



EFL Undergraduate Students' Professional Identity Construction: A Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract

Social relationship within a sociocultural context is considered to be one of the influencing factors involved in the process of teacher identity, which demands individuals' continual struggle and change due to the involvement of external and internal factors. This study investigated the process of professional identity construction of two EFL undergraduate students through their engagement in the educational environment and the teaching practicum context. They were at the eighth semester of the Teacher-Education Study Program at University of Papua (UNIPA), Manokwari, Papua Barat and had accomplished their teaching practicum at a high schools in Manokwari. The student-teachers built their social interactions with their peers and teacher-educators within their educational environment at the university and with their mentor-teachers, students and supervisors in their teaching practicum. Qualitative research was employed through semi-structured interview. The findings revealed that the process of students' professional identity construction is both dynamic and unstable and shaped by the three intertwined factors inamely: self-perception, educational environment, and teaching practicum. The students' self-perception changed through the process as the impact of their interactions with educational environment and teaching practicum. The significance of the contentment and impediments as the dimensions of these experiences shaped the students' professional identities.

Keywords: professional identity construction; sociocultural perspective, EFL undergraduate students.

Introduction

There are various influencing factors involved in the process of teacher identity: social relationships within a socio-cultural, historical and institutional context, emotions, traditions, beliefs, values, background of education, job, discourses and experiences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). This perspective can be regarded as the

initial step in determining a pertinent theoretical framework for delineating how individuals construct identity in their social contexts (Park, 2015). This notion is in accordance with the conceptualization of socio-cultural perspective proposed by (Vygotsky, 1979) which considers that self-consciousness emerges from the relations built in social life with others and the dimension of individual consciousness is regarded as secondary and derivative. From this interactional discourse, the identity concept highlights the significance of an individual's surrounding and his/her involvement in a community. Fajardo Castañeda, (2011) states that personal identity develops when individuals, as group members, participate and interact with others in social life. Thus, both personal and social factors may be regarded as the intertwined factors as those constructs play important roles in individual identity development which also possibly affect the sense of a teacher's professional identity (Canrinus, 2011). Based on these theoretical backgrounds the current study focused on investigating the process of professional identity construction of EFL undergraduate student-teachers through their social interactions within both their educational environment at university and their teaching practicum.

Day (2018) states that professional identity specifically refers to how teacher views him/herself as a teacher, based on his/her interpretation of his/her continued interaction with the community context. This perspective is in line with Canrinus (2011) who claims that professional identity is often interpreted in terms of the individual's view of his/her self as a teacher and his/her perception of a teacher he/she wishes to become. Furthermore, Schutz et al., (2018) assert that communication in social life and continuous personal reflection are essential to develop teacher identity since those will be used by teachers in negotiating and reflecting their roles on the social aspects. Meanwhile, Beauchamp & Thomas, (2009) elaborate that within the sociocultural process the teacher identity is shaped from a personal view which is related to: the self, agency, meaning system and emotions and, on the other hand, social view consists of social interactions, context influences, positioning, experiences and traditions. Thus, the intertwined factors lead to a process which enables teachers to constantly negotiate and reshape identity through social participation and experience. Additionally, it is difficult to separate professional identity from teacher's personal identity since teachers are required to get involved personally with students, team-mates and community (Salinas & Ayala,

2018). This interconnection is due to the teachers' investment of his/her self and values they put in their work and also the social relationship they build in community (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Lamote & Engels, 2010).

