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The Role of Professional Development Activities on Teacher Identity: An Ecological Review on Novice and Experienced EFL Instructors

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ABSTRACT

Professional development (PD) has long been examined through a technical and instrumental lens, with emphasis placed primarily on enhancing teachers' pedagogical competencies. However, the role of PD in constructing, negotiating, and repositioning teacher identity across different career stages and institutional contexts remains insufficiently explored. Drawing on ecological systems theory and sociocultural conceptions of identity as its theoretical framework, this study investigates how and in what ways participation in professional development activities affords opportunities for identity construction among novice and experienced EFL instructors working at the university level. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings suggest that the construction and negotiation of teacher identity is shaped not solely by participation in PD, but also by engagement with ecological systems operating at macro, meso, and micro levels. Whereas novice instructors tend to perceive PD as a structure that shapes, regulates, and legitimizes their professional identities, experienced instructors approach it as a more strategic, selective, and at times distanced experience. Institutional expectations and policy-driven discourses emerge as powerful mechanisms that determine how PD is perceived and internalized at the individual level. Taken together, the findings indicate that PD should be understood not merely as a pedagogical learning activity, but as an act of identity work embedded within and mediated by ecological contexts.

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Professional development (PD) in teacher education has traditionally been approached as a technical and instrumental process designed to enhance instructional competencies. This approach confines PD to the transmission of pedagogical knowledge, the improvement of classroom practices, and the development of instructional strategies, resting on the assumption that it provides a neutral experience for all teachers. However, PD practices are not merely experiences through which instructional skills are developed; they are also contexts in which professional norms are produced, legitimized, and teachers are expected to conform to these norms (Avalos, 2011; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). In this respect, PD can be understood as directly related to how teachers make sense of their own professional identities and how they position themselves within institutional structures.

According to the literature, teacher identity is not a fixed or individual attribute; rather, it is continuously negotiated through social relationships, institutional expectations, dominant discourses, educational policies, and similar factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Varghese et al., 2005). Despite this understanding, existing research tends to address teacher identity primarily through classroom practices and individual narratives, while structural factors such as institutional expectations, policy discourses, and social relationships are frequently overlooked. Studies examining PD's influence on teacher identity across multiple layers and within a contextual framework in higher education remain considerably limited (Murray & Christison, 2011; Tao & Gao, 2018). The need to investigate PD not merely as a site of skill acquisition but as a space of identity negotiation embedded in sociopolitical and institutional contexts has been increasingly foregrounded in more recent scholarship (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Cheung et al., 2015).

Departing from this gap, the present study moves beyond examining PD as a mere pedagogical learning process and repositions it as a social and institutional site of practice through which teacher identity is constructed and renegotiated. Drawing on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979,

1994), the study examines what function PD serves in the construction and renegotiation of identity among novice and experienced EFL instructors. The central argument of the study is that PD constitutes a multi-layered site of negotiation with respect to teacher identity. From this perspective, PD is conceptualized not only as an individual learning process but as an act of identity work that operates in interaction with institutional expectations, policy discourses, social relationships, and local practices.

In line with this, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do novice and experienced EFL instructors experience PD activities in the course of identity construction and negotiation?
2. How do ecological systems at macro, meso, and micro levels contribute to the effect of PD on teacher identity?
3. To what extent do PD experiences differ according to career stage?

2. Literature Review

This study draws on both sociocultural theory and ecological systems theory to understand the influence of professional development on teacher identity. Both theoretical lenses conceptualize teacher identity not as a set of individual attributes or internal dispositions, but as a construct shaped within relational and institutional processes.

2.1. *Teacher Identity as a Dynamic and Contextual Process*

Teacher identity is conceptualized not as a fixed, individually owned attribute, but as a continuously transforming construct shaped over time through social interactions, institutional practices, and discursive processes (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Morgan, 2004). From a sociocultural perspective, identity is less a state of being in relation to a professional role than a process of becoming—one that involves how individuals are positioned and defined within particular contexts (Wenger, 1998). Teacher identity must therefore be understood as a negotiated, reproduced, and dynamic construct.

