



**“If I go back, I would never tell the manager that I am stressed out”:
Novice TESOL Teacher Identity Development**

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Introduction

The first years of teaching is a process fraught with a wide range of fluctuations that may complicate novice teachers' work. The complexities are firmly linked to not only pedagogical issues, but also to other contextual factors such as the existence of educational, social, political, and cultural challenges in the profession. Professional identity development has been recognized as a major challenge for novice teachers (Farrell, 2012; Pennington & Richards, 2016). Novice teachers may confront dissonances between their teaching ideas and the existing organizational atmosphere (Shin, 2012) and experience isolation and left-to-oneself feelings (Farrell, 2012). They should also attempt to strike a reasonable simultaneous balance between effective teaching and their own learning-to-teach process (Farrell, 2012). Some of the terminologies associated with the experience of the first year such as “reality shock” (Veenman, 1984), “sink-or-swim” (Varah, Theune, & Parker, 1986), and “transition shock” (Farrell, 2016) highlight the issue that novice teachers are more prone to experiencing moments that can reverberate through the very retaining of the teacher in the profession and have an overarching impact on their cognitions and practices (Maynard & Furlong, 1995).

The above issues influence the identity novice teachers construct as their learning involves not only developing teaching competencies, but also what it means to be a teacher in a particular context (Pennington & Richards, 2016). The complexity of novice teachers' work may largely stem from their initial ideas about teaching and learning, their own previous learning, connection to their teaching context, and how they learn to conquer the challenges they face at the outset (Feryok & Askaribigdeli, 2019; Kanno & Stuart, 2011). Particularly, the experience of the first year can have a profound impact on the way teachers develop in their career as they are more likely to face dramatic occurrences, with 24 percent of novices leaving the profession in the first year (Joiner & Edwards, 2008).

Although recent research (e.g., Avalos-Rivera, 2019; Feryok & Askaribigdeli, 2019; Kanno & Stuart, 2011) has explored the identity development of novice language teachers, this line of inquiry still needs more attention as emphasized by Farrell (2016). This line of research features the institutionally-sanctioned, other-dependent, and vulnerable nature of novice teachers' identity development. In the Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, teaching English “is likely to provide substantial challenges to some EFL teachers and to present them with both political and personal conflicts”

(Eslamdoost, King, & Tajeddin, 2019, p. 4). Research is thus required to explore how these factors influence the teachers, particularly novice teachers who are more prone to being negatively influenced and the associated repercussions to their identity development. This issue motivated the present study, which aimed to explore the identity development of a novice English teacher in the first year of her teaching. The study addressed the following question:

What are the factors shaping the teacher's identity in the first year of her teaching and how do they influence her identity development?

Method

Context and Participant

The context for the present study was a language school in Iran. The school offers general English classes at different proficiency levels and also recruits newly-graduated applicants who are interested in teaching English. Upon recruitment, the novice teachers usually start with teaching the beginner level of proficiency and also in the case of the participant of the present study, Shirin (a pseudonym) was a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) graduate who was teaching English to children of 7 to 10 year old age range. Shirin was 22 years old, had completed her education in a local, Azad university (a university system in which candidates pay a fee for their education, as opposed to state universities), and taught learners in the beginner level of proficiency in her first year of teaching. Although the administrators of the language school did not mandate strict regulations as to the methodology of teaching adopted by the teachers, it was necessary for the teachers to cover all the assigned textbooks. The classes of the school were held twice a week, each lasting 75 minutes. Each educational semester lasted three months (per season) except for summers in which two semesters were held. Shirin taught children for five semesters during the first year and her classes had on average 15 learners. Shirin had one (first semester), two (second semester), four (third semester), three (fourth semester), and three (fifth semester) classes during the first year.

