

Reflection, Resistance, and Reconstruction: Professional Identity Development Among Basic-Level Nepali Female English Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The professional identity of English language teachers is crucial to their instructional effectiveness, self-perception, and students' target language learning. This study explores the perceptions of basic-level English language female teachers on their identity construction in Nepal. Under a qualitative approach that employed a narrative inquiry design, five female teachers from Birendranagar Municipality participated in the study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participants' reflective journals. It showed that teachers' identity construction was influenced by socio-cultural norms and institutional contexts. Female English teachers actively shaped their professional identities through reflection, resistance, and reconstructive engagements. Findings suggest the need for supportive institutional environments and gender-sensitive policies to enhance English language female teachers' identity construction in English as a foreign language contexts. This study contributes to a broader understanding of

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how gender, language teaching, and socio-cultural norms intersect to shape professional identity within the Nepali context through interpretative and socio-cultural lenses.

Keywords: female teachers, professional identity construction, socio-cultural expectations, teacher agency, work-life balance

Introduction

Teacher identity has become a central topic in educational research over the past two decades (Zang & Wang, 2022). It is taken as an essential element in understanding teachers' lives, instructional choices, and professional growth. Teacher identity refers to the way they perceive themselves within the educational ecosystem and how they make sense of their roles as educators (Bowen et al. 2021). Identity construction of the teachers contributes to their motivation, teaching-learning, professional development, and institutional development. As Gee (2000) notes, identity is being "recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context" (p. 99). It is formed through a network of constant interaction with socio-cultural and institutional contexts (Zembylas, 2003). Teacher identity is closely linked to teachers' life stories, values, emotions, and the dynamic experiences they encounter in and outside the classroom (Teng, 2017). In this regard, exploring the stories of female English language teachers on how they construct their identities helps navigate their agency in the grounded patriarchal socio-cultural norms in Nepal. Also, it shows their visibility and voice, constraints and resistance, and the narratives of how they encounter societal influences in English language teacher identity construction.

Teacher identity encompasses the dynamic process through which teachers construct their professional selves in relation to their beliefs, experiences, values, and social interactions within educational and cultural contexts (Zembylas, 2003). It is a dynamic,

dialogical construct that evolves through reflective practice and negotiation of internal self-concept with external expectations. Recent literature emphasizes its complexity. Pishghadam et al. (2022) propose a comprehensive framework that identifies key components, including power relations, discourse, investment, emotion, and capital, as essential to identity construction in language teaching contexts. In the case of female English language teachers at the basic level, identity construction involves navigating gender norms, educational policies, and sociolinguistic ideologies (Meleknia et al., 2022).

In Nepal, the interplay between gender and education has always been deeply rooted in traditional values. Female teachers, especially those in public institutions, face numerous challenges in constructing a coherent professional identity. Traditional gender roles, limited opportunities for advancement, and a lack of supportive professional development environments create significant obstacles (Mainali, 2021). Female teachers are often expected to prioritize their domestic responsibilities over their professional duties, which limits their availability for training, leadership roles, and community engagement. In some communities, the notion of a 'good woman' is still tightly bound to homemaking and obedience, which clashes with the image of an assertive and professionally ambitious teacher (Ghimire, 2022, 2023; Mainali, 2021). These tensions complicate the identity construction process, placing women in positions of constant negotiation and role balancing.

In the specific case of English language teaching, the complexity increases further. Teachers are expected to bridge global pedagogical expectations with local cultural practices, a task that is both enriching and challenging. The status of English in Nepal has undergone a dramatic transformation. It is now considered a symbol of modernity, economic mobility, and intellectual superiority (Pandey,

2020). Consequently, English language teachers are not just expected to teach a subject; they are positioned as agents of globalization, expected to impart not only language skills but also global perspectives (Giri, 2015). This positions them at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, further complicating identity development.

Birendranagar Municipality in Surkhet district is an emerging educational hub in western Nepal, with a growing number of basic schools and increasing emphasis on English education. Despite these developments, the professional identity construction of female English language teachers remains under-explored. The region reflects issues, including resource disparities, mixed community perceptions about female professionals, and gaps in institutional policies on gender equity. Yet, it also presents a growing awareness about the importance of education and the empowering role of teachers. This paradoxical environment makes Birendranagar an ideal site for investigating the nuanced dynamics of teacher identity. Understanding the identity construction of teachers is vital for theoretical insights and practical implications. Enhancing teacher identity contributes to improved teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and ultimately, better student outcomes. A teacher who possesses a strong, positive sense of identity is more likely to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches, engage actively with students, and advocate for educational reforms (Neupane, 2024). Moreover, such teachers often become role models within their communities, challenge stereotypes and inspire the next generation of female professionals. Thus, this study addresses academic curiosity and aims to support broader goals of gender equity for educational transformation.