For a considerable period, teacher identity in the literature was examined as a fixed and internal attribute, reduced to the sum of values, beliefs, and pedagogical orientations adopted by the individual. However, with the incorporation of post-structuralist and sociocultural theories into the field, this understanding underwent a profound transformation. Today, identity is conceptualized not as an unchanging category residing within the individual, but as a dynamic process continuously constructed and renegotiated through discursive practices, institutional contexts, and power relations (Varghese et al., 2005; Norton, 2000; Tsui, 2007). This transformation has been further substantiated in recent scholarship through narrative and post-structuralist inquiry into language teacher identity, with such studies foregrounding the multiplicity, fluidity, and contested nature of professional self-understanding (Barkhuizen, 2017; Yazan, 2018).

Within this context, the concept of the positioned subject assumes a decisive role. From a post-structuralist framework, individuals are not autonomous producers of discourse, but subjects positioned by existing discourses (Davies & Harré, 1990). In other words, a teacher does not freely choose identity positions such as 'being a good teacher' or 'becoming an expert practitioner'; rather, these expressions or positions are offered, imposed, or opened to negotiation by institutional discourses, professional norms, and social interactions. Teacher identity, in this sense, must be approached as a discursive position. Holland et al.'s (1998) concept of figured worlds offers a productive framework for understanding the cultural and institutional sites in which identity construction takes place. Figured worlds are social worlds in which specific actors, roles, and meanings are pre-shaped. These may include a school, a professional development program or activity, or an EFL department; within these worlds, who teachers are or who they are expected to be is determined through shared narratives and practices. Identity is therefore not only individually but also collectively produced.

In terms of theorizing the dimensions of power and legitimacy, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation provides an important explanatory framework. According to

this concept, individuals participate in a community of practice as learners who begin at the periphery and progressively move toward the center, thereby attaining full membership. Applied to the context of professional development, this framework demonstrates that PD is not merely a transfer of knowledge but a practice of participation through which identities are reshaped and the boundaries of legitimacy are reconstituted. Indeed, which teachers are included in or excluded from particular PD activities is a direct reflection of institutional power relations. Considered alongside Bourdieu's (1991) conceptualization of symbolic capital, this picture becomes more layered: certain forms of PD not only offer pedagogical achievements but also provide access to—or obstruct access to—identity positions that carry symbolic significance within the institutional field.

Within this theoretical context, Norton's (2000) investment theory, although originally developed to examine the relationship between identity and language learning, has been powerfully transferred to teacher PD research. As Norton argues, when individuals engage in an educational practice, they invest not only time and effort but also in a particular identity position. Underlying this investment are calculations and expectations regarding how participation in professional practices will construct or transform their identities. Resistance to or low participation in PD activities can therefore be explained not by a lack of motivation but by the tension between the teacher's existing identity and the identity positions offered by the institution. Teacher identity in this study is treated, in line with the theoretical frameworks discussed above, as a non-fixed process constructed through participation in professional and institutional practices such as PD, and negotiated within the context of these practices. Identity is shaped neither solely by individual preferences nor exclusively by institutional pressures, but within the ongoing interaction of these two dimensions through discursive practices and power relations (Tsui, 2007).

2.2. Ecological Systems Theory and Teacher Identity

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994) provides a powerful framework for examining teacher identity as a dynamic construct across multiple layers. Complementing the discursive and subjective identity construction processes addressed in the preceding section (2.1), this theory enables teacher identity to be situated not as something separate from individual experience but as a structural process emerging through the interaction of nested systems. The analytical power derived from the theory lies not only in the distinction between micro, meso, and macro levels but also in how the interactions among these levels are conceptualized. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), systems are not unidirectional and do not operate within a top-down hierarchy; rather, each level is reciprocal and influences or transforms the others. This bidirectionally interactive model allows us to examine not only how policy discourses shape teacher practices, but also how teachers' mechanisms of resistance and accommodation can, over time, transform institutional norms. Teacher identity is therefore not a passive product of systems but a dynamic position in continuous negotiation with those systems.

Structural elements such as educational policies, quality assurance mechanisms, institutional performance discourses, and national-level professionalization standards reside at the macro level. The aims, content, and legitimacy of PD are determined by discourses produced at this level, which indirectly orient the attitudes and behaviors expected of teachers (Johnson, 2009). Examined through a Foucauldian lens, these discourses are not merely policy texts but power-knowledge regimes that render certain teacher subjectivities possible or exclude others (Foucault, 1980). In other words, the macro level operates as a discursive field that organizes which type of teacher is defined as 'ideal' or 'eager for development'.