Data Collection

This study is part of a larger project that investigated the identity development of a novice L2 teacher. Data collection started in 2016 and ended in 2017 when Shirin completed her first year of teaching. Shirin was initially briefed on the purpose of the study and after her agreement, the study was started. To collect the data, narrative inquiry (Johnson & Golombek, 2002) was used wherein Shirin was asked to narrate the occurrences that contributed to her perceptions of self. Shirin reported the narratives online. In doing so, a group was created on a messaging application in which we (the teacher and the first researcher) could share, discuss, and reflect on the narratives (via chatting/voice messages and in Persian). In this platform, Shirin reported her narratives and we discussed each of them to gain a deep understanding of her sense-making. This perspective resonates with Johnson and Golombek (2002) who support "a conceptualization of narrative inquiry as systematic exploration that is conducted *by* teachers and *for* teachers through their own stories and language" (p. 4, emphasis in original). We chose the online format because it was easier for Shirin to manage the process.

Additionally, whenever Shirin and the researcher met each other in the staffroom, they discussed different pedagogical and non-pedagogical issues and shared their ideas to better understand how Shirin conceived of her development. Our online conversations often took about 30-40 minutes to deeply analyze each narrative. In this regard, the researcher listened to the teacher's narrative(s), asked related questions, and examined the narrative from multiple perspectives regarding the participants in the narrative in order to delineate how it had influenced her perceptions.

Data Analysis

The study was conceptually informed by grounded theory (GT). Due to the longitudinal nature of the study, it was necessary to engage in data analysis vis-à-vis the narrative sharing process and the way they contributed to the teacher's identity development. The process of memo-writing in this study was viewed as a process (Charmaz, 1996) in which the discussions were copied in a Word document and analyzed in detail (by commenting on them) to figure out their interconnection and points of difference. This engagement in turn contributed to better running of the subsequent discussions. To cull more data, the first researcher wrote down their staff-room discussions by asking the teacher to explain more about the online discussions and these were noted in his journal for further supplementation of the online discussions in an iterative process.

The trilogy of GT framework proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), which consists of open, axial, and selective coding, was utilized for coding the narratives under clearly-defined categories. In the open coding stage of this framework, the data are read iteratively to develop an in-depth familiarity with the nature of the narratives and come up with the initial codes. In the axial coding stage, the connection between codes and categories is sought along with the sub-categories constituting the main categories. In the selective coding stage, the categories are organized around a central, main category. To analyze the data, the narratives were initially coded by searching for the emerging themes that represented similar foci (open coding). These sub-categories were analyzed inductively several times to arrive at a better understanding of their nature, to look for possible changes, and to further refine the sub-categories, which led to developing the related categories (axial coding). The core categories were then organized around a central, explanatory category (selective coding) in this study, which was "factors contributing to the teacher's professional identity in the first year of language teaching". Additionally, the data were given to an experienced teacher educator/researcher to check the categorizations. After two rounds of discussion on and refinement of the sub-categories, the areas of disagreement were resolved and the categories were finalized.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the narratives featured a chronological shift from initial apprehension as a function of transition from studentship to teaching (Farrell, 2008) to narratives which were dominantly policy-oriented toward the end of the first year (Figure 1). In the first six months, Shirin was mainly concerned with adapting herself to the discourse of teaching and the associated intricacies and establishing a close connection with the learners. In the second six months, she was more concerned with increasing learners' learning gains and meeting curricular demands. Below are sample vignettes from Shirin's reports.