Literature Review

The formation of teacher identity continues to be a pivotal topic in educational

research (Chamo, 2024). Contemporary studies emphasize that teacher identity is not static but constructed through dynamic processes shaped by socio-cultural interactions, institutional frameworks, and personal narratives. According to McAdams et al. (2020), narrative identity theory involves organizing life experiences into a coherent storyline that contributes to a sense of self over time, integrating diverse life events into a meaningful narrative. It illustrates how individuals form coherent life stories from diverse experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) describe narrative inquiry as a method where teachers “re-story” their experiences to interpret and shape their professional knowledge. They uphold that narrative identity plays a crucial role in helping educators make sense of their journeys, challenges, and professional positioning.

This evolving understanding is echoed by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), who reaffirm the multifaceted nature of teacher identity, incorporating elements of emotion, reflection, and agency. Similarly, Beijaard et al. (2004) conceptualize teacher identity as a composite of subject matter knowledge, pedagogical skills, and professional beliefs. These components continue to guide teacher development, especially as they evolve over time and through varying contexts, highlighting the fluid and context-specific nature of professional identity formation.

Recent studies further illuminate the complex identity work undertaken by female teachers in multilingual and culturally conservative settings. Hanifah (2022) explored identity construction among novice Indonesian EFL teachers and found that cultural expectations often led to shifts in personal aspirations and professional attitudes. Likewise, Mainali (2021) identified persistent patriarchal influences shaping the identity of Nepali female English teachers, revealing a tension between conformity and resistance. These findings suggest that gendered

experiences significantly affect how female educators construct and negotiate their professional roles.

Adding to this discourse, emerging literature from 2020 onward emphasizes the transformative role of reflective practices and collaborative communities in fostering identity construction. Kosmanou and Vassilaki (2023) illustrated how guided reflection allows teachers to build more resilient and agentive professional selves. In the Nepali context, KC (2021) showed that structured professional development, such as continuous mentoring and collaborative teaching initiatives, significantly enhances teachers' self-perception and instructional innovation. These studies collectively underscore the importance of supportive environments and continuous reflection in shaping robust professional identities.

In a broader regional context, Wang and He (2022) explored Chinese English teachers' research identity within the university, schools and community and found that institutional support, peer networks, and respect for teachers' autonomy were critical in reinforcing positive professional identities. Their findings resonate with studies in the South Asian region where social, cultural, and institutional elements intersect, often intensifying the gendered experiences of female educators (Islam et al., 2023). Similarly, research by Li and Li (2020) in the context of urban-rural school settings in China revealed that location, access to professional development, and institutional recognition are crucial determinants of identity negotiation among language teachers.

In parallel, Neupane (2022) found that female English teachers in rural Nepal rely on improvisation, emotional resilience, and peer encouragement to sustain their motivation and professional identity. These experiences echo broader patterns of adaptation and self-renewal among teachers working in under-resourced and gendered environments. Furthermore,

intersectionality remains a dominant lens in current identity research. Scholars, such as Chaulagain and Pathak (2021) emphasize how age, religion, ethnicity, and language combine to shape the personal and professional positioning of female educators. This perspective is especially critical in diverse societies such as Nepal, where local norms often conflict with global pedagogical expectations, leading to identity ambiguity and negotiation.

Despite the growing body of research on teacher identity, there remains a notable gap in empirical studies, specifically in addressing the identity construction of female English language teachers at the basic education level in areas with inhabitants from different locations (of nearby districts) and religions. Mostly, existing literature has concentrated on secondary or tertiary education, leaving the basic level underexplored, especially concerning how gender, language teaching, and socio-cultural factors intersect in shaping the professional identity of teachers (Kandel, 2023). This study offers localized, gender-sensitive insights into how female English teachers negotiate personal and institutional challenges and resist gendered norms in their shoes. Additionally, it also depicts how they reconstruct their professional selves through reflective practices. It provides practical implications for education policy, teacher training, and institutional support mechanisms. Accordingly, the study seeks to (i) explore the perceptions and stories of identity construction among basic-level English language female teachers in Birganj Municipality, (ii) evaluate the factors influencing their identity formation, and (iii) understand how reflective practices contribute to their professional growth. Consequently, it is guided by the research questions: How do female English language teachers at the basic level in Birganj construct their teacher identities? What socio-cultural, institutional, and personal factors influence their identity

