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Digital Literacy: Identity Construction to Transformation

Ramita Deuja

Lecturer, Tejganga Multiple Campus, Kavrepalanchok, Nepal

Rdeuja42@gmail.com

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Abstract

Teaching and learning situation faced a notable shift after the Pandemic in Nepal as teaching and learning was completely book based, the changed scenario not only altered teaching context, it reformed teachers' identity. This study explores stories of two English language teachers who changed their practiced integrating digital literacy skill and transformed their identity. This study employed narrative inquiry as a method and interview guideline is the prime tool to collect information. Information generated is analyzed using Wenger (1998) theory of identity formation. The study finding revealed that teachers' day to day engagement can reforms their identity. Teachers' digital integration in the teaching and learning process valued teachers' engagement. They are identified as a successful digital friendly teacher, innovative teacher in the professional space. This study finding contributes all the teachers who are willing to integrate digital tools, materials and platforms to shift teaching addressing the demand of 21st century learner.

Keywords: *Digital literacy, teachers' identity, professional transformation, identity formation.*

Introduction

In the 21st century, digital engagement and technological literacy have become integral to the evolving landscape of education, fundamentally reshaping pedagogical practices and redefining teachers' identity. The integration of digital tools in teaching and learning has transitioned from supplementary use to a central component of instructional design, fostering more interactive, student-centered, and inclusive learning environments. Digital literacy has emerged as a significant challenge for educators who have traditionally relied on the "talk and chalk" pedagogical approach, highlighting the need for professional development and pedagogical adaptation in the context of increasingly technology-mediated learning environments. The term digital literacy was first introduced by Gilster (1997). Digital literacy for him is the ability to understand and use digital resources for practical use via devices. Likewise, Bawden (2008) defines digital literacy as an Individual's knowledge, skill, and ability to incorporate digital tools and software in professional and social life. Similarly, Buckingham (2015) defines digital literacy as the ability to use various mediums to present a variety of information to users. Following these scholars, 21st-century education has to be well-thought-out in connecting and assimilating digital literacy for teacher professional development. Ferrari et al. (2012), see digital literacy from a broader perspective. According to him, Digital Literacy (DL) includes searching, storing, creating, and sharing information creatively, critically, and efficiently. Ferrari's definition does not limit digital literacy as an ability to use tools in the professional space. Adopting the aforementioned ideas and following Ferrari's definition, digital literacy for this study stands for the ability to handle digital devices, such as mobile, audio devices, laptops, projectors, and smartboards for searching information, storing, creating, and sharing creatively and effectively in the professional space.

This study is inspired by my personal experience and transformation in professional space after the pandemic. I found myself transformed due to digital engagement which was introduced by the compelling situation. Continuous digital engagement and integration even after when the classes shifted to physical mode changed the way I worked. I perceived myself as a new professional in term of my act in my profession. Hence, I decided to explore the stories of the teachers who integrated their digital learning in the new normal.

This narrative study is the collection of life stories of two secondary level English language teachers who transformed their teaching practice integrating digital skills which they practiced in the

pandemic and continued. This study explores how teachers' digital literacy skills transform their teaching practice and their identity in the professional space.

Identity overview

Identity is an important aspect of human life. It starts from our birth and remains one of the crucial aspects throughout our lives. Identity, in general, answers who the person is. However, we cannot confine the definition, as it sees the identity from different perspectives, such as who the person is as per his/her role or responsibility, character, behavior, practice, and, so on. Norton (2013) states that the identity discourse began in social science during the 1990s. Norton defined identity as "The way a person understands his or her relationships to the world, how the relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013, p.4). Similarly, Gee (2000) emphasizes an identity is 'being recognized as a certain, "kind of person" (p.99), in a given context. Gee's focus on identity is a construct formed in a professional context. Identity for him is contextual. Meanwhile, De Costa and Norton (2017) argue that language teaching is an "identity work" (p.11). They further discussed that language teaching improves through pre-service and in-service training. Identity defined by the scholar reveals identity is largely contextual rather than individual.

Identity issues are believed to get pertinent space in academia as Barkhuizen (2020) claims that people are paying much attention to identity issues as it is a popular topic in conferences, presentations, research, and dissertations. I believe identity is contextually created, so I operationalized the term, "Identity" adopting Wenger's (1998) social theory of identity construction. Wenger defines identity as neither the way an individual thinks about themselves nor what another thinks and says about them. Identity is lived and a day-to-day process.