Local institutional practices, departmental culture, collegial relationships, and the ways in which institutions organize and implement PD constitute the meso level. Policy discourses

produced at the macro level reach this level transformed into everyday practices and concrete PD activities. Local expectations and departmental norms directly influence how teachers experience PD and make sense of those experiences (Tao & Gao, 2018). Collegial interactions at this level further mediate the ways in which teachers emotionally invest in PD and derive meaning from it, a dimension that is receiving growing recognition in the literature on teacher emotion and identity. (Gkonou & Miller, 2018). Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development can be productively linked to this level, as teachers pursue their professional development not in isolation but through interaction with more experienced colleagues and institutional structures.

At the micro level, we encounter teachers' individual narratives, moments of self-positioning, and the meanings they attribute to their PD experiences. At this level, teachers construct their professional identities by striking a balance between institutional expectations and their own individual professional values (Tsui, 2007). Bronfenbrenner's concept of proximal processes is critical at this point: development is not the product of abstract systems but of teachers' concrete, recurring, and mutually interactive practices. PD activities, viewed from this perspective, are not merely mechanisms for content transfer but proximal processes through which identity transformation takes place.

Finally, the chronosystem—that is, time and transitional processes—adds an important dimension to this institutional perspective. Teacher identity is not a momentary positioning but a process that changes and transforms over the course of a professional life through multiple PD experiences and transitions across institutions. Novice and experienced teachers cannot experience the same professional or PD environment in the same way; these differences, considered from the perspective of the chronosystem, can be interpreted in terms of the cumulative effect of professional experiences and institutional contexts. In this study, PD is conceptualized as an ecological practice situated at the intersection of macro, meso, and micro systems, arguing that teacher identity is shaped within the reciprocal and temporal

interactions among these systems. This perspective directly addresses one of the study's central research questions: namely, why novice and experienced teachers differ in their perceptions of and experiences with professional development.

2.3. The Neglect of the Identity Dimension in PD Literature

In the existing literature, PD research has historically focused on the enhancement of teachers' pedagogical and technical competencies, with a more dominant conception of professional development defined in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, and measurable outcomes (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Guskey, 2002). Notwithstanding various attempts to typologize PD models on the basis of their transformative potential, the identity dimension has continued to occupy a peripheral position even within more nuanced frameworks (Kennedy, 2016). Underlying this approach are behaviourist and cognitivist frameworks that position teachers as mere technical practitioners possessing specific skills and knowledge. The identity dimension has been marginalized within these frameworks or reduced to an individual psychological factor, thereby abstracted from its structural and discursive dimensions.

According to Beijaard et al.'s (2004) comprehensive systematic review of teacher identity research, the majority of studies in this field address identity through classroom practices and individual narratives, with institutional mechanisms such as PD receiving far less attention. Similarly, Varghese et al. (2005) draw attention to the fact that PD has been treated as a site of practice in which legitimate teacher identities are constructed and renegotiated and discuss the theoretical implications of this neglect. This has nonetheless remained insufficiently addressed, particularly in higher education and EFL contexts.

There is a structural reason underlying this gap. PD research and identity research have largely proceeded along parallel and disconnected lines. PD studies tend to focus on institutional outcomes, while identity research foregrounds individual

experiences and meaning-making. Sachs's (2001, 2003) concept of activist teacher identity can be interpreted as a critical attempt to address this disconnection: Sachs defines PD as a site where teachers construct and renegotiate their professional identities and can take a counter-position vis-à-vis institutional norms, thereby laying the theoretical groundwork for examining PD as simultaneously a structural and identity-related phenomenon. Pennycook's (1994) and Morgan's (1997) analyses of identity and ideology further deepen this discussion: since English language teaching practices can be approached as an ideologically laden domain, EFL teachers' professional development experiences encompass not only a pedagogical dimension but also a process of identity and political negotiation. In the EFL context specifically, recent scholarship has investigated how teachers navigate competing identity positions shaped by language ideologies and institutional hierarchies, bringing to the fore the need for PD practices and models that are responsive to these contextual complexities (Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

The original contribution of this study lies precisely at this intersection. Rather than treating PD as a site of mere pedagogical learning, this research approaches it as a practical context in which discursive identity construction processes and ecological systems become concrete. By incorporating the career stage dimension into the analysis, it further examines, from the perspective of the chronosystem, why novice and experienced instructors develop varied relationships with professional development and what the cumulative consequences of these differences are for identity. This study therefore aims to fill the gap in the identity dimension of the competence-oriented PD literature and to make an original contribution to the limited number of studies that systematically address this relationship in the EFL higher education context.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach, used to understand how teacher identity is negotiated through professional development

activities, is consistent with the context-sensitive, relational, and experience-based nature of the phenomenon under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Given that quantitative measures are insufficient for capturing such constructs, in-depth analysis and contextual meaning-making were prioritized as the primary aims of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In accordance with the qualitative research paradigm, participants' subjective meanings, interpretations, and experiences are foregrounded (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the meanings that instructors attributed to professional development activities, the connections between institutional policies and expectations, and how they positioned their own identities were examined in depth through semi-structured interviews.

