



TESOL Teachers' Professional Identity Construction in Emergency Remote Teaching in Thailand

Junifer L. Bucol

School of Languages and General Education, Walailak University, Thailand

Mark B. Ulla

School of Languages and General Education, Walailak University, Thailand

Introduction

Previous studies on teachers' professional identity (TPI) (Arvaja, 2016; Kayi-Aydar, 2019b; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Wolff & De Costa, 2017) have acknowledged that TPI is deeply rooted in teachers' interaction and engagement in various socio-cultural contexts, which may impact teachers' professional selves. For example, teachers' professional identity may have been constructed early on in their careers, especially during their pre-service years. It may have been further developed as teachers entered the teaching profession as in-service teachers, where they may be exposed to different professional learning networks and various classroom pedagogies. It may also have been influenced by their engagement in research and publication, teacher-training, and other professional development programs afforded by the schools and other professional organizations.

The current educational context, which is greatly affected by the COVID19 pandemic, has challenged TPI since most education institutions in the world migrated from face-to-face classroom teaching to online or emergency remote teaching to continue the teaching and learning process. Although the concept of online teaching is different from emergency remote teaching in that the former may involve substantive preparation from technical to pedagogical, while the latter "is a temporary and abrupt shift to instructional delivery due to crises such as weather, war, or health" (Moser et al., 2021, p. 2), migrating to emergency remote teaching, especially in the middle of the semester or academic year, entails a number of challenges that teachers may encounter. For instance, teachers may not be prepared for the new teaching and learning environment since they may not have the pedagogical skills to deliver their lessons in a remote/online setting (König et al., 2020). Teachers may not have prior training on conducting classes virtually or remotely since most of the training they received may only concentrate on pedagogies inside the classroom. Moreover, this unprecedented shift to emergency remote teaching may also mean that teachers have to develop new teaching materials, employ new teaching strategies, and adapt to the new teaching environment to conform to the new teaching environment. While teachers take advantage of the new teaching opportunities outside of the traditional classroom, they may also have to reflect on and consider their agency and self-efficacy in carrying the pedagogical tasks in a new social setting. Considering that a number of teachers may have been trained only in classroom pedagogies, teachers may need to reexamine their professional identity and identify whether they can cope with the needs of the



“new normal” in education, particularly in language teaching. In other words, how teachers view their professional role in emergency remote teaching during health emergencies may impact their agency and self-efficacy towards online pedagogy.

In the field of TESOL and language education, there has been a growing interest in language teacher professional identity (LTPI) since it “could afford preservice and practicing language teachers a space to assert their agency in creating the contours of their identity formation” (Lindahl & Yazan, 2019, p. 1). Language teachers position themselves as focal persons who can make an impact on their language learners’ beliefs and attitudes towards learning the target language. Therefore, language teachers should recognize the intricacies of their professional identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2019a) since how they view and demonstrate their professional identities may affect their classroom pedagogies and their language learners.

Using the concept of teacher’s professional identity (Skott, 2019), this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on language teacher’s professional identity by exploring how language teachers in a university in Thailand view and construct their professional identities in emergency remote language teaching during the COVID19 pandemic. It is argued that within the context of online language teaching, TPI also plays an important concept that needs to be understood, especially from the perspectives of the language teachers who shifted from face-to-face classroom teaching to remote teaching in the middle of the semester due to the COVID19 pandemic.

Teacher Identity in TESOL and Language Education

Several studies have already explored language teacher’s identity formation in TESOL and language education, focusing on various aspects of identity development issues. One such aspect that is crucial towards teacher professional identity is teacher’s emotions. In a study conducted by Wolff and De Costa (2017), which investigated how teacher’s emotions affect teacher identity and how a teacher develops in her profession through different strategies, they argued that emotion is one of the critical factors that is crucial towards the study of teacher identity. However, Pennington and Richards (2016) have also argued that language teachers’ professional identity is reflected in their pedagogical and content knowledge presentation, influenced by their years of language teaching experience and their academic orientation and background. Specifically, teacher professional identity “determines and is determined by their experiences of teacher learning and teaching practice” (Yazan, 2018, p. 25). For instance, the study conducted by Goktepe and Kunt (2020), which explored the identity construction of a novice language teacher in Turkey, showed a number of identity construction issues. One of the issues that was highlighted pertained to the imagined identity as an idealized identity, which is often different from the practiced identity. It was reported that the participant found the practice of teaching challenging since her mentors restricted her from applying the teaching practice that she imagined in the actual classroom teaching. Such teaching restrictions made the participant feel that she did not belong to the school community. Furthermore, the participant admitted that she could not apply her teaching ideas and that she was only made to follow what her mentors wanted her to do in the actual teaching practice. Thus, given the language teaching experience and her orientation to the teaching profession, it can be suggested that the participant’s professional identity was constructed based on various constraints and opportunities in her teaching practice experience. According to Pennington and Richards (2016), these constraints and opportunities play a significant role in developing teachers’ professional identity.