Teachers' professional identity

Teachers' professional identity is fundamentally shaped by their pedagogical practices, as teaching constitutes their core professional role, and is continuously constructed through their daily engagement in professional contexts. However, existing literature indicates that multiple factors influence this identity formation. Notably, a recent study by Neupane (2023) in the Nepalese context highlights those institutional policies and strategic directives, particularly within university settings, have a significant impact on the professional identity of English language teachers, often exerting adverse effects on their identity construction. Similarly, Baral and Phyak (2021) explored the stories of six junior university teachers (lecturers). The study result was quite surprising that the majority of

the teachers in the university are recruited using ‘the political bhagbanda system’ [The political bhagbanda means selecting teachers based on their power relation in the political party] rather than their academic degrees and achievements. Another study conducted by Subedi (2023) brought similar findings regarding teacher’s identity construction; as per his study, identity is impacted by hierarchy, power relation and social context. Identity related review study conducted by Deuja (2024) conforms teachers’ identity is a process not a product which starts from pre-service stage to career long process.

After reviewing the literature available, I realized teachers’ identity not still and stable it keeps on changing. It demands continuous exploration. Identity created once does not remain longer. It is in the process of construction and reconstruction. The present study is concerned with teachers’ transformative practice, digital awareness, engagement with tools, and the identity change through their enactment in the professional space.

Theoretical framework

This study interprets participants stories using Wenger’s (1998) social theory of identity, which conceptualizes identity as a dynamic, socially constructed process developed within communities of practice such as workplaces, professional networks, and educational settings. A community of practice, according to Wenger (1998), consists of individuals who mutually engage in shared learning through giving and receiving support. For the purpose of this study, such communities include colleagues, students, and professional groups. Wenger (1998) emphasizes that identity is not formed in isolation but is lived and continuously shaped through daily social interactions. He defines identity not as self-perception or others’ views, but as “lived and day to day” (p. 145), involving one’s ability to influence the meanings that define communities and forms of belonging.

Identity formation, according to Wenger (1998), is a dual process of identification and reification. Identification refers to an individual’s investment in building association and differentiation, while reification involves giving concrete form to abstract concepts such as using symbolic imagery to represent justice (Wenger, 1998, pp. 58–62, 287). Three modes of belonging engagement, imagination, and alignment serve as key sources of identification. Engagement is defined as participation in practice that shapes who we are, involving ongoing negotiation of meaning, the formation of trajectories, and the unfolding of practice histories. As Wenger (1998) notes, “Engagement transforms communities, practices, persons, and artifacts through each other” (p. 175), making it a vital dimension for identity negotiation.

Imagination, as Wenger (1998) states, involves “creating images of the world and seeing connections through time and space by extrapolating from our own experiences” (p. 173). It allows individuals to envision alternative identities and possibilities, shaping how meaning is negotiated through experience. Alignment refers to “coordinating our energy and activities in order to fit within broader structures and contribute to broader enterprise” (Wenger, 1998, p. 174). This mode links personal actions to institutional or systemic goals, highlighting the role of power in meaning-making. Wenger (1998) argues that meaning is not pre-existing but constructed through practice, and access to meaning-making is unequal, shaped by what he calls “economies of meaning” (p. 197). Practice, in this context, refers to human engagement in social and historical pursuits that sustain both survival and purpose.

Digital literacy supports teachers’ identity construction by enabling active engagement in online professional communities, fostering imagination through digital self-representation (e.g., blogs, social media), and facilitating alignment with broader educational discourses. These digital practices reflect Wenger’s (1998) three modes of belonging, positioning digital literacy as a critical resource for teachers to negotiate identity in contemporary, technology-mediated professional environments.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative narrative approach to explore how digital literacy influences the professional identity construction of English language teachers in Nepal. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with two mid-career English teachers. Two teachers are purposively selected. In addition to semi-structured interviews, informal conversations during professional interactions were documented as supplementary data to capture nuanced perspectives on teachers’ life experiences.

The analysis and interpretation of the information was guided by Wenger’s (1998) theory of identity as a social and relational construct shaped through participation in communities of practice. Emerging themes were further contextualized and substantiated through engagement with existing literature on teacher identity and digital literacy, ensuring a robust and well-grounded interpretation of the narratives.