construction? In what ways do reflective practices support or challenge their evolving identities? Addressing these questions will not only extend the academic discourse on teacher identity but also help inform more inclusive and supportive educational practices in Nepal and similar contexts.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to evaluate how basic-level English language female teachers in Birendranagar Municipality construct their identities. Narrative inquiry was used to elicit experiences of identity construction through narrative stories recollected through interviews and reflective journals of the participants. It helped researchers explore the participants' tensions, dilemmas, voices, and agencies. Moreover, it allowed the participants to share their experiences through personal stories. Consequently, it enabled researchers to gain rich, contextualized insights into how the participants' teacher identity was shaped, challenged, and reconstructed over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study captured how the participants experienced their identity construction and how they interpreted and made sense of their identities.

Research Site and Participants

This research was conducted in the Birendranagar Municipality of Karnali Province, Nepal. This area has recently undergone rapid educational development while still retaining strong traditional cultural norms, with the diverse backgrounds of its inhabitants, including the students and teachers. These contrasting dynamics made it an ideal site for exploring the contextual identities of female English teachers. We selected five female English language teachers from public basic schools purposively. Our selection criteria included: (i) a minimum of

five years of continuous teaching experience, (ii) current involvement in English language instruction at the basic level, and (iii) willingness to engage in extended interviews and maintain reflective journals. The participants represented diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Their ages ranged from 30 to 45 years, with teaching experience spanning seven to 20 years. We assumed that teachers within this age group and experience range experienced professional transitions, possessed in-depth knowledge of institutional and societal expectations, navigated critical engagement of their identity construction, understood policy and practice relevance to some extent, and better engaged in reflective practices. Three of them held Master's degrees in English Education, while the other two held Bachelor's degrees. They also represented religious diversity, including one Muslim and one Christian, while three others followed the Hindu religion. All were married, and four had school-age children. These demographic details allowed us to understand how their roles influence and interact with teacher identity constructions in their respective contexts.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection took over two months through semi-structured interviews and participant teachers' reflective journals. We conducted two in-depth interviews with each participant, with each session lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. We held these interviews in appropriate school settings and recorded them with the participants' consent. Our interview guide covered their early teaching involvements, motivations for joining the profession, perceived professional roles, identity-related experiences, and aspirations for their career growth. We asked participants to maintain journals for four weeks, making at least two entries per week. We provided guiding prompts that elicited them to reflect on classroom experiences, identity dilemmas,

moments of pride or frustration, and evolving thoughts about their role as English teachers.

Data Analysis Procedures

We analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method. First, we transcribed the interviews verbatim and assembled them with the reflective journal entries for coding. It also allowed us to triangulate the data. We then read the texts multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the content. Afterwards, we generated initial codes to identify recurring patterns, ideas, and phrases. Next, we organized these codes into broader themes that reflected key aspects of teacher identity construction. We paid attention not only to what the participants said but also to how they expressed it, the emotional tone, use of metaphors, contradictions, and narrative flow. To ensure the credibility of our interpretations, we conducted member checking by sharing the summary of findings with the participants. We corrected any discrepancies through follow-up conversations with the participant teachers.

We obtained ethical approval for this study from the Research Committee at Surkhet Multiple Campus, Department of English Education, Tribhuvan University. We ensured informed consent from all participants before data collection. To protect their identities, we used pseudonyms throughout the report. We followed strict ethical guidelines concerning voluntary participation, data confidentiality, and respectful engagement during all stages of the research.

Findings

The analysis of interviews and reflective journals revealed four interconnected themes to address the research questions.

Transitions in Female Teachers' Identity Construction

All participants shared that their identity construction involved a constant negotiation between personal roles and professional aspirations. Teaching was not seen as an isolated job but intertwined with their identities as housemakers, mothers, and community members. The teachers revealed that they had to continuously balance lesson planning, classroom duties, and student care with caregiving responsibilities and traditional expectations at home. Swostima, for example, reflected:

Sometimes I feel like I am living two lives, two in one, one at school where I am respected as an English teacher, and another at home where my work is not taken seriously. I have to take care of the children and the chores of the kitchen, including house cleaning.

Janumna's reflections both in the interview and her reflection journal aligned with Swostima's. This ongoing balancing act shaped how teachers viewed themselves as professionals. Despite limited support and the emotional labor of juggling dual roles, they expressed pride in their profession and a strong sense of responsibility toward their students. Their reflection notes also showed that they employed strategies like early rising, time management, and selective disengagement from domestic duties to protect their professional space.