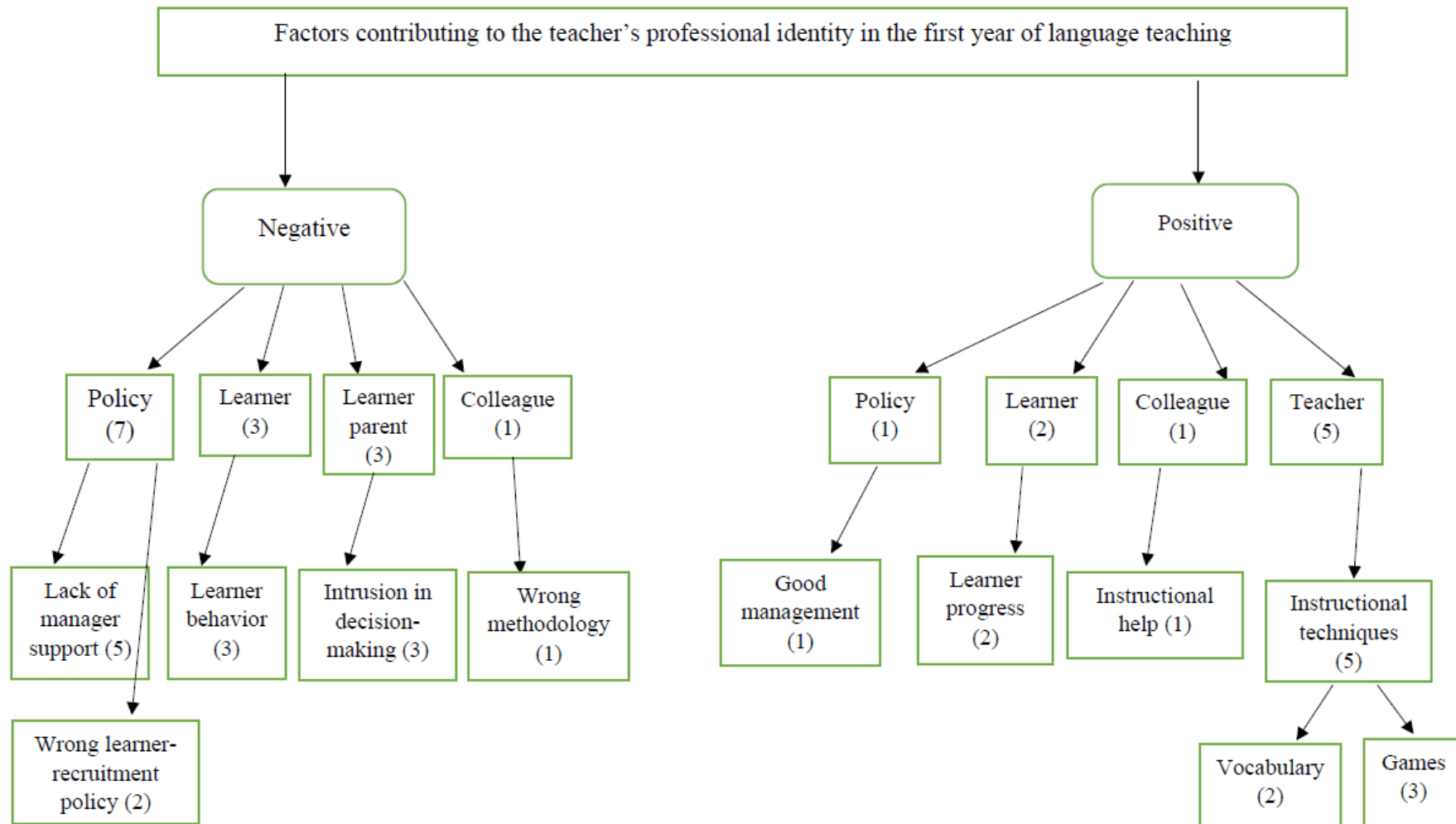


Figure 1. The categories reported by the teacher: The numbers in parentheses indicate the frequency of category; Teacher = the participant.

Policy: I want support

While Shirin was initially satisfied with the management system, this issue backfired as she approached the end of the first year. Shirin sorely lamented over how revealing her stress had become a lens through which the school manager had been viewing her practice and self. This occurrence shows how the initial experiences have influenced the way Shirin had been continually recognized as a teacher because of what she herself had done, which had led to experiencing burnout in the long run. In Extract 1, “fossilized”, “demotivated”, and “demoralized” indicate that the teacher has experienced lack of support whose major cause has been the manager.