Findings and discussion

Opening discourse in teaching English in the 21st century is not limited to teaching textbooks using lecture methods. We cannot overlook the learners who live in two different communities; live

community and virtual community. Learners today enjoy innovative techno-based activities as they are born in the digital era. We have been experiencing our kids wrapped up with devices. Learners in general observation are found enjoying digitally integrated language classrooms. Casual talk with my students and my personal experience as a teacher made me realize that learners are super fond of the digital world to the bookish world. Teachers teaching these digital natives demand to be techno-friendly to integrate technology in the teaching and learning process adding digitized activities which motivates learner. Teachers practiced in this study reveals teachers are proactively working to engage learners in the learning process integrating new form of literacy.

Digital integration and significance in the 21st century

The evolutionary development of science and technology has extended impacted to every aspect of human life. The educational sector is not an exception. According to Byfield et al. (2016), in the changing scenario, educators must create a learning environment that ensures learners' digital enactment and prepares the learners to contribute to global learning communication. Byfield et.al, further add the identity of the 21st-century educator is connected with technology. The researchers truly stated that the reality of today's learners is not limited to a small town and a country, they have to compete with global citizens and digital integration seems to be pertinent. The education sector these days is prioritizing and integrating technology for teaching and learning purposes to enhance learners' performance and make them competent to compete with the global citizens. The curriculum of Nepal rightly addresses, the gravity and essence of utilizing digital resources in the educational space.

The government of Nepal listed 8 competencies to be a teacher in Nepal. Among them, digital competency is the one mentioned in the list. Moreover, the Secondary Education Curriculum (2021) clearly states learning through information communication and technology is one of the principles of language facilitation. Furthermore, the curriculum also encourages both learners and educators to make use of digital tools to have access to huge resources available online.

Regarding the issue of the essence of digital literacy teachers' and participants of this research shared almost similar statements;

Digital integration is crucial in language learning. Digital integration in English language classes has more possibilities. Teachers can use vast resources available online to make the classroom lively. This week I taught a topic about strange cultures around the world. I collected short videos of all the cultures and presented them in the classroom. I didn't speak

more. I assigned some tasks to do based on the video. My oral assessment by the end of the class made me realize that my students learned language and culture through this audio-video material presentation.

Ms. Bina's video presentation enabled the learners to learn both culture and language in a fun way. Her video presentation helped the learner to be familiar with the world's culture. Additionally, integrating audio-video materials in the language classroom reduced the teachers' talking time and provided authentic teaching materials. She further adds, "Students nowadays are digitally smart. They seek expertise from us". As she stated students born in this digital age are very smart. Her narration sheds light on the pertinence of digital literacy for the teachers who have to cope with the challenges of 21st-century learning. Learners are digital users right from childhood. Therefore, teachers who teach the smart generation need to be smarter than them.

Hari states, "I often navigate and prepare materials during vacations and weekends. I have been teaching English from grades 9-10. So, teaching content and exam pattern is almost the same. In this regard, material prepared for grade 9 can be useful for grade 12, if I designed slightly different activities." English Language teaching has more possibilities of digital integration than in other subject intern of content similarity and availability of materials in the digital platforms. Moreover, using the same materials multiple times saves teachers time and effort which helps teachers to manage time for teachers' personal life. Hari further states digital platforms are a vast source of knowledge where teachers like us have to dive and explore innovative ideas to integrate in the language pedagogy to improve learners' achievement and nurture teachers professionally. Those teachers who realize the essence of digital integration can survive in the profession with satisfaction and dignity. Teachers' identity according to Wenger (1998) is the product of their imagination, engagement, and alignment. Therefore, to craft a dignified identity, teachers' participants seem imagine themselves as a crucial part of the digital world and change their practice aligning it with the digital world.