3.1. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection method (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This technique enabled instructors to narrate their own professional development experiences in their own voices and to reveal their self-positioning with respect to teacher identity (Cohen et al., 2018). Interview questions were designed to understand how instructors experienced PD, how these experiences shaped their sense of identity, and how they related to institutional expectations.

Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and were subsequently transcribed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview protocol was designed in alignment with the study's theoretical framework, with open-ended questions organized around the research questions (Cohen et al., 2018). To ensure content validity, the interview protocol

was reviewed by two experts in the field of ELT and qualitative research, and revisions were made in accordance with their feedback prior to data collection. Follow-up probes were also used throughout the interviews to deepen participants' narratives.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The participants of this study consisted of four EFL instructors: two novice and two experienced. The number of participants was deliberately kept limited, with the aim of generating analytical depth and contextual meaning rather than pursuing quantitative generalizability. In qualitative research, the adequacy of sample size should be evaluated not primarily in terms of participant numbers but rather in terms of the explanatory richness of the data and the attainability of analytical saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). This principle is consistent with the notion of purposive sufficiency in interpretive inquiry, according to which depth of insight supersedes breadth of representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Based on the data obtained from this study, recurring and meaningful patterns emerged regarding how teacher identity is positioned within the context of professional development, and these emerging themes demonstrated consistency with the institutional framework, providing a sufficient analytical foundation for explaining teacher identity. Purposive sampling was employed in the selection of participants, with the aim of reaching participants from different career stages who were relevant to the research focus. Purposive sampling was employed in the selection of participants, with the aim of reaching participants from different career stages who were relevant to the research focus (Patton, 2002).

Table 1
Participant Profile

Participant	Age	Gender	Educational Background	Teaching Experience	Current Teaching Context
ET1	43	Female	BA in ELT, MA in English Language & Literature	University-level, foundation institution	Modern Languages Dept.
ET2	35	Male	BA in ELT, MA in ELT	Secondary-level, private high school	School of Basic English

Participant	Age	Gender	Educational Background	Teaching Experience	Current Teaching Context
NT1	25	Female	BA in ELT, MA in Curriculum & Instruction (ongoing)	Short-term, high school students	Modern Languages Dept.
NT2	25	Female	BA in American Culture & Literature, MA in American Culture & Lit. (ongoing)	No prior experience	School of Basic English

3.3. Methodological Rationale for the Novice–Experienced Distinction

By dividing participants into novice and experienced categories, the study aimed to reveal the various ways in which teacher identity intersects with professional development. Rather than treating experience as a linear indicator of progress, this distinction is intended to provide a comparative framework illustrating how PD is positioned differently by instructors at different stages of their career (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

In this study, instructors classified as novice—that is, those new to the profession—are those with five years or fewer of professional experience. Instructors with at least ten years of experience are considered the experienced participants. This categorization serves as an analytical tool for examining the relationship between professional development and the bond formed with PD and demonstrates that the effect of PD on teacher identity may vary according to career stage (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Flores & Day, 2006).

3.4. Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis approach was employed in the analysis of the data, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being predetermined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). More recent elaborations of this method emphasize the significance of reflexive engagement throughout the analytical process, positioning the researcher as an active theorist rather than a neutral coder (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Rather than placing data into pre-established categories, this analysis aimed to allow recurring patterns of meaning to emerge from participants' narratives.

The analysis process did not proceed in a linear fashion; instead, an iterative structure emerged among the processes of coding, theme development, and reinterpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were first read line by line and meaning-bearing units were coded. Subsequently, codes were categorized relationally and potential themes were identified. Finally, themes were revisited and finalized in relation to the research questions and the institutional framework. Although a formal intercoder reliability procedure was not employed, the trustworthiness of the analytical process was ensured through sustained researcher reflexivity and prolonged engagement with the data. The researcher continuously interrogated emerging interpretations in relation to the raw data, and analytical decisions were documented throughout the coding process to maintain transparency and auditability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.5. Trustworthiness, Credibility and Researcher Reflexivity

The trustworthiness of the study was addressed particularly in terms of the principles of credibility and researcher reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was ensured through the detailed treatment of participants' narratives during data collection and the development of themes grounded in the data throughout the analysis (Finlay, 2002).

