Women English Language Teachers' Professional Identity in Nepal: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

This study explores the professional identity construction process of women English language teachers in Nepal. Browsing the narratives and making sense of women English language teachers' professional identity construction in language teaching appeared to be a growing concern and burnout research issue. This study aimed to explore the impact of socio-cultural settings on women English teachers' ability to achieve personal and professional strands. The study obtained theoretical references from the Identity and Language Learning Theory of Norton (2013). This research manifested a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry that relied on ontological perspectives. It consisted of in-depth interview sessions incorporating four women English language teachers with professional expertise. The findings revealed that they attempted an active language teaching environment building amid engagement accompanied by the quality of active language teaching, investing in active language learning, developing skills and then using new techniques in teaching. However, it made a hindrance for women English language teachers due to patriarchal structures and socio-cultural settings in the context of Nepal. This study focuses on gaining access to 21st-century teaching skills to contribute to language-teaching institutions in society.

Keywords: Women English language teachers, professional identity, socio-cultural impact, English language learning and teaching

Introduction

Identity construction is a multifaceted dimension to develop a sense of self-encompassing personal and social influences. According to Gee (2001), identity refers to the concept of people, who they are, what kinds of landscape they face and how they are concerned with others. People create and establish identities as personal, professional and social extensions. These attributes constitute the identity of a person entirely. However, I explore the professional identity of women English language teachers and the construction of their multiple identities.

Teachers' identities have had the attention of researchers in the recent era, so it is indeed complex to find research on women English teachers' identities. The professional identity of women English teachers in education sets up their personal and professional experiences and perspectives with societal norms and values. For Nepalese society, the identity construction process through English language teaching and learning to women English teachers faces challenges integrating with gender disparity. This article explores the professional identity formation of women English teachers based on sociocultural hindrances and professional opportunities to perform their competency and performance professionally and effectively. Women English teachers should bear multiple identities in different situations. In this realization, Doecke et al. (2004) presented past, present, and future narratives of teachers to control their identity.

The exposure and proficiency to academic/standard English in concerned disciplines enable the sense of quality in a professional enhancement. Language proficiency develops linguistic competency and power (Norton, 2013). Thus, perceiving proficiency in the English language provides an opportunity to engage in a global world and gain a platform to challenge the traditional patriarchal schooling and be involved in a wide range of educational, linguistics, and professional discourses. Such practices can be a stepping stone to mark their professional career in teaching and learning practices. These practices may support enabling their self-image and interpret their professional role as associating with professional attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets.

Social dignities influence the women English teachers' professional identity. It can influence them to reform their traditions. They can contribute to raising future women English teachers in the landscape of 21st-century teaching and learning practices. In this term, Barkhuizen (2021) expressed that professional teachers create future teachers and language learners in educational settings. Therefore, the professional expertise of women and their transformative practices can amalgamate with learners' language improvement and professional empowerment. Moreover, they should be role models like lecturers, mentors, researchers and administrators to inspire others. Identity construction for women English teachers enhances their professional identity and agency with the sense of self and subjectivity within language discourse and profession (Mainali, 2021).

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

This article aims to research the process of professional identity construction of women English language teachers through learning and teaching English language education in Nepal. For the significant research of the issues that I have explored in the section, I formulated the following research question: How do women English language teachers perceive the educational opportunities and work environment to construct their professional identities?

Review of Literature

Identity and Women English Language Teachers

Identity based on teacher identity explored the narratives of my four research participants. Hereby, identity investigates the framework of personal, social, and professional identity. Identity refers to understanding who we are and who we are in others' understanding (Danielewicz, 2001). Norton (2000) presented how identity creates a sense of the past, present, and future. Liu (2012) asserted identity as a constant personal experience. Gee (1996) considered identity construction as a discourse through communication. In this respect, identity is an ongoing dynamic and multifaceted dimension of time and transformation.

Identity of Women English Language Teachers'

Women English language teachers' identity emerged as a new notion in language learning and teaching practices in the context of Nepal. Thus, teachers have pertained multiple identities with inclusive voices. Varghese et al. (2005) stated that their identities transfer in the emerging transformative milieu of language and discourse. It focuses on transformation amid the construction of language learning and teaching discourse. Language learning and teaching include the reconstruction and negotiation of professional identity. Professional identity appears in different ways in professional development programs. It is a dynamic process of language acquisition inside and outside the classroom.

To create professional identities, teachers should adopt active language learning and teaching approaches to meet the needs and necessities of learners. They should be aware of appropriate input and bring out expected outcomes in language learning. Based on the opinion of Lutovac (2020), identity refers to the skills of teachers with productive and progressive employment. After gaining professional skills, teachers receive satisfaction based on their personal beliefs, traits, and social norms that impact the professional journey. Teachers create their identity in the accompanied profession through ongoing conversations and communication (Tsui, 2007).