While there have been a number of studies in TESOL that explored language teachers’ professional identity, studies that identify, describe, and understand the experiences of language teacher’s teaching in the middle of the pandemic and how such a specific phenomenon shapes their perceptions of their professional identity in emergency remote language teaching are scarce. This study aims to fill this gap by addressing the following questions:

1. How do participants think of themselves as English language teachers during the shift to emergency remote teaching in the middle of the pandemic?
2. How do TESOL teachers view and re/construct their professional identity in emergency remote teaching during the COVID19 pandemic?

Method

Context and Participants

The present inquiry was conducted in one of the schools of a university in Thailand. When the university announced the migration of all classes from classroom face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching during the COVID19 pandemic, teachers used various online teaching platforms as there had been no established and working learning management system (LMS), where online teaching could be accommodated. Moreover, since the shift to remote teaching was sudden, training the teachers and conducting workshops on how to migrate their lessons to online teaching were impossible. In other words, teachers had to rely only on their previous pedagogical experience and their technological skills and knowledge to conduct online and remote teaching.

Three TESOL teachers (2 males, one female), whose ages ranged from 30 to 45, responded to a 'call for research participants' announcement on social media and volunteered to participate in the study. These three teachers, who held a Master's degree, had teaching experience between five and 15 years. They were all teaching students with different majors and English language proficiency levels in their general language courses in the university.

Data-Gathering Procedure, Tools, and Data Analysis

Before conducting the study, approval from the institutional review board (IRB) for research on human ethics was sought. Once approved, the researchers recruited the participants through a call for participants announcement on social media. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study. They were also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their identity and the data they would share. It was emphasized to them that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation anytime.

An in-depth semi-structured individual interview was conducted in English and was done online in Zoom due to travel restrictions. It was recorded, and each interview lasted for about an hour. Furthermore, the online interview concentrated on how the participants identify themselves as TESOL teachers in the middle of the pandemic and how they construct or reconstruct their professional identity during this unprecedented time.

Finally, the interview data were transcribed verbatim, checked repeatedly, and read carefully. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the interview transcripts were sent back to the participants for confirmation, correction, and approval. The participants were allowed to revise and edit their transcripts for clarity and conciseness. The data were analyzed by categorizing them under the research questions posed for the study. Excerpts from the interview were included in the Findings section, where participants were assigned to codes (P1, P2, P3) to maintain anonymity.

Findings

TESOL Teachers' Perceptions of Themselves in Emergency Remote Teaching

Although participants admitted that they did not have any experience in conducting online classes, migrating to emergency remote teaching due to the COVID19 pandemic was perceived positively by the participants. When asked what they thought about online teaching, their common response was that online teaching was a better option to continue the teaching and learning process. They believed that teaching should be continued despite the pandemic because they did not want their students to stop learning. They also expressed that shifting to remote teaching was the only way for them and for their students to be safe from the virus. However, moving to online teaching was also challenging as participants admitted to have faced some issues during the transition. Apart from the internet connectivity issue, one of the common issues they mentioned is making their teaching materials suitable for online teaching. Participants were aware that moving their face-to-face classes to online teaching was sudden, and that they did not have time to prepare their teaching materials.

Another important issue that participants faced when moving classes to online was how to make their students learn. For example, participant 3 admitted that even in her face-to-face classes before, where she already had a few students who were not motivated to learn, she worried that many of her students would no longer be interested to learn because of the physical distance among them. Thus, when participants were asked what they thought of themselves as English language teachers teaching online in the middle of the pandemic, they acknowledged that they were unprepared, inexperienced, and unqualified. For participant 1, he described himself as an incompetent language teacher.