Teacher identity becomes a construct within the process of learning to teach and it has been significantly considered in teaching education (Salinas & Ayala, 2018). Moreover, the teacher identity development is regarded as an essential component both in teaching and teacher-education field (Friesen & Besley, 2013; Riyanti & Sarroub, 2016). This understanding may provide insight for the educators in teacher programs to assist pre-service teachers in their professional growth (Izadinia, 2013). Fajardo Castañeda (2011) reasons that learning to teach is an activity which is recognized as highly demanding since it asks for making-decisions related to learning goals, content, materials, and assessment as well as requires teachers to be able to connect their teaching to any other related contexts such as culture and policies. The prior experiences and knowledge from university courses will contribute to the teacher identity development (Lim, 2011; Rogers, 2011). Thus, the program is concerned to facilitate students in adopting a new professional identity by entailing more than providing teacher's performance training because it involves both personal and social dimensions (Fajardo Castañeda, 2011).

Since experiencing being student-teachers during the teaching practicum in the training period yields in teachers' adoption of new identity, teacher-education contributes to the foundations of professional identity construction (Fajardo Castañeda, 2011). Similarly, Salinas & Ayala (2018) state that the students of the teacher program experience a change at the beginning of their careers in teaching since they start to assume more positions and responsibilities as being actual teachers through the accomplishment of their teaching practicum. During the involvement, student-teachers might carry out some meaningful tasks which are beneficial for their identity development, for examples: experiencing professional jobs, working along with other teachers, and building professional connections with their communities (Fajardo Castañeda, 2011). In addition, novice teachers might encounter both internal and external struggles which will reshape their professional identity (Ke Lomi & Mbato, 2020).

Some researchers have conducted previous studies to explore the professional identity development of university students through their learning program and teaching practicum. In their study Kanno & Stuart, (2011) investigated the process of

teacher identity construction of two novice teachers by doing their teaching practicum through a situated learning lens. They employed several tools of data collection: class observations, journals of teaching, classes recording, stimulated recalls, interviews and documents. The findings showed a relationship between students developing teaching practicum and their identity construction. Meanwhile, Salinas & Ayala (2018) attempted to investigate the identity construction of two Chilean female university students from a sociocultural perspective. Using grounded theory, the study employed a qualitative case-study through semi-structured interview, focus group and personal narratives. The results revealed that personal and external factors shape the dynamic and unstable process of professional identity.

The process of teacher identity construction demands individuals' continual struggle and change due to the involvement of external and internal factors (Bloomfield, 2010; Park, 2015; Pillen et al., 2013). In Indonesian context Kuswandono (2014) undertook a study to investigate the voices and beliefs of the mentor teachers in helping the pre-service English teachers to do their professional learning. By implementing a qualitative research, the findings displayed the mentors' view of the students' need of learning and experiencing more fundamental teaching aspects. The mentors' beliefs can possibly shape the pre-service teachers' professional identity (Kuswandono, 2014). While a study conducted by Riyanti & Sarroub (2016) explored how EFL teachers in Kalimantan Island construct their identities through the interaction in their teaching practicum. The findings indicated that the development of EFL teachers' identities was influenced by the negotiation of multiple identities and the relationships they built with others (Canh, 2014; Dang, 2013). The current study attempted to explore EFL undergraduate students' identity construction within their sociocultural contexts through their social interactions in both their educational environment at university and their teaching practicum. The participants involved in this study were students from the Teacher-Education Study Program of Papua University (UNIPA), Manokwari, Papua Barat. In gathering the data, the researchers conducted semi-structured interview as one of the data gathering tools in case study. The research question formulated in this study was: how do two EFL undergraduate students construct their professional identity within their sociocultural contexts?

Research Methodology

Since this study explored students' identity construction which was considered as an immeasurable and dynamic process, a case study from qualitative research paradigm was employed (see Norton & McKinney, 2010). Conducting case study method enabled the researchers to closely look into the data within a particular context by involving a limited number participant (Ebneyamini & Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018). Case study leads to explaining the phenomenon for both its process and outcome by observing, reconstructing and analyzing the cases (Tellis, 1997). Case study focuses on a single case and it does not search to make a generalization (Thomas, 2011). The researchers chose a case study method by considering contextual conditions which were closely relevant to the focus of study (Yazan, 2015). Contextual factors which intertwined with personal factors were significant in the current study as those combined factors constituted the main features in the construction of students' identity within the sociocultural perspective.