Researcher reflexivity was maintained through the researcher's sustained awareness of their relationship to the data and by continuously questioning their own assumptions throughout the analysis. The capacity of themes to represent the data and their consistency with the theoretical framework were repeatedly evaluated. This process contributed to the transparency and coherence of the analysis. In the absence of a second coder,

analytical credibility was further supported by returning to the original transcripts at multiple stages of the analysis to verify that themes were adequately grounded in participants' own accounts.

4. Findings

This section examines how professional development activities are experienced by novice and experienced EFL instructors and how these experiences intersect with teacher identity. The

findings indicate that PD is perceived by instructors not merely as a site of professional learning but as a context in which norms are produced, professional identities are legitimized, and institutional expectations are internalized. The relationship that novice and experienced instructors establish with PD has been thematically organized under three main headings, based on the qualitative characteristics of the data.

Table 2
Professional Development Activities and Teacher Identity Formation

Codes	Sub-Themes	Theme
Perception of teacher identity as evolving impact of professional beliefs and teaching philosophy Social and cultural influences on teacher identity	Evolution of Teacher Identity Through PD	Professional Development Activities and Teacher Identity Formation
Role modelling through observing experienced instructors Mimicking experienced instructors' strategies Insights into classroom management and teacher-student interaction	Impact of Pre-Observation and Observation Activities	
Initial confidence building through observation Reflection on observed practices Adapting practices to personal teaching style Aligning feedback with professional beliefs	Observation Reflection and Identity Reinforcement	Role of Institutional Support and Peer Interaction
Collaboration with colleagues for shared growth Influence of experienced colleagues on novices' identity Long-term development through induction and peer observation		

4.1. PD as a Regulatory and Legitimizing Structure: Novice Instructors

For novice instructors, professional development activities are positioned as a central site for conforming to institutional structures and constructing an accepted teacher identity. The findings indicate that rather than constituting a voluntary learning environment, PD is perceived by novice instructors as a mechanism through which norms concerning 'what kind of instructor they should be' are produced, whether explicitly or implicitly.

The purpose of participating in PD activities for novice instructors is closely related not only to professional development goals but also to gaining institutional visibility, recognition, and legitimacy. It can be clearly inferred from participants' narratives that regular attendance at PD activities serves as an important means of gaining

institutional acceptance. Novice instructors' participation in PD activities can therefore be understood as serving not only pedagogical learning but also institutional conformity and social acceptance.

For novice instructors, PD becomes a site in which they construct their professional identities in accordance with institutional expectations. Since PD frames certain teaching practices and attitudes as 'correct' and 'expected', instructors who fall outside this frame are implicitly, if not directly, defined as problematic or inadequate. In this context, PD assumes a function of reproducing normative professional identities rather than fostering pedagogical learning.

These findings suggest that PD serves as a regulatory mechanism for novice instructors, shaping the professional knowledge and professional identity deemed legitimate within the institutional context. Participation in PD is

understood by novice instructors as an indispensable means of legitimizing their professional existence within the institutional framework.

4.2. *PD as a Site of Strategic Engagement: Experienced Instructors*

For experienced instructors, PD activities constitute not a compulsory context for institutional acceptance but rather a conscious, selective, and self-directed learning environment. The findings suggest that the relationship experienced instructors maintain with PD appears less as a reconstruction of their professional identities than as a management and strategic positioning of their existing identities. Experienced instructors approach their decision of whether or not to participate in PD activities through the lens of their professional priorities, institutional expectations, and personal pedagogical principles.

The selectivity of experienced instructors emerges as a form of deliberate professional

positioning rather than indifference or resistance. The reason experienced instructors maintain a distance from certain PD activities is not opposition to the institution or its expectations, but rather a strategic assessment of how and to what degree they position themselves in relation to those expectations. For experienced instructors, PD serves less as a reconstruction of identity than as a tool for reaffirming their existing identity or updating it within a limited frame.

Moreover, for experienced instructors, PD stages are processes in which they actively participate and intentionally manage their identities. Choosing to attend or not attend particular PD activities is an indicator of these instructors' identity performances. This demonstrates that professional experience equips instructors not only with technical competence but also with the capacity to manage their own identities (Flores & Day, 2006).