It is said that professional identities may be constructed and reconstructed based on teachers' roles, responsibilities and active performance. In this term, Qoyyimah et al. (2023) presented concerned to the qualities of a good teacher. The existing knowledge and insights of teachers determine their identity. Furthermore, professional identity is a lifelong learning process, enabling competence and active performance. Cheng (2021) and Luto Vac (2020) asserted that professional identity subscribes to past experiences and teacher education programs.

Professional Identity of Women English Language Teachers

The professional identity of English teachers marks a remarkable value in teaching English as a foreign language to the expanding circle in the education system of Nepal. Hereby, Barkhuizen (2017) presented the identity of English teachers from cognitive, social, and historical perspectives as inside teachers and outside as social agencies in the digital literacy era.

The language teacher's professional identity is expected inside the classroom and outside concerned curriculum reform and academia for language teaching, planning and even at the policy level. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) mentioned the expansion and promotion of other languages used in Nepal that could show the significance of the English language in multilingual teaching contexts. It describes the status of English teachers in Nepal. According to Liu and Hu (2020), the identity of the college teachers needs to reform the course of the curriculum.

English teachers should enhance and grow their personal and professional development strands. The professional identity of English language teachers creates a platform for reforming the curriculum. Socio-cultural factors affect this identity construction process. Besides this, Babanoglu and Yardimci (2017) stated that gender affects the professional development process of teachers.

Gender identity indicates feminine identity. It indicates the degree to which an individual perceives self-status to appear as masculine or feminine based on a given culture (Wood & Eagle, 2009, as cited in Mainali, 2021). So, examples defined the complexities and challenges to constructing a professional identity for women English language teachers related to traditional cultural practices.

Research Methodology

I used the interpretive paradigm for this study. In this sense, Cresswell (2014) stated that it supports the qualitative comprehending of multiple realities and narratives. So, I interpret the narratives of four participants with their English language learning and teaching practices. Similarly, I examine the socio-cultural impacts on women English language teachers' professional identity-building process. This study incorporated qualitative study methods with narrative inquiry to explore the professional identity of

women English language teachers. Narrative inquiry is applied to delve into the complex situation of participants to manifest their identity through experiences and reflections (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The study included four women English language teachers from Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. Narratives were collected by applying in-depth interviews with audio recordings to explore their lived experiences encompassing their personal and professional development strands. The study ensured quality standards following ethical considerations.

Results and Discussion

Gender Identity in Language Learning

Gender identity anticipates empowering women English teachers equally and collaboratively with men in social practices. Identity refers to creative and continuous progressive classroom activities. This section explores the lived experiences of four women English teachers to account for how cultural settings oppose their choices and decision-making process. Block (2007) stated that identities integrate past and present experiences with future trajectories for English teachers. It ignites the speed of investing, inventing and building professional identity. Identity construction of women English language teachers can perform a better role in society by eradicating ill practices and breaking the existing traditions.

Hereby, the research explores the historical accounts of creating professional growth of university-level English facilitators and mentors embedded in the Nepalese context. It reveals the story of research participants' education as second language learners manifesting their multifaceted identities in a male-governed society. Cultural framing and structured patriarchal practices impact the entire growth and rights of women English language teachers.

The narratives of research participants based on the influence from school to college and university level education emphasized learning English as a foreign language with different perceptions to determine the belief and subjectivity of the community. In this context, the most underprivileged first research participant shared her narratives that her father denied sending her to school and did not listen to her mother, and her uncle supported sending her to school to study.

Here, her lived stories became evident to draw the picture of a traditional male-governed society and explore the history of gender discrimination. Her narratives make us think seriously and carry out research about gender issues. However, her experience with the ideas of Fariba (2011), who said that regular attendance of girls in educational institutions enhances self-esteem, confidence and positive outcomes to lead a professional life.

P1, a very enthusiastic participant, performed better in her studies. Initiating to learn English language education in grade four, she developed competency in English language

learning. She claimed that she was good at study. She had to work even in the kitchen and do household chores. The paradigm of the society looked to provide education to girls and enhance their multi-dimensional skills and abilities together facilitated by male members of any localities (Mainali, 2021). Here, it is significant to share Fariba (2011) regarding efforts from male support to develop their leadership skills and professional abilities. In this respect, collaboration between both men and women is essential.

Another bold and energetic participant in this research shared her narratives proudly on her accomplishment of diverse identities from home, community, and school to university-level studies. Based on her shared stories, she deserved a prolific space to study and enjoy like her brother at study, home and society at the time of restricting education to daughters. However, her father sent her to a private boarding school to receive an English medium education for her strong learning foundation. Her experiences built the belief that impacted the condition of their education. In this regard, it is relevant to assign (Kiluva-Ndunda, 2001; Vavrus, 2002) that in the economic crisis, boys have a choice and get access to education at school. Indeed, this tradition is matched and practiced in the context of Nepal. Describing her narrative of very few daughters who used to go to school, I have linked Kola (2014) to the fact that hardship and fewer capacities may impact boys and girls in conventional society. For this reason, girls get additional disadvantages compared to boys in such conditions. It manifests the socio-cultural background that gives birth to the socio-economic condition of society.