The participants involved in this study were two students at the eighth academic semester of the from Teacher-Education Study Program, Papua University (UNIPA), Manokwari, Papua Barat. When the data were gathered, all the participants had accomplished their teaching practicum in high schools in Manokwari at the eighth academic semester. In addition, teaching practicum was the main selection criterion for this study. The students who were selected to participate in the current study came from the same batch. However, they did their teaching practicum at different schools. The researcher gave pseudonyms to the participants in order to respect their anonymity. They are Tina and Sherly.

Tina is 22-year-old Indonesian female undergraduate student who perceives herself as a shy and average student. When participating in this study she had done her teaching practicum in a public senior high school in Manokwari. While Sherly is 21-year-old Indonesian female student. She is such an enthusiastic and intelligent person who received a scholarship for her undergraduate study. She had finished her teaching practicum at one of private junior high schools in Manokwari.

Semi-structured interview was conducted in collecting the data in the current study as it is one of the tools which is usually utilized in a case study (Creswell, 2011). The researcher applied chronological events as the characteristic of the case study, in which the participants were interviewed about their experiences within the

process of accomplishing their learning in the teacher-education program and their teaching practicum. The samples of interview questions are provided in the following table.

Table 1: Samples of Interview Questions

| No | Contexts | Interview Points | Questions |
|----|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1. | Educational Environment | Learning Contentment | Did you get any contentment while you were engaged in learning activities at teacher-education program? Please share your experience. |
| | | Learning Impediments | Did you find any impediments while studying at teacher-education program? Please share your experience. |
| | | Learning Impacts on self-development | What are the impacts of your learning experiences at teacher-education program on your self- development? |
| 2. | Teaching Practicum | Contentment | Did you get any contentment while you were doing your teaching practicum? Please share your experience. |
| | | Impediments | Did you find any impediments while you were doing your teaching practicum? Please share your experience. |
| | | Impacts | What are the impacts of your teaching practicum experiences towards your self-development? |
| 3. | All learning Environment | Self-perception | Do all of your experiences build your new self-perception? How do you perceive yourself now? |

The researchers used WhatsApp as a tool to interview the participants in order to collect the data. Since WhatsApp is applied in daily basis and in numerous ways for micro-coordinating actions within social setting (Ling & Lai, 2016), it is possible for gaining and reflecting on the participants' point of view related to their engagement (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). Before responding, the information about procedures and guidelines were provided to the participants. They were allowed to give their response either in English or Indonesian. Each personal interview took for around 30 minutes.

The data gained from the interview were transcribed. In analyzing the data the researchers employed opened coding. Further, the interview transcript was segmented into a series of meaningful units to identify some related categories which related to EFL undergraduate students' identity construction. Finally, the categories were rearranged and re-examined to form relevant relationships with the conceptual framework which was adopted in the current study. There were three main inter-related categories, namely educational environment, teaching practicum and self-perception.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The repetition of the patterns has constructed the two undergraduate students' identity through the interaction within their learning process. These patterns are framed in three major categories: educational environment, teaching practicum, and self-identity. The first two categories provide two dimensions: contentment and impediments, and both have impacts on the students' self-perception.

Tina's Teacher Identity Construction

Educational environment. Regarding her experiences in her learning process within teacher-education program, Tina went through contentment, impediments and impacts. Tina found two most substantial learning experiences which were related to her relationship with her friends and her inspiring professors in her first semester of her study. Tina felt supported by her encouraging friends who were always willing to share and learn together with her. The other significant experience for Tina was coming from her professors who always widened the students' perspectives on learning English and becoming teachers.