This theme directly answers the first research question by revealing that identity is constructed not in isolation but through active management of personal and professional expectations. Their identity construction is both an internal process of self-definition and an external process negotiated within social structures.

English Language Proficiency as Identity Capital

Proficiency in English was identified as a critical component in building a strong professional identity. Participants viewed their command over English not only as a teaching skill but as a source of authority and legitimacy in the classroom. They reported that using English fluently increased student engagement, improved classroom control, and boosted their confidence. Kamala mentioned, "My students sometimes ask difficult questions. I worry if I can answer correctly. I try to learn more every day so I won't lose face". This shows that students' queries made them learn English better and develop their English language proficiency.

However, this perceived identity capital also came with pressure and vulnerability. Teachers were aware of being judged by male colleagues and educated parents, and head teachers who they thought expected perfect English. For instance, Gauri, a participant teacher, reflected in her notes:

I know my knowledge of English is an asset of my being and living. But, sometimes, I am afraid that people, students and educated persons whom I meet in school, including the headmaster, find me using incorrect or inappropriate English. Because it is not my mother language. My English is not perfect; I am learning English.

Moreover, the participants expressed that their fear of being questioned or corrected publicly haunts them as female English teachers. Nonetheless, all participants reported taking proactive steps to enhance their English, such as watching English news, practicing with peers, or attending local training sessions to develop their English proficiency.

Additionally, the participants shared that English language proficiency worked as both a professional pride and a personal motivator, helping participants assert their

identity as modern, competent educators. This illustrates how personal effort and external validation interact in identity formation, responding to the second research question by highlighting how institutional and socio-cultural expectations surrounding language affect professional identity.

Reflection as a Tool for Identity Reconstruction and Professional Growth

Reflective practice emerged as a transformative tool in participants' identity construction. All teachers engaged deeply with the reflective practices, which helped them analyze experiences, express emotions, and evaluate their professional growth. Writing gave them space to recognize small successes and articulate complex feelings. Mahima teacher, for instance, wrote, "Writing about my day helped me see that I am doing more than I give myself credit for. I am not just a worker; I am shaping the lives of students. Also, I am growing better professionally". It showed that their reflection on their professional activities helped them shape better professional growth. It helped them learn from their mistakes and everyday experiences inside the schools and outside as English teachers.

Participants used personal reflections not just to escape frustrations but also to reframe challenges as growth opportunities. Reflective writing helped them gain clarity about their values, teaching philosophy, and classroom decisions. It also served as a coping strategy, particularly when they felt marginalized or undervalued at work. It responds to the third research question by showing how reflective practices serve as a developmental process empowering teachers to become more self-aware, resilient, and agentive in constructing their evolving professional identities.

Confidence, Teacher Agency, Resistance, and Resilience in Identity Construction

Participants' professional identities were also significantly shaped by their positioning within the school hierarchy and the extent to which their voices were heard in institutional decisions. Those working in inclusive, collaborative schools reported a stronger sense of belonging and agency. They felt confident sharing their opinions, leading initiatives, and mentoring others. In contrast, teachers in male-dominated settings felt overlooked and underappreciated. Swostima commented, "Even when I have ideas for improvement, they don't listen. It's as if my gender makes me less credible". It implies that female teachers at schools, in some instances, have to cope with the gender bias of male supremacy.

Occasions of being excluded from decision-making reflected the broader gender biases embedded in institutional cultures. Teachers expressed frustration at being treated as passive recipients rather than active contributors in the school decisions. However, when the principals recognized their potential and created supportive spaces, participants thrived and took on leadership roles. It underscores that identity construction is not solely an internal process but also depends on external validation and opportunity. It highlights how institutional factors, such as school culture, leadership, and gender equity, directly influence identity development, aligning closely with the second and third research questions.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the professional identity construction of basic-level English language female teachers in Birendranagar is a complex, ongoing, and contextually grounded process. The first major insight focuses on the balancing of professional

and personal identities. The teachers in this study lived in a continuous state of negotiation between their domestic roles and their responsibilities as educators. This dual burden of fulfilling traditional gender expectations at home while maintaining a competent professional self in school aligns with earlier findings in South Asian contexts (Mainali, 2021; Hanifah, 2022). However, what this study highlights more deeply is how this negotiation is not only emotional but strategic. Teachers developed various coping mechanisms, including strict time management and selective disengagement from domestic tasks, to maintain their professional identity. Their narratives portrayed identity as something fluid, reshaped daily through negotiations with family, community, and institutional norms. These findings emphasize the need for educational systems to consider not only teachers' classroom performance but also the socio-cultural environments in which they function.