In the existing scenario, learners possess outstanding knowledge in digital space. Guiding the learner to learn through the use of their expertise, can be the best solution. Moreover, encouraging learners to learn using digital expertise provides a strong message to those parents who often complain that their children are wrapped with the gadgets. Thus, the crucial point here is: are the teachers' literate enough to instruct techno friendly generation? In this setting, if the teachers do not develop digital competency they will be named as an outdated teacher. Teachers' survival becomes a big question. The study rightly stated that digital literacy is "A survival skill in the digital era"

(Eshet-Alkalai, 2010, p. 102). Bina recounts the similar experiences:

I tried to learn whenever I encountered a problem, I first visited Google, and YouTube to solve the problem, and sometimes my kids helped me to sort out the problems. When I was in the class even my students helped. I never mind learning new ideas from students. I believe learning is everywhere. I do convince the fact to the students so that they would not misinterpret it.

She engaged herself in the learning process, she used media to learn. She made her learning process easy not hesitating to ask with her students while in the class. The way she valued her students respects learners pre-existing knowledge, this I believe is the greatest asset teacher can to for the survival in the profession. She made her teaching and learning participative and created a different image among the learners. A study conducted in an Indonesian setting documented that teachers' and learners' digital literacy enhances collaborative learning; learner-to-learner to learner and learner-students (Mudra, 2020).

Teachers' stories and experiences reveal that their digital literacy enhanced their ability to integrate digital space during the teaching and learning. These teachers uniquely contributed to their community as stated by Wenger (1998), and shaped meaning in their professional space. Therefore, the study measured all the activities relating to the two components of identity formation and negotiation of meaning.

Professional transformation

Few years when I was at school my teacher used to enter the class with pieces of chalk, and duster, made up of pieces of waste clothes, and ordered the students to open page no... of the book. "I used to ask the students to read the lines after me. I Used to explain the lessons and to write answers on the chalkboard." Bina memorized her as a teacher few years ago. She added teaching after COVID [...] a teacher enters the classroom with a marker, opens a smartboard/smart TV already managed in the class and opens a pdf version of the book, commands the audio reader to read, students look at the screen, and listens. Students were asked to read the text and guess the meaning. Teachers by the end of the classroom assign their students to record their reading in vocaroo.com (Vocaroo.com is a recording tool) and upload it in the messenger group.

Bina's lived experience is a paradigm shift in teaching field. She transformed her pedagogy where she engaged the learner with digital tools in the classroom and shared assignment in digital platform. Her assignment also encouraged learners to get engaged in digital tools and work in a

digital environment. Bina states:

Students born in this digital era love to engage in digital platforms. Honestly, if I asked my students to read the lesson, they would surely not read. The task that I have assigned is to read and record their voice. Everyone in the class does the task. In the next class we play their audio and praise. The activities I planned for making my learner read. I feel is working for me in my context. I feel satisfied, when I hear the shy students reading the text.

Students born after 2000 are conferred digital natives (Prensky, 2001). They are fond of working on the digital platform. Bina let the learner use their cell phone to read and record, which ultimately engaged learner in the learning process. Moreover, recording activities are outstanding in the sense, that even the shy students can learn from the recorded voice shared in the group. All her pedagogical engagement and imagination that to creatively integrate digital tools is identity formation process.

Hari also realized that he was transformed as a teaching professional. A few years back his engagement was quite traditional, a teacher with chalk and duster. He is thankful to the pandemic outbreak on behalf of all the teachers who transformed teaching pedagogy by implementing digital literacy skills. Although he was digitally informed before the pandemic, the institution lacked digital resources. There was no projector. There was a desktop computer to perform administrative work. The unprecedented scenario compelled local and federal governments to manage resources in the school. Now, schools are resourceful enough to digitalize teaching practices.

As a teacher these days, I feel entirely changed. I have been doing my best to initiate my class with something that arouses my student's interest. Short video clips, TED Talks, vocabulary guessing games, audio reading, poem recitation, and videos related to current issues. I prepare my lesson on my laptop. Preparing the lesson if I find any suitable materials, I instantly share it in students' group with clear instructions. I feel good, with the belief, I am always connected with my students.

His narration reveals that he has been employing resources available in the digital environment. He believes online resource like 'TED Talk' not only provides English language exposure to the language learner it also develops critical thinking skills for the learners and motivates them as the TED are often inspiring and success stories. The teachers in the story not totally but gradually shifting their teaching practices introducing innovative ideas. Deuja (2024) in her identity study states when teachers try to transform themselves, they need to unlearn their existing practice

and relearn new knowledge. In this study participants' gradual shift is the evidence that they unlearn and relearn new practices.