"I feel so lucky for having my three best friends who are always there with me in my happy and difficult times. Their support and encouragement minimize my anxiety in learning as I perceive myself as an unconfident person who is usually easy to get nervous and insecure. However, being together with my friends make me cheerful and raise my courage and confident in learning. To be honest I was not good in speaking and writing skills but my professors taught us those skills by applying some interesting approaches which led me to be more encouraged in learning. My

professor advised me to build my confidence by trying to be more engaged in learning activities as it is very beneficial for my future”.

Nevertheless, she came across with some impediments throughout her learning process. The first obstacle that she found was her difficulty in managing the time to accomplish all of her learning tasks on time. The other impediment that Tina met was the inconvenience situation when working in the same group together with some friends who were dominant.

“Due to my increased tasks I often encountered some problems related with time management. It was quite hard to finish all of my assignments on time because I had to spend much time to accomplish every single task as I am not a such of fast doer. I remember a year ago my professor assigned me to do a group project in which the groups were decided by him. Accomplishing the project, I had to work with some friends whose English proficiency were totally much higher than me. Honestly, I felt inconvenient and unconfident working with such dominant.”

Tina is aware that all the experiences she got from her learning process in teacher-education program have given her some positive impacts such as her increased self-confidence, her improved communicative and productive skills and also her better understanding of pedagogical knowledge.

“Getting involved in the learning activities within academic environment has increased my self-confidence since it helps me to improve my English skills specially writing and speaking as well as to understand the educational knowledge”.

Teaching Practicum. Tina gained contentment, impediments and impacts from her teaching practicum. Regarding contentment in her teaching practicum Tina stated that she went through some worthy experiences. Those are related to her supportive headmaster, the caring and the favorable relationship with her mentor-teacher.

“I felt so lucky that I came across with such supportive headmaster who welcomed me gladly when the first time I came to the school. Even though I was just doing my practicum but the headmaster always treated me as if I was a real teacher. Beside I was helped by a mentor teacher who was always willing to provide me with some feedbacks of my teaching performance and she suggested me to implement some teaching strategies in order to help students increasing their English proficiency. Getting encouragement from both headmaster and mentor teacher led me to be more motivated.”

However, during her teaching practicum Tina also experienced some impediments related to her difficulty to deal with misbehaved students and unsupportive supervisor.

"I found many misbehave students who frequently displayed negative attitude in my teaching. When the first time I taught in class, I was so shocked to find just five students from around forty students remained in the class while the other students were still outside either playing or staying in the canteen. Frequently, those students showed undesired behavior that sometime made me feel unmotivated yet finally I tried to reflect on myself and to discover what the best teaching strategies that I should apply". I observed that they were more interested in my teaching when I was using some learning medias like games, songs and video in class activities and I was so grateful that finally I could build close relationship with my students". My other obstacle came from my supervisor who seemed really busy with her other jobs so that she never visited me at school to give some feedbacks for me. Actually, I really needed to have consultation with my supervisor but it was so difficult to make an appointment with her."

Tina got some positive impacts from her teaching practicum experiences such as, raising her self-confidence in teaching, building favorable relationship with headmaster mentor teacher and her students, applying some teaching strategies and doing self-reflection. Tina was able to develop a sense of contentment and after she applied successful teaching strategies based on students' using some media. This achievement raised her confidence in teaching which will be very essential for her future. The feedbacks and guidance from her headmaster and mentor teacher were significant for her teaching skill development.

Self-perception. Tina's interactions with professors and peers in the study program and also with students, mentor teacher and headmaster in the teaching practicum shaped her professional identity.

"At first I was not confident enough to learn and to teach yet I tried to trust myself and ensured myself that I could do even though the process was not easy".

The intertwined contextual and personal factors have changed Tina's perception of herself from being a student to becoming a teacher. Tina realized that having interactions with professors and mentor teachers led her moving from being unconfident student-teacher to being a more confident student teacher since she gained both more teaching knowledge and teaching skills. Moreover, experiencing success in implementing teaching strategies as well as establishing favorable relationship with her students during her teaching practicum also contributed in her raised self-confidence

"My confidence raised because of the guidance and encouragement from my professors who has taught me English skills and Educational knowledge and my

mentor teacher was willing to share her teaching experiences and give feedbacks of teaching performance".