In the case of P3, she did not know when and how she started her education because she was small and lived at her maternal house. She said that she was restless in her childhood. She did not get access to study at home due to the deeper poverty of her parents. They were underprivileged by society. She received her childhood education in her maternal home. She said, "My *sisters left their studies due to poor resources to pay their education fees at school''.* Her narratives made clear that her sisters and parents worked without wages. Upon her return home from her maternal house, she stopped rich people by asking for the salaries of her sisters' labour and challenged them to earn from dancing and taking tuition classes for junior class students at her school. This research reveals to Kola (2014) that child labour has been breaking due to poverty and hardship of economic conditions. In this respect, her English teacher ignored her due to her later submission of tuition fees. She enhanced her language skills and was good at studies, so she took tuition classes for juniors and continued investing in her language-learning career. In this relation, Gardner (1985) asserted that self–confidence energizes one to learn a second language and perform through positive experiences. She never tried to keep her ear at society but rocked on her revolutionary path by learning and teaching English–language education.

The narratives of P4 interpreted the problems of her parents by providing education to their daughters and not having sons. Society did not accept them easily and criticized them for sending their daughters to school. She shared, "My villagers used to tell my father; he must send us to the house of in-laws, so we see what he will do by educating daughters". Her father brought her to Kathmandu for her quality education with her sisters. At the same time, they asked why he needed economics, not having sons, only having daughters. It shows the status and values of daughters in society. Why does he need property? It showed her social status, educational territory, and professional career. Society believed that only sons needed an education to grab professional opportunities. Here, I would see the relevance of connecting with the character of Norton (2013), where Eva never got a chance to make her rights respectable and acceptable.

Identity Formation of Women in English Language Teaching

In this article, the narratives of four women English language teachers explored their beginning teaching academic careers. After analyzing their real-life experiences, the insights and knowledge presented that they endeavored with their entire potential and linguistic intelligence to change classroom practices. They have paid their effort to perform academic excellence that shaped their professional language teaching journey, and they delved into identities in the landscaping sphere of teaching. For this, they were devoted to this process with enthusiasm and passion for the continuous language acquisition process. They also have used new techniques and updated teaching materials and assessment systems. They adopted digital literacy in their teaching and learning practices. During this term, teachers enhance their abilities by respecting and paying attention to children as well as adults (Day, 2010). In this sense, the stories of participants craft the same model.

P1, having a successful celebrity career, commenced her teaching journey by accomplishing a bachelor-level degree and contributed to this service by being the first lady teacher in her district. She empowered herself and evolved as a teacher educator. Later, she shifted from there to nuance her academic degree and then perceived a PhD in education. She implements AI in teaching-learning activities. She explored her professional identity by implementing a new pedagogical approach to teaching. Based on her narratives, she focuses on learning and growing together with write-up practices at seminars. She received more than 30 years of teaching academic identity.

Her stories show her as a motivational teacher who gets updates and then focuses on autonomous learning for her students. She initiated new research methods in teaching and learning. I implement active language learning and teaching techniques instead of the traditional methods of teaching and learning language (Bolyard, 2016). P1 has followed the same path-breaking challenges that made her seek a progressive and professional teaching career.

Similarly, P2 emerged in the teaching journey after accomplishing the SLC result. She explored new pedagogy skills at the beginning of teaching. She studied the curriculum, collected teaching-learning materials and taught effectively. She delved into an adventurous teaching career where she got recognition as a user of transformative pedagogy and created high proficiency among her colleagues. She challenged her expertise with her male staff and performed better. Hence, based on her narratives, she stood in the place of decision-making where she struggled with the help of her academic career and voice. Mainali (2021) stated that women English teachers should struggle for transformative professional identity.

P3 had begun her teaching journey from her school life due to her willingness to study. She was an inspiring and popular teacher of better communication and presentation skills. From the observation of her classes, I came to know that her non-verbal communication sounds powerful. She has been contributing to teaching the English language for twenty years to perceive personal, professional, and social identities. She selected her life partner herself and raised the economic condition. The language learning and teaching profession can break patriarchal practices and establish a personal, social, and professional identity (Mainali, 2021). Thus, economic status determines identity and linguistic discourse. Likewise, professional identity opens new avenues to strengthen subjectivity.

P4 initiated teaching at boarding schools after accomplishing her secondary level education. She was attracted to a government job and left teaching for two years. However, she returned to teaching due to her language proficiency and began to teach at university as a young English teacher. In this respect, Starr and Zurbriggen (2017) narrated that women accomplish a sense of coherent self-influencing from gender roles and professional status.