Table 3
Differences between Novice and Experienced Instructors in Identity Formation and Development

Group	Codes	Sub-Theme	Theme
Novice	Observed self-improvement Peer discussions Initial self-assessment challenges	Reflection Practices and Approaches	Difference between Novice and Experienced Teachers in Identity Formation
Experienced	Reflective peer discussions Self-improvement process Lifelong practice and learning		
Novice	Building confidence in teaching practices Learning new classroom strategies Networking opportunities	Perceived Value of PD Activities	
Experienced	Focus on advanced teaching techniques Workload management		
Novice	Aspirations for future identity as educators Shaping identity through institutional culture	Evolution of Professional Identity	
Experienced	Ongoing redefinition of roles Balancing personal teaching philosophy with institutional expectations		

4.3. Institutional Discourses Mediating PD and Identity

The findings indicate that explaining the influence of professional development activities on teacher identity solely through individual experiences is insufficient, and that institutional discourses serve as powerful mediators. Educational policies, quality assurance mechanisms, and accountability-oriented approaches provide examples of the primary discursive frameworks that determine the goals and content of PD. According to these discourses, PD is observed less as pedagogical support than as a marker of adaptation to institutional standardization and professional performance.

Discourses produced at the institutional level reproduce an understanding of 'expected professionalism' through PD. The findings demonstrate that PD normatively defines certain teaching practices, attitudes, and professional positions, and evaluates instructors according to these norms. It can be concluded that this exerts a powerful, albeit indirect, influence on teacher identity.

Policy, accountability, and quality assurance discourses thereby mediate how PD activities are approached and enacted by instructors, positioning PD as a significant site in which expected professional performance is produced, reinforced, and negotiated. This points to the need to treat professional development not merely as an individual learning process but as a mechanism shaped by power relations that also indirectly regulates identity (Ball, 2003, drawing on Foucault).

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that professional development should be understood not as a process of mere pedagogical competence enhancement for instructors, but as a site of identity negotiation operating within multi-layered ecological systems. Rather than being addressed exclusively through individual preferences or professional experience, teacher identity is observed to be repeatedly reshaped in interaction with institutional discourses, policy-driven expectations, and departmental-level practices. In this respect, the study offers a critical perspective on the

instrumental learning paradigm that has dominated the PD literature.

5.1 The Evolution of PD from 'Learning' to 'Identity Work'

In the existing literature, PD is predominantly defined as a mechanism oriented toward developing teachers' knowledge, skills, and competencies (Avalos, 2011; Guskey, 2002). However, this study reveals that PD also plays a significant role in shaping how instructors perceive themselves, which professional positions they consider legitimate, and which identity narratives they internalize. Particularly for novice instructors, PD functions as a site in which explicit and implicit norms concerning 'what kind of teacher one should be' are made visible.

This finding is consistent with sociocultural approaches (Norton, 2000; Wenger, 1998) — and with more recent empirical research revealing that participation in PD reshapes instructors' self-concept, their sense of professional agency, and their relational positioning within institutional hierarchies (Izadinia, 2013; Cheung et al., 2015) — that argue teacher identity is not an individually internal transformation, but a formation constructed through institutional practices. In this context, PD can be understood not only as a site where professional learning takes place but as an identity stage in which instructors legitimize themselves within institutional structures, achieve visibility, and manage the processes through which they are accepted. This conceptualization directly challenges the assumption that PD constitutes a neutral learning context and draws attention to its entanglement with power relations.

These findings are also meaningful with Kennedy's (2016) comprehensive review of PD research, which shows that PD initiatives focused only on skill acquisition tend to produce limited and short-lived changes in teaching practice, whereas approaches that engage teachers' professional identities and belief systems yield more sustained transformation. Similarly, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) claim that effective PD must be rooted in the contexts in which teachers work and

must address the relational and identity dimensions of professional life, rather than functioning as a delivery mechanism for technical knowledge. The present study covers these arguments by showing that PD not only shapes what teachers do but fundamentally mediates how they understand and position themselves as professionals within institutional structures.

5.2 Career Stage Differences and Identity Negotiation

One of the most critical contributions of this study is its demonstration that PD experiences vary meaningfully across career stages. While novice instructors experience PD as a necessary path for creating a professional identity aligned with institutional expectations, experienced instructors adopt a more critical and strategic stance. This difference indicates that PD does not offer a uniform experience but is directly related to instructors' existing identity capital (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This career-stage differentiation is consonant with Kelchtermans' (2009) framework of the professional self, which conceptualizes teacher identity as a biographical construction that takes shape through accumulating institutional encounters and reflective self-understanding.