You know, I feel that I have become fossilized and this is because of the manager's decisions. He has demotivated me a number of times through asking questions such as 'why do you do this and that?' I know that I am not an excellent teacher the way he expects, but such comments have demoralized me. (Extract 1)

The importance of support, from pedagogical to affective dimensions, and the need for being heard is so influential that novice teacher attrition, retention, and conceptions of success depend largely on the encouragement they receive from policy-makers and teacher educators (Farrell, 2012). Shirin also reported narratives regarding her initial survival and adaptability/resistance to change such as stress-related issues, which indicated her gradual adaptability to the complexities of teaching. This adaptability was influenced by the mixture of her previously-held cognitions and anchoring them into the exigencies of the current context. For example, in Extract 2, two components are central to Shirin's gradual adaptability, namely her personal motives and the manager. Particularly, her reference to “purpose”, “got assured that I can be a good teacher”, and “gradually decreased my stress” show that “moving from the identity of a graduate student to that of a teacher is not a quick and automatic transition, even for individuals who have made a clear commitment to become L2 teachers” (Kanno & Stuart, 2011, p. 249).

In the beginning weeks I felt that I am up in the air because I did not know what the right thing to do was. In the beginning session I was so stressed out that I was about to lose my control. But after two or three sessions I first, reminded myself of my purpose of studying English language teaching at university and second, the manager helped me. Then I got assured that I can be a good teacher. I tried a lot and gradually decreased my stress. (Extract 2)

As for resistance to change, Shirin reported digressions from top-down policies of the language school due to a conflict of viewpoints. While her sense-making required taking action based on the realities of her class, the manager's wants impeded her action taking and this had turned into a conundrum for her. In Extract 3, the teacher starts with the dilemma of adhering to either the manager's wants or her personal sense-making, supports her action with an example of her practice, and ends with a reasoning for her belief.

While the manager told me to do this and that, I was stuck between two ideas: what really worked in the class which was my methodology and what the manager told me; I kept up with mine, though. For example, in one case, it did not make a difference how much homework I told the learners to do and the manager always would tell me to assign less homework to the learners. He told me the learners would not like the class in which the teacher assigns a lot of homework and the parents complain about this issue. I think that the beginning levels are so determining in the learners' level of proficiency. (Extract 3)

Mann and Tang (2012) report on the negative effect of administrators on the participating novice teachers' comfort and its associated psychological filter in their cognition. This effect had not only been a result of the administrator's presence in the meetings, but also due to his comments on the teachers' self. Shirin also reported narratives that echoed similar views, realized in forms such as ‘he criticized me in front of other teachers which draws me to the conclusion that he does not believe in me’. While these occurrences might seem insignificant in the

eyes of administrators, the accumulated body of tensions and disjunctions between administrators/managers and teachers can exert a substantial influence on the success of the whole system.

Learners and their Parents: I need autonomy

Another line of narratives was a mixture of the learners' unruly behavior and the intrusive behavior of their parents (for similar findings see Karimi & Nazari, 2019). Shirin mentioned the dominant discourse of vicarious intrusion of parents in the decisions and the associated negative learner feedback to her decisions. Shirin believed that administrator leniency had allowed the parents to influence the decision-making process through parental influence on manager decisions and the subsequent influence on her classroom decisions. It seems that the lack of autonomy Shirin had experienced as a function of parents' intrusion, which had been tantamount to manager leniency, had impacted her perceived burnout, arising from the expected yet unrealized support she had had in mind (Maynard & Furlong, 1995).

The manager pays too much attention to what the parents say and wants me to realize those expectations in the class. The other day I was asking questions from one of the learners. There is a cheeky student who constantly answered the questions of other students. I brought her and some other learners to the board and punished them a little. You won't guess what happened! The next session she brought her mother to the school and she told me: You must treat my kid kindly because she is not accustomed to such behaviors! If the manager had been stricter, the parents would not have dared to behave so. (Extract 4)

In Extract 4, Shirin laments over the unnecessary attention the manager has paid to the parents and its associated influence on her perceptions. It seems that adherence to her institutional identity (Gee, 2000) had influenced Shirin to view the language school as a community that only its members are legitimate enough to operate and make decisions. This was also evident in her discourse, most notably when we discussed similar issues in the staff room. Additionally, Shirin made no single reference to parent-related positive incidents. This shows that the complex web of Shirin's identities in terms of viewing parents as jeopardizing her autonomy seems to have made her develop a shield against any assistance from the parents. Part of this identity may go back to Shirin's perceptions of her professional career (Extract 5) in perceiving herself as a naturally legitimate person to be the decision-maker (Gee, 2000):

