling moral values and critical thinking in students. Being a promoter of this pedagogy forms an important part of their professional identity. The ESL teachers at the non-state sector institute have not particularly highlighted this area and it is mostly in the background of their professional identity. They advocate the priority given to the outcome-based teaching and learning process along with the less hierarchical power relations between learners and teachers as a result of the workplace culture in the non-state sector. They also believe that a more positive attitude towards learning English and using English as the working language exists in the non-state sector compared to the society in general. This attitude has contributed to strengthening their identities as a motivator, friendly teacher, and facilitator. Such a positive attitudinal impact at the workplace has not been discussed by the state university teachers as a main factor contributing to their identities.

In addition, the non-state university teachers stress the impact of engaging in research as an important element in creating their professional identities of

knowledge seeker and continuous learner. This factor is not significantly visible as impacting the identities of the other group of teachers. Furthermore, being an ‘ESL teacher in a state university’ is a crucial part of the identity of the teachers at the state university. They are very conscious of their role in propagating ‘non-commercialized’ education. However, this aspect is not considered by the non-state sector university ESL teachers. These differences in identity formation can be largely attributed to teachers’ experience, their teaching philosophies, and the working environments of state versus non-state universities. In conclusion, it is important to note that while this study provides insight into how ESL teachers in the Sri Lankan higher education sector perceive their professional identities, this paper is based on the data obtained from only six participants from two leading local universities. Therefore, caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings in a larger context. Future research could focus on a larger participant group to validate these findings and compare ESL teacher identities at an international level.

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