Sherly's Teacher Identity Construction

Educational environment. Similar to Tina, Sherly went through contentment, impediments, and impacts during her learning in the teacher study program. Her first contentment is related to her supportive professors. The other Sherly's contentment was joining the students' English activities which provided her with her increased English skills. Experiencing to communicate with native speakers also motivated her to improve her English skills.

"When I decided to enter the teacher education program, I hadn't had a passion of becoming a teacher for my future, my biggest desire was just to enhance my English skills. However, in the journey of my learning process I began to develop my interest in teaching as I got much knowledge of pedagogy from my professors. Since I really wanted to more proficient in English, I was interested to join students' English activities where I could find some interesting activities such as discussion, English debate and games. These activities facilitated me to foster my English skills. I was so excited when I got an opportunity to communicate with native speakers who visited my university with their purpose to help us building our English skills."

However, Sherly also went through some impediments such as her difficulty to find supportive friends who were willing to practice speaking English in daily activities. The other obstacle that she encountered was working with irresponsible friends.

"Even though I was majoring at English Education Program but it was hard for me to find friends whom I could practice speaking English with because most of them thought that achieving good mark was more significant than increasing English skills. I also experienced with negative emotions when I had to work with irresponsible friends. They just depended the work accomplishment on me while it was a kind of group project and It made me feel sad and a bit emotional."

The contentment and impediments Sherly went through in the interactions within her educational environment gave some positive impacts on her self-development such as increasing her self-confidence, improving her English skills, gaining more understanding of pedagogical knowledge and developing her interest in teaching. Moreover, Sherly became more confident to communicate with native speakers as she had improved her speaking skills.

Teaching Practicum. Similar to Tina, Sherly gained contentment, impediments and impacts from her teaching practicum. Sherly's contentment was related to her supportive mentor teacher and supervisor. Her other contentment regarded to her

implementation of some strategies which engaged students to be more interested in learning English.

“Luckily, I have a supervisor who really encouraged me to do my best in my teaching practicum and regularly he visited me and gave me some feedbacks on my teaching performance. Besides, my mentor teacher always guided me to teach in some different classes. It was my excitement when I noticed that the students were happy and interested to involve in class activities even though I had to struggle hard in order to engage my students in learning.”

Impediments also became part of her teaching practicum. The first impediment was related to students' reluctance to learn English since they viewed English as a difficult subject. After having consultation with her supervisor, finally she found out that fun learning was effective to gain students' attention in learning. However, Sherly still dealt with another obstacle regarding the lack of listening facilities at school as she mentioned. School's lack of teaching facilities became another problem that Sherly had to face during her teaching practicum.

“When the first time I came to the school I noticed that many students were not interested to learn English... Some of them just kept silent in English class while the other students escaped from class.” This situation frequently occurred and made Sherly a bit frustrated as she had tried many ways to draw students' interest but she had not been successful yet. “I was so surprised to see my students seemed more enthusiastic in English class when I gave them some fun games, videos, song and learning out-side class”. “Actually, I was eager to teach my students all English skills, yet the school did not have sufficient facilities to support them specially an English laboratory where they could train their listening skills.” Finally, I decided to teach them listening by implementing the simple ways of teaching listening such as narrating stories and dictating some words or phrases.”

The impacts of these contentment and impediments are mainly related to her increased passion in teaching and her developed teaching skills. During her teaching practicum Sherly realized that her interest in teaching had grown as she met her students and had significant opportunities to implement the real teaching. She mentioned that experiencing teaching practicum enabled her to relate the theories she got from teacher education program to her real teaching. In addition, practicing real teaching has challenged her to deal with solving the obstacles related to teaching strategies as she eventually was able to implement fun learning in her classes. Besides, she was capable of creating some interesting activities in listening in spite of lack of learning facilities.