I would say that I was unprepared and I was incompetent language teacher. I did not have prior experience and training related to online teaching. My orientation was basically on face-to-face teaching. This is the reason why I said that I was incompetent. I feel like I was doing my practice teaching online.

For participant 2, he mentioned that he never had an online teaching experience before, and that moving to online class was new to him. He perceived himself as an inexperienced language teacher.

I never experienced this before [online class]. When I was finishing both my BA and MA degree, we never had coursework that prepared us to emergency situations like this. That is why I had difficulty conducting my lesson online, especially using the teaching materials I had for my class.

Likewise, being an unqualified language teacher was also perceived by participant 3 after moving her classes to online and remote teaching. She believed that given the current experience she had, she would never qualify to teach the language online.

To be honest, if I were to apply for a language teaching post this time, I would never qualify because surely, schools should be looking for someone who can teach the language online effectively. And this is something that I am not sure I am good at. I need training, more experience, and guidance to do the teaching online.

TESOL Teachers and Their Professional Identity Construction in Online Teaching

Although participants perceived themselves as unprepared, inexperienced, and unqualified because they did not have prior experience nor training in online language teaching before the pandemic, they reconstructed their professional identity to cope with the demands of online language teaching during the COVID19 pandemic through their participation in various online training, the support from their colleagues, and their pedagogical skills. Thus, they expressed that in situations like the COVID19 pandemic, a professional teacher should be flexible, understanding, and patient. For example, participant 1 claimed:

I am a flexible teacher and I think we should all be especially in times like this [COVID19 pandemic] As a teacher who does not have a background on online teaching, I attended some seminars and training online to get some knowledge and strategies that I can use in my online class. I also read some journal articles from distance education journals to keep me informed on online teaching strategies.

For participant 2, the construction of his professional identity did not only come from his attendance and participation to various online professional development programs. To him, understanding the situation and accepting it are keys towards successful remote teaching. He also mentioned that his professional identity in online teaching during the COVID19 pandemic was due to the support from his colleagues in the school. He emphasized how the support from his colleagues had given him the motivation to learn from the experience.

Even if I described myself as an incompetent online language teacher during the COVID19 pandemic, I would say that I learned something from this experience. We just have to be accepting and understanding of what is going on because we are not the only ones who are experiencing this pandemic

Furthermore, the online language teaching experience for participant 3 during the pandemic became an avenue for her to reflect on what kind of an English language teacher she was before the pandemic. For her, being patient when teaching online during the pandemic made her realize that she can do better as a language teacher.

After teaching online for a semester, even if it was a challenge for me, I would say that I have become a more mature, creative, and resourceful language teacher. Maybe because I was patient even if I experienced a lot of issues with my online teaching. At first, I felt unqualified but after teaching one semester online, it made me reflect on what kind of a language teacher I was before the pandemic.

Discussion

The current study investigates how three language education teachers in Thailand reconstructed their professional identity in an online teaching environment during the COVID19 pandemic. Findings from the present study revealed that language teachers viewed themselves as unprepared, inexperienced, and unqualified. Such perceptions may be valid because the shifting of classes from face-to-face classroom teaching to emergency remote teaching was sudden due to the COVID19 outbreak. Schools and universities have had to temporarily close all the classrooms, giving no time for teachers to undergo training on conducting online classes, developing language teaching materials, and designing an online language learning assessment, which is vital for effective online language instruction.

Studies on teachers having no online pedagogical and technical training in conducting online classes were also reported by Joshi et al. (2020) in India, Blume (2020) in Germany, and Bergdahl and Nouri (2020) in Sweden. This suggests that the sudden transition to remote teaching during the COVID19 pandemic brought pedagogical issues that confronted most teachers and schools in the world, affecting their professional identity. As a result, participants in the current study believed that they were inexperienced and unqualified to deliver their language lessons online.

Moreover, teachers' perceptions of their professional identity imply that teachers in a university in Thailand did not have online pedagogical and technical skills training before migrating to online teaching and did not have an orientation to online pedagogies. The lack of teacher's orientation to online and remote teaching can be attributed to the fact that most language teacher education curricula in the world

do not provide an opportunity for language teachers to be trained in conducting online classes, where much emphasis is only given to teaching practicums in the classroom (e.g., Farrell, 2008; Gilliland, 2018), particularly in Thailand context (Lim, 2016; Prabjandee, 2019). In other words, there is a lack of language education pre-service teacher-training programs in the country that prepare language teachers for online teaching.