The negotiation of professional identity is not confined to the early stages of one's professional life; it is a dynamic process that continues throughout the career. The selective perspective of experienced instructors toward PD activities does not terminate or complicate this process; rather, it demonstrates that the process takes on a more complex and strategic form.

This finding is further maintained by Flores and Day (2006), whose multi-perspective study of new teachers shows that institutional culture and contextual factors use a powerful influence on the ways in which novice teachers build and rebuild their professional identities, often creating tensions between personal beliefs and institutional expectations. The present study documents and extends this finding by showing that such tensions do not dissolve with experience but rather shift in character — from identity formation in novice instructors to identity management in experienced ones. Additionally, Beijaard et al. (2004) emphasize

that professional identity is not a fixed entity but an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation, a position that aligns closely with the career-stage differentiation observed in the present study. Tao and Gao (2018) likewise show that teacher agency and identity commitment progress across professional trajectories, with more experienced teachers unveiling greater capacity for strategic self-positioning in relation to institutional demands — a pattern clearly obvious in the findings reported here.

5.3 Institutional Discourses and Ecological Mediation

Examined through the lens of ecological systems theory, the influence of PD on teacher identity is clearly shaped not only at the individual level but also through structures at the macro and meso levels. Educational policies, quality assurance discourses, and institutional performance expectations emerge as the primary macro-level factors determining the aims and content of PD. Following from these discourses, PD is transformed from pedagogical support into an apparatus of institutional conformity and accountability (Ball, 2003; Johnson, 2009).

Departmental culture and local PD activities at the meso level reveal how macro-level discourses are reflected in everyday practices. Based on the findings, it is possible to conclude that PD is frequently constructed with institutional priorities taking precedence over personal needs, and that this directly affects instructors' perceptions of identity. This finding indicates that PD, rather than foregrounding teacher autonomy, is restructured in a normative manner to shape specific professional identities.

At the micro level, instructors engage with these discursive pressures through the lens of their career stages, individual histories, and professional values; this process directly shapes both identity construction and the forms of participation in PD activities. The interaction among these three levels reveals how teacher identity becomes the subject of negotiation across multiple layers within the context of PD.

These dynamics resonate strongly with Sachs' (2001) analysis of competing institutional discourses and their effects on teacher identity, in which she argues that teachers are positioned within contradictory frameworks that simultaneously demand conformity and professional autonomy, producing identity tensions that are rarely acknowledged in official PD discourse. Sachs (2003) further contends that the activist teaching profession requires PD structures that resist normative regulation and instead foster critical, collaborative, and inquiry-oriented professional identities — a vision that stands in sharp contrast to the accountability-driven PD practices observed in the present study. Additionally, Miller and Gkonou (2018) draw attention to the emotional dimensions of institutional positioning, demonstrating that the labor involved in managing one's professional identity within institutional hierarchies carries significant affective costs, particularly in tertiary-level language programs. The present findings suggest that this emotional dimension, while not foregrounded in participants' explicit narratives, is implicitly present in the regulatory and legitimizing functions that PD performs for both novice and experienced instructors.

5.4 Theoretical Significance of the Novice–Experienced Distinction

The novice–experienced distinction revealed by this study constitutes not merely an experience-based classification but a hypothetical transparency concerning the quality of the relationship that instructors establish with PD. While PD serves as a primary vehicle for identity formation for novice instructors, it becomes a component of identity management for experienced instructors. This distinction renders observable the career stage dimension that is frequently overlooked in the teacher identity literature (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Tsui, 2007).

In this context, the study argues that the effect of PD on instructors varies in contextual and temporal terms, thereby empirically grounding the ecological nature and structure of teacher identity. Taking these variations into account in the design of PD activities has significant practical implications both

for institutions and for individual instructor experiences.

From a broader theoretical perspective, Varghese et al. (2005) argue that language teacher identity must be understood as simultaneously social, cultural, and political — shaped by the discursive fields in which teachers operate rather than as an autonomous individual construction. The novice–experienced distinction documented in the present study provides empirical grounding for this theoretical position, illustrating how career stage functions as a mediating variable that determines the nature and intensity of teachers' engagement with institutional identity discourses. Kayi-Aydar (2019), in her review of language teacher identity research, similarly highlights the need for studies that examine how identity is negotiated across different professional contexts and career trajectories, identifying this as one of the most underexplored dimensions of the field. The present study responds directly to this call by offering an ecologically framed comparative analysis that renders visible the differential identity work performed by novice and experienced EFL instructors within the same institutional context.