Digital integration and challenges

Apart from the opportunities to construct identities through digital literacy, the challenges teachers face to integrate digital tools and resources were the pertinent issue in this study. Those teachers who limited themselves to the chalk and duster were compelled to teach on the online platform. I experienced how the whip of virtual teaching created mental trauma among the teachers who were limited to textbook teaching. My research participants although faced the adverse situations, appear to be successful in carving new identities in the profession. Some are passionate teachers whereas others are digitally literate earlier. Some remained in the profession due to passion whereas others survived due to their prior knowledge. They might face a number of hardships, however, sustained their identity as a teacher facing adverse situations, they might have faced challenges in course of learning and integration of ICT skills in language learning in the time being. Therefore, this study I believe, cannot be comprehensive until we present the genuine challenges presented by the participants.

Hari questions what we call digitization, PowerPoint slides and YouTube videos he believes do not digitalize the class. According to Hari, Integrating ICT in the language class should ensure learners' contribution and participation in the language learning process. He further added if we present any materials, it must follow an assessment plan which is an integral aspect of the teaching and learning process. He shared his disappointment:

Although I have been presenting digitally prepared materials, online resources, and other self-prepared materials my, teaching method is still teacher-centered. I am not able to design interactive materials and activities. Just presenting materials available without any concrete cannot be claimed as a digitalized classroom.

His insight and critical observation is the truth of all the discourse that has been taking place at present relating digital integration both in policy level and implementation level. This area would be a possible area to research in the future. Hari strongly claimed, "My digital knowledge and limited use of tools and resources are not helping the learner to be creative." His awareness of students' creativity is a great challenge that teachers have been facing in digitally integrated and non-integrated classes. Digital integration in the language learning process is believed to foster the

learning process not limiting learners' creativity.

Another participant Bina also presents similar view concerning the student's disengagement in the classroom participation.

Mostly, I have been using the resources to show a few YouTube videos and self-created materials. However, the learner's active participation in the language learning process is less or nil. Moreover, students reading in our school belong to poor economic backgrounds so a majority of the students don't have internet access and devices for extended learning activities. Therefore, digitalization is limited to bringing variety to the language classroom. Digitalization in the language learning process cannot be extended to an autonomous learning process due to the learner's economic background.

Bina is digitally smart, she can digitize her classes, however, she is worried about the digital divide and its long-term impact on the part of learner presenting the reality of our society. Participants ideas here arouse bitter reality of our diverse classroom which demands strong study and policy from the concerned authority.

Conclusion

This study conducted to explore English language teachers' digital literacy skill, implementation for the teaching and learning process and impact in teachers personal and professional aspect is discussed on five different themes all the themes present how teachers engaged in the digital space and integrated technology into language learning process.

The study finding and discussion reveals that digital integration in the 21st century is a crucial agenda and it has to be taken seriously in educational policy. Moreover, teaching profession no doubt is a noble profession which demands continuous change as per student's interest and demand.

Teachers' digital engagement in this study not only transformed classroom activities, teachers' engagement changed teachers' identity as they play different role in their workplace. Bina and Hari both teachers integrated digital devices and materials in their classroom, their practice shifted years long book-based teaching and learning process. Moreover, Hari's blog writing and presenting the blog as teaching content is one of the notable examples for the teaching professional, to learn innovative ideas. Teachers are the change agent; Hari is a change agent who introduced a shift in teaching. He not only created new identity among students he craved a brand-new identity among the teachers being an innovative facilitator. Hari's critical question to our concept regarding digital integration is one of the burning issues in teaching as we are advocating the essence of digitizing

classroom being unaware of the bitter truth that he presented as challenge of the entire concept. Interestingly, both of the teachers engaged to align their knowledge and pedagogy to fit in the teaching context where the learners are digitally sound and loved to learn through digital integration. Throughout the process teachers formed and reformed their identity. They are identified as facilitator, innovative teacher, digital friendly teacher, blogger and successful teacher in short period of their professional journey. Teachers' imaginations align with their practice. The thought-provoking finding is that teachers digital practice opened doors of new opportunities, transformed teachers practice, classroom teaching practice. This study I feel is successful to explore how teachers' digital literacy skill impacts a person and institution. The researchers who are willing to study on this area can study how teachers can integrate digital literacy in an innovative way ensuring all the students meaningful participation.

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