Self-perception. This category refers to how Sherly perceives herself as a pre-service teacher. Sherly reported both strengths and weaknesses related to her personal and professional characteristics. Sherly's strengths could be described as persistent, enthusiastic, responsible, creative, and committed to her students. She considers herself as a committed teacher who is willing to get involved with her students' learning process, someone who is not easy to give up with the impediments of her teaching (persistent), a teacher who always motivates her students to keep on learning with some interesting strategies (creative) and is always excited to enhance her skills through doing activities (enthusiastic). On the other hand, she admits that she still needs to learn how to deal with her emotions since sometimes she still experiences with her negative emotions.

Discussion

The Significance of Contentment in Students' Identity Construction

The findings of the research revealed that most students' contentment from their educational environment and teaching practicum have contribution to their professional identity construction. The first contentment is linked to their gained understanding of pedagogic knowledge which enables them to prepare the efficient teaching role performance (Fajardo Castañeda, 2011). This theoretical understanding may yield in their adapted strategies that could be efficiently implemented in their teaching practicum. In this case, both Tina and Sherly were able to employ fun learning using some media to gain students' interest in learning. The second contentment is related to their favorable interaction with their professors, mentor teachers, students, and learning communities. These both internal and external sources might develop students' professional identity construction (Olsen, 2008).

The Significance of Impediments in Students' Identity Construction

The results of the study also discovered some impediments which these undergraduate students experienced within their journey of learning. The first impediment is linked to unsupportive peers as Tina felt neglected when she worked with some superior friends, while Sherly could not find any counterparts whom she could practice her speaking skills with her daily basis. Encountering unresponsive and misbehaved students which led her into frustration was also a part of Tina and

Shirley's impediments in their teaching practicum. The other obstacle is related to Tina's experience of having unencouraging supervisor who never gave her any feedbacks on her teaching and seemed to have no time for consultation. Finding lack of listening facilities became Shirley's impediment when doing her practicum. In this case, students' experiences could impact them negatively but positively at the same time (Day, 2012) as both Tina and Sherly were challenged to be creative and strategic in their teaching in spite of their impediments.

The Intertwined Factors in Students' Identity Construction

The contentment and impediments reshape Tina's and Sherly's self-identity through adaptation, problem solving, and negotiation. This process is in accordance with teacher identity construction from the sociocultural perspective in the sense that it is complex in which teachers' identities must be negotiated and reshaped within their social interactions and experiences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Johnston, 2012). Aligning with Lee & Schallert (2016) contemporary conception of identity, significant changes of Tina and Sherly's personalities have been revealed during their process of self-identity re-construction: confidence, persistent, tolerance to frustration, creative and strategic. Besides, they also developed their language proficiency, pedagogic knowledge and teaching skills and strategies through their interactions within their academic environment and teaching practicum. It is in line with the notion that the process of becoming involves both professional and personal dimensions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day, 2012; Lamote & Engels, 2010; Salinas & Ayala, 2018).

Conclusion and Suggestion

The findings of the study discovered that there were three intertwined factors in the identity construction process namely: self-perception, educational environment, and teaching practicum. The two undergraduate students' self-perception changed through the process as an impact of their educational environment and teaching practicum that emanate from their interactions within contextual environment: professors and college friends in the teacher-education program, mentor teachers and students in the teaching practicum. The significance of the contentment and impediments as the dimensions of these experiences shaped the two students' professional identities. In general, this study appeals the

government attention to supply more facilities which are needed by students in learning especially in Manokwari, West Papua. In addition, this study also reveals a demand for the teacher educators to provide more guidance in the teaching activities carried out by the students since it will be meaningful to enhance students teaching skills development. Finally, the findings of the study indicated a request for teacher study programs to equip students with more strategic pedagogical knowledge and skills in order to facilitate them to be more prepared in their teaching practicum.

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