6. Conclusion

This study adopts a critical stance toward the dominant understanding that treats professional development activities as a technical process designed solely to enhance pedagogical competencies and seeks to reconceptualize PD as an ecological context in which teacher identity is constructed, negotiated, and repositioned. The findings reveal that teacher identity is shaped through PD activities, and that this process varies according to career stage, institutional discourses, and the complex multi-layered interactions within ecological environments. Examined through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) ecological systems theory, these processes are shown to operate simultaneously at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

The findings suggest that teacher identity is not a fixed, individually owned attribute; rather, it is an emergent outcome of ongoing transactions across multiple systemic layers. This multi-level

perspective provides a theoretical grounding for understanding why PD affects different teachers differently, and why career stage constitutes such a significant mediating variable in the identity work that PD occasions. While experienced instructors manage their identities more strategically in the face of institutional pressures (Flores & Day, 2006; Kelchtermans, 2009), novice instructors perceive PD as an indispensable pathway to gaining institutional legitimacy (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

In light of these findings, this study repositions PD within the teacher education literature and demonstrates that it constitutes a site of identity work operating within ecological systems. The evidence that PD has shifted from a form of pedagogical support to a mechanism of accountability and institutional conformity underscores the need to treat professional development not merely as an individual learning experience, but as a structure shaped by power relations that also indirectly regulates identity (Ball, 2003; Sachs, 2001). In this respect, the study offers an original theoretical and empirical contribution that brings together teacher identity, professional development activities, and higher education contexts.

7. Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for PD policy, institutional practice, and teacher education. At the policy level, the study challenges the prevailing assumption that standardized, competency-oriented PD programs are sufficient to support teacher growth. The evidence presented here demonstrates that PD initiatives must be redesigned to account for the identity dimensions of professional development — acknowledging that what teachers are asked to do in PD contexts is inseparable from who they are and who they are expected to become. Policymakers are therefore urged to move beyond performance-driven frameworks and to invest in PD structures that actively support teacher autonomy, professional agency, and diverse professional identities (Sachs, 2003; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

At the institutional level, administrators and PD coordinators should recognize that novice and experienced teachers bring fundamentally different identity needs to professional development contexts. PD programs designed for novice instructors should prioritize mentoring, collaborative reflection, and the creation of psychologically safe environments in which emerging professional identities can be explored without normative pressure. For experienced instructors, on the other hand, PD should be structured in more participatory, horizontally relational, and autonomy-supportive forms that respect the identity capital accumulated over years of professional practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2009).

At the level of teacher education, the findings suggest that pre-service and in-service teacher development programs would benefit from explicitly foregrounding identity as a dimension of professional learning. Preparing teachers to reflect critically on the institutional discourses that shape their professional selfhood — and empowering them with the conceptual tools to navigate these discourses strategically — represents a critical yet insufficiently explored dimension of teacher education in EFL contexts (Varghese et al., 2005; Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

8. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations inherent in this study must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size — four participants drawn from a single institutional context — necessarily constrains the transferability of the findings. While this is consistent with the interpretive, depth-oriented aims of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002), the patterns identified here cannot be generalized to broader populations of EFL instructors without further empirical corroboration. Second, the study was conducted within a specific higher education context in Turkey; accordingly, the institutional dynamics, policy frameworks, and professional cultures documented here may not be representative of other national or institutional settings. Third, as data were collected at a single

point in time, the longitudinal dimensions of identity development — particularly the processes through which novice instructors transition into experienced professionals — could not be observed.

Future research should address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples across varied institutional contexts, thereby enabling comparative analyses that illuminate how PD-identity dynamics differ according to ecological conditions. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable for tracing how teachers' relationships with PD evolve across career stages and in response to shifting institutional discourses.

Additionally, mixed-methods approaches that combine the interpretive depth of qualitative inquiry with the breadth of quantitative measurement could provide a more comprehensive account of the relationship between PD participation and teacher identity development. Finally, studies examining the perspectives of institutional stakeholders — including PD coordinators, department heads, and policymakers — could yield a more complete ecological picture of how PD is designed, implemented, and experienced within complex educational systems.

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