Professional Identity of Women English Language Teachers'

This study accounts for the historical, socio-cultural impacts and professional journey of English language teaching identity and analyses the impact of language teaching for transformation. In this sense, past and present language teaching careers highlight and decorate the future designation of professional identity through language teaching. In addition, this research shows an overview of the map of constructing professional identity through the experiences of the research participants of this study. Recently, the issue of language and exploring their identity emerged as a burnout issue for research in social science.

This study narrated the research insights of women English teachers' perceptions that helped them to charge effectively in their professional accountability (Mainali, 2021). According to Beijaard et al. (2000), teachers' professional identity is to their

psychological experiences. In this regard, a teacher's professional identity is considered a rational process in a teacher's professional development (Varghese et al., 2005).

The participant of this research study, named P1, claimed that she was born to teach. She seemed delighted from her heart to share her love of teaching as an aesthetic of her profession. She said that she loves the teaching profession. It is her passion, interest, and intelligence. She feels comfortable and enjoys using new techniques, materials, and digital tools. Her successful teaching career coloured her stimulating teaching career by exploring her professional identity. She believes that continuous professional development gives space to contribute to concerned disciplines. The support of professional identity influences teaching and learning practices (Toohey, 2000). She anticipated a privileged professional identity initiating her educational journey from the remote geography of Nepal as underprivileged characteristics of cultural practices. In this respect, Mansouri (2021) asserted that past and present experiences construct teachers' identities.

P2 performed a better and stronger role from the beginning of her teaching career in language teaching and learning. Her narratives mention that she appeared to be the best teacher, teaching the English language effectively with active language teaching practices. She teaches at the best colleges in Lalitpur and Kathmandu. She is also a university teacher. She teaches from early morning to evening. For this reason, she had to separate time for research and publication like P1. However, she gave priority to enhancing the quality of her learners. Beauvoir (1949) depicted that she applied her professional outcomes to get her different status and create her world.

Indeed, like P2, P4 has constructed a unique professional academic career. She does not believe in teaching but believes in learning, facilitating, and publication. She said, ''I accomplished my MPhil level education and then searched colleges and initiated to teach in my endeavours.''. She was familiar with employing digital literacy in her teaching-learning practices. Recently, she has used AI to develop more exposure and enable linguistics proficiency in English language teaching.

Her narratives surprised me as a landscape of paradigm shift concerned with her teaching-learning practices and professional identity made me think thrice about how she posited herself in such a position. She expressed that she was *a* favorite teacher of her students. She believes in learning outcomes. There are well-wishers and jealous people in my circle. I am an example in my society for giving examples to daughters. She reflected positive experiences in the spirit of her teaching profession as an English teacher at university and constructed a social status as an English language instructor. In this term, Lamb (2013) asserted that teachers pertain to the quality of sense.

P3 also has a similar bold position to attract students using non-verbal communication effectively. Upon investigation, she loves to use slang words with her students. Her main attribute refers to the skills of being familiar with students through rapport building. She has the quality of working collaboratively in a team. Similarly, her educational destination itself is an inspiring narrative to her students. Her experiences integrate with the features of soft skills. She empowered herself with professional identities in foreign language teaching. Deeper-rooted social powers influenced her to stop her status and position (Leavy, 2008).

Implications

The professional language learning and teaching identity brings a remarkable transformation in gender empowerment and strengthens them in the educational territory. Their narratives create a rainbow to fill the gap between national policy and practical practices concerned with avoiding the discriminative traditions based on patriarchal governing. It constitutes equal practices in the professional journey of academic profession between male and female education. It ignites the professional career of girls and women to invest in education and language learning by awakening stakeholders from slumbered positions.

Moreover, it builds and establishes a positive environment for language learning by providing access to personal and professional development strands of women English teachers by erasing traditional practices. This study can be applied to raise and sustain the voice of women English teachers who value their expertise, challenge obsolete practices, seek opportunities and contribute to creating future teachers.

Conclusion

The professional identity of women English teachers incorporates a multifaceted upbringing in the professional journey of transformation impacted by traditional practices in Nepal. The shared narratives of this research participants presented a fuel rocket to progress their academic careers and the language teaching profession to assert their agency and subjectivity. They could break embedded societal norms and construct a way of professional aspirations. They can highlight the importance of education and the attention of educators, researchers, and policymakers.

This study sheds light on the complexities of growing women professionally to explore and set the professional identity construction. Through the lens of identity construction, the study supports to contribute with an understanding of challenges and opportunities to form their identity by exploring the new dimension of women English teachers in Nepal. For this instance, family, society and government stakeholders invest and create a positive environment in the landscapes of the 21st century to accomplish gender justice and gender empowerment in Nepal.

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