Generally, most teacher's education programs in Thailand may lack curricular programs that prepare teachers not only for residential classroom teaching but also online classroom pedagogies. In other words, since teachers may only have training that focuses on physical classroom teaching, they may not have enough knowledge and skills to deliver their lessons online. Without such provisions on online pedagogies training, teachers may lose self-confidence and self-efficacy that may significantly affect their online teaching efficacy (Ma, et al., 2021) and their professional identity. While online teaching may be considered another field of study that teachers may choose to concentrate on, online teaching involves the actual teaching practice and TESOL teachers preparing their teaching materials suitable for online teaching (Daniel, 2020). As evident in the interview, participants also need to plan how to conduct language assessments and give feedback to their online students. Thus, teachers need to be afforded with training on online pedagogies that equip them with knowledge on how to develop or transform their physical teaching materials to online teaching materials and design practical and effective language assessment and feedback tools to maximize student's learning. Likewise, such a finding also implies that there is a need to revisit and reform the language education curriculum not only in Thailand but across higher learning institutions around the world to include the provisions on online pedagogies to support future language teachers.

Another important finding from the study is how teachers reconstructed their professional identity in emergency remote teaching. Participants mentioned that the reconstruction of their professional identity was made possible through their participation in various online training, their colleagues' support, and their existing physical classroom pedagogical skills. Although they perceived themselves as unprepared, inexperienced, and unqualified, teachers were able to communicate their professional identity as online language teachers by offering language support to their students and conducting online language learning assessments and feedback. Additionally, with their existing classroom pedagogical skills, they acknowledged emergency remote teaching as a new experience where they can improve and develop in their profession.

Such professional identity reconstruction among the participants suggests that even if they do not have an orientation on online pedagogies, no prior training in remote teaching and no previous experience in conducting remote classes, the support given by their colleagues, the availability of various online training programs for their professional development, and their physical classroom teaching experience can provide them an avenue to carry out emergency remote teaching, especially during the COVID19 pandemic. Although professional identity is a continuous process for teachers, participants became active agents of this unprecedented change in the language education landscape. They were able to reflect on the situation and acted on it professionally, not only for their institution but also for their students. According to Arvaja (2016), the construction and negotiation of teachers' professional identity can be manifested in how teachers take an active role in the process of change and how they make sense of their context and situation. By taking the initiative to participate in various online professional development programs and continuing the support they give to their students in a physical classroom to the remote teaching classroom, teachers have embraced the reality of the situation and used it to develop in their profession. They have understood why they needed to shift to remote teaching. They have become flexible and patient in their transition to emergency remote teaching. Thus, language teachers teaching in the emergency remote classrooms have "become engaged in many different dimensions of learning, from those related to mastery of the subject matter of language teaching to those involved in managing learning in the classroom, as well as issues involved in developing an understanding of themselves as teachers" (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 6). Such teachers' professional identity construction in emergency remote teaching plays a vital role in learners' language learning since effective and successful remote

teaching may be directly linked to how language teachers project themselves professionally during the shift to remote teaching. It followed what Pennington and Richards (2016), Skott (2019), and Widodo et al. (2020) believed that teacher's professional identity is historically, socially, and culturally constructed, which can be reflected on their pedagogical and content knowledge presentation.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine TESOL teachers' professional identity in emergency remote teaching in a university in Thailand during the COVID19 pandemic. Although teachers felt unprepared, inexperienced, and unqualified to do emergency remote teaching, they saw the opportunity in the COVID19 pandemic to reflect on their professional identity as language teachers and learn from the new experience. Through the support given by their colleagues, participation in various online professional development programs, and their existing academic orientation, teachers acknowledged the need to be patient, understanding, and flexible to the situation to project their identity to their students professionally.

The findings of the study may have implications on the existing curriculum policy in language teacher education where pre-service teacher training and practicum teaching only emphasize physical classroom teaching. Higher learning institutions with teacher education programs should take into consideration having pre-service or in-service teacher training on how to conduct emergency remote or online teaching, how to develop and transform physical teaching materials to online materials, and how to design suitable language assessments and feedback tools in order to maximize the teaching and learning process. It is believed that preparing future teachers and equipping them with the skills in online pedagogies will impact their confidence and efficacy, which are crucial towards re/constructing their professional identity.