I have studied English language teaching at university for four years. Then if I tell the learner to do the assignment I know that it is useful for them and the parents' objections and complaints are totally unnecessary. (Extract 5)

Pedagogy: I am developing

Most of the reported positive incidents involved Shirin's consent with her instructional techniques that had been effective, and her associated self-efficacy to deal with the complexities of practice. This perspective was also evident in her discourse as she talked about her practice enthusiastically and was more into elaborating on her practices that had made her *feel* better. This finding shows the circular trajectory of Shirin's development in that her cognitions fed her practice which in turn fed the subsequent cognitions iteratively. Additionally, this finding attests to the close tie between identity and practice – what Lave (1996) termed identities-in-practice – in that Shirin seems to have resorted to and invested efforts in her practice as the major comfort zone where she could materialize her mentalities and sense developing as a teacher (Extract 6).

When I teach the alphabet effectively, especially with a new technique, I come to believe in myself and enjoy teaching. For example, some days ago I designed a new technique for teaching the letter B. I realized that my

learners can learn it very well and this gave me a sense of satisfaction from my own practice, especially when I checked their understanding and all of them were successful in writing the letter and recognizing it among other letters. I know that designing an activity is difficult but I tried it and I understood that I am capable of doing it nicely. (Extract 6)

The composite of positive incidents/practices had engendered learner progress and teacher satisfaction with self. The nexus among identity, practice, and learner progress seems to be mutual in that they rely inextricably on the other components. One reason that can be mentioned in this regard may be Shirin's personal motives (Extract 7) in that she has devoted and engaged herself in the practice of teaching because of her personal belief and the requirements of professional practice.

A teacher is a model. These children come to the class with the hope that they can learn English and because of this I do my best to help them learn. The teacher, I think, is the key enlightening the connection between the learner and the material. (Extract 7)

Overall, the findings of the present study indicate that policy-related issues were in the foreground of Shirin's experience of the first year. These issues seem to have influenced Shirin so greatly that her final comment was: *'If I go back, I would never tell the manager that I am stressed out'*. Although Shirin stated that she had reached the state of handling everyday routines of practice (Maynard & Furlong, 1995) toward the end of the first year, her fully palpable sense of what she called "fossilization" bears important implications for policy-makers. The aforementioned terminologies associated with the experience of the first year pose cardinal questions about the role of administrators/managers in navigating novice teachers through the turbulent experience of the first year. Ironically, the navigation does not appear to have been much successful in the case of Shirin. Nevertheless, the opposite view may also be at work in that as Shirin attributed all the negative incidents to external factors/participants, it might be that "when the situations do not improve, new teachers may find some comfort in ascribing their difficulties to traits in pupils or parents or in blaming the administration" (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, p. 3).

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the trajectory of identity development of a novice TESOL teacher during the first year of teaching. The findings of the study showed that various interdependent factors and participants contributed to the teacher's identity development, from policy-makers, to learners and their parents, to colleagues, and to the teacher herself. Shirin left teaching the major reason for which was the isolation she had experienced from the administrators/managers (personal communication). Managers should thus become more familiar with novices' identity as the wide array of internal and external factors novices are in contact with could profoundly influence their sense of professionalism. Additionally, they should show more emotional support and tolerance toward novices to increase the possibility of teacher retention and then carrying out subsequent amendments, if required. Much in this vein, the layered, complex web of novice teachers' identity development, prone to multifarious interconnected and contextual factors, highlights the multidimensionality of their work and its highly emergent nature in terms of being, becoming, and doing as a teacher. This issue could thus be explored in future research in terms of considering the voices of other stakeholders and the way they influence novice teachers' identity development to better demonstrate the ecology of novices' life.

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