The English language proficiency of the teachers was a marker of authority, confidence, and professional validation. All participants described how their ability to use English fluently directly influenced their identity construction. This affirms Beijaard et al.'s (2004) assertion that subject matter expertise is a core element of teacher identity. In Nepal, where English is often associated with social mobility, global citizenship, and prestige, the teacher's role as an English educator carries symbolic weight (Giri, 2015). Yet, this symbolic power also brings pressure, especially when female teachers are held to higher standards of performance or feel judged by male colleagues or parents. Unlike in some urban settings where English exposure is high, semi-urban female teachers must work harder to earn legitimacy. Their efforts to constantly improve their language skills show not just professional commitment but also their desire to assert authority in a male-dominated environment. Thus, language proficiency

becomes both a pedagogical tool and a form of identity capital.

Teacher empowerment through reflection adds another dimension to the teacher identity construction process. The teachers used reflective journaling not just as a task assigned by the researcher but as a tool for self-understanding and emotional regulation. Their entries revealed how they re-framed routine classroom experiences like praise from students, successful lessons, or overcoming a challenge (Kandel, 2015; 2025) as evidence of growth. This supports the claims of Kosmanou and Vassilaki (2023) and Kandel and Raskoti (2025), who noted that teachers' reflective practices strengthen transformative self-awareness and reinforce teacher professional development. The study found that when teachers documented their emotions, failures, and successes, they began to perceive themselves more confidently, even when external validation was lacking. This suggests that institutionalising reflective practices through training, mentoring, or action research could serve as a powerful identity-forming mechanism, particularly for female teachers navigating complex socio-professional spaces.

The institutional culture and positioning of teachers emerged as a decisive factor in whether they could fully claim and express their professional identities. In schools where principals practiced inclusive leadership, female teachers felt heard, involved, and valued. This directly affected their willingness to take initiative and contribute to school development in collaboration with their colleagues (Kandel & Kandel, 2023) and their students. On the other hand, in hierarchical or male-dominated institutions, teachers reported feeling sidelined, regardless of their experience or qualifications. This dynamic reflects broader research (Kandel, 2019; Chen et al., 2023; Raskoti & Kandel, 2025; Sharma & Rijal, 2023), which underscores how institutional recognition and opportunity shape teacher motivation and

identity formation. In this study, teachers did not ask for special treatment but for equal space to be consulted, trained, and promoted with their male counterparts. Their experiences highlight that identity is not only self-constructed but also institutionally framed. When schools exclude female voices, they risk limiting the full development of their staff and, by extension, the educational experiences of students..

Conclusion and Implications

This study sets out to explore how basic-level English language female teachers in Birendranagar Municipality construct their professional identities, what socio-cultural and institutional factors influence this process, and how reflective practices contribute to their identity development. Through in-depth interviews and reflective journals, we found that teacher identity is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic, context-driven process shaped by continuous negotiation between personal roles and professional aspirations. The findings revealed that participants balanced the dual expectations of home and school, often navigating deeply embedded gender norms while striving to assert themselves as capable educators. Their identity was further influenced by their perceived English language proficiency, which acted as both a tool for classroom authority and a source of professional validation. Institutional factors, including school leadership, peer collaboration, and opportunities for involvement in decision-making, played a crucial role in either enabling or constraining identity growth. The study indicates that stakeholders in Nepali education can work toward building more inclusive and empowering spaces for all teachers to grow, lead, and inspire.

The findings of this study imply that teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service, must integrate content that addresses identity construction, gender

dynamics, and reflective practice. When teachers, especially women, are encouraged to explore and articulate their professional selves, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with students, adopt innovative teaching methods, and persevere in the face of challenges. It also shows that incorporating reflective journaling and narrative sharing into teacher training modules can help educators develop a stronger sense of agency and professional purpose.

At the institutional level, school leaders and policymakers must recognise that identity development is not an isolated process, but one that is embedded in everyday interactions, school culture, and institutional structures. Creating inclusive environments where female teachers are consulted, supported, and given leadership opportunities can significantly enhance their sense of professional identity. Gender-sensitive policies, equitable access to professional development, and open forums for collaboration can promote individual teacher growth for broader educational transformation. Ultimately, by investing in the identity development of female educators, educational systems can foster more resilient, reflective, and empowered teaching communities capable of driving positive change.

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Authors' Contributions

PO was responsible for data collection and writing the initial draft of the manuscript, while RKK led the conceptualization of the study and the development of research instruments. Both authors reviewed the final version and provided informed consent for

publication. RKK further contributed to the substantive revision of the manuscript and oversaw the correspondence for the publication process.

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