Another direction for future research is extending the study to other educational contexts employing a large-scale survey to identify different ways for teachers to project themselves in emergency remote teaching during the COVID19 pandemic. While our interview findings imply a revisit in the teacher education curriculum, data from various learning institutions may render different TPI construction methods.

The Authors

Junifer L. Bucol is the Head of the Languages Department, School of Languages and General Education, Walailak University, Thailand.

Email: junifer.bu@mail.wu.ac.th

Mark B. Ulla (corresponding author) is assistant professor and Head of Research at the School of Languages and General Education, Walailak University, Thailand

Email: mark.ul@mail.wu.ac.th

References

- Arvaja, M. (2016). Building teacher identity through the process of positioning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 59, 392-402. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.07.024>
- Bergdahl, N. & Nouri, J. (2020). Covid-19 and crisis-prompted distance education in Sweden. *Tech Know Learn*, 26, 443-459. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10758-020-09470-6>
- Blume, C. (2020). German teachers' digital habitus and their pandemic pedagogy. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, 879-905. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00174-9>

- Daniel, S. J. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects*, 49, 91-96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09464-3>
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2008). 'Here's the book, go teach the class': ELT practicum support. *RELC Journal*, 39(2), 226-241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688208092186>
- Gilliland, B. (2018). Teacher research during an international practicum. *ELT Journal*, 72(3), 260-273. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx054>
- Goktepe, F. T., & Kunt, N. (2020). "I'll do it in my own class": Novice language teacher identity construction in Turkey. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 41(3), 472-487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2020.1815648>
- Joshi, A., Vinay, M., & Bhaskar, P. (2020). Impact of coronavirus pandemic on the Indian education sector: perspectives of teachers on online teaching and assessments. *Interactive Technology and Smart Education*, 18(2), 205-226. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ITSE-06-2020-0087>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2019a). Language teacher identity. *Language Teaching*, 52(3), 281-295. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0261444819000223>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2019b). A language teacher's agency in the development of her professional identities: A narrative case study. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 18(1), 4-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2017.1406360>
- König, J., Jäger-Biela, D. J., & Glutsch, N. (2020). Adapting to online teaching during COVID-19 school closure: teacher education and teacher competence effects among early career teachers in Germany. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 608-622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1809650>
- Lim, S. (2016). Learning to teach intelligible pronunciation for ASEAN English as a lingua franca: A sociocultural investigation of Cambodian pre-service teacher cognition and practice. *RELC Journal*, 47(3), 313-329. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688216631176>
- Lindahl, K., & Yazan, B. (2019). An identity-oriented lens to TESOL teachers' lives: introducing the special issue. *TESOL Journal*, 10(4), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.506>
- Ma, K., Chutiayami, M., Zhang, Y., & Nicoll, S. (2021). Online teaching self-efficacy during COVID-19: Changes, its associated factors and moderators. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26, 6675-6697. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10486-3>
- Moser, K. M., Wei, T., & Brenner, D. (2021). Remote teaching during COVID-19: Implications from a national survey of language educators. *System*, 97, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102431>
- Pennington, M. C., & Richards, J. C. (2016). Teacher identity in language teaching: Integrating personal, contextual, and professional factors. *RELC Journal*, 47(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688216631219>
- Prabjandee, D. (2019). Becoming English teachers in Thailand: Student teacher identity development during teaching practicum. *Issues in Educational Research*, 29(4), 1277-1294.
- Skott, J. (2019). Changing experiences of being, becoming, and belonging: Teachers' professional identity revisited. *ZDM Mathematics Education* 51, 469-480. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11858-018-1008-3>
- Widodo, H. P., Fang, F., & Elyas, T. (2020). The construction of language teacher professional identity in the Global Englishes territory: "We are legitimate language teachers." *Asian Englishes*, 22(3), 309-316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2020.1732683>
- Wolff, D., & De Costa, P. I. (2017). Expanding the language teacher identity landscape: an investigation of the emotions and strategies of a NNEST. *The Modern Language Journal*, 101(S1), 76-90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12370>
- Yazan, B. (2018). A conceptual framework to understand language teacher identities. *Journal of Second Language Teacher Education*, 1(1), 21-48.

(Received June 17, 2022; Revised August 23, 2022; Accepted Sep 18, 2022)