

# Learning to Become L2 Teachers: Prospective Teachers' Professional Identity Development

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## Abstract

Learning to teach is conceptualized as a complex process of identity development. To address this process, this study explored Prospective Teachers' (PTs) professional identity development at different stages of learning to teach within a four-year Second Language (L2) initial teacher education program. Participating in a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, 140 PTs filled out the English language teacher professional identity questionnaire three times: at the end of the second year, third year, and fourth year. Then, after each round of the questionnaire administration, 12 PTs were asked to participate in the interview phase to gain further insight into the participants' professional identity development. Three separate sets of Freidman test and grounded theory were employed to evaluate the questionnaire and interview data, respectively. The results of both quantitative and qualitative data analyses revealed that the second-year PTs' language awareness had a major contribution to the enactment of collective identity of language analyst and language user roles as part of their professional identity. Teaching practicum experiences also helped the third-year PTs develop a sense of belonging to the school community by aligning themselves with its rules and policies, which helped them develop their professional identity in a prescribed manner, informing institutionally situated identity of formal teachers. The fourth-year PTs' identification of themselves with regard to their prospective learners' needs was also the identity development observed in the form of learner-oriented attitude toward learners as whole persons, all conducive to imagined future identity of needs analysts. The results and implications are further discussed.

**Keywords:** L2 initial teacher education program, L2 prospective teachers, Teacher learning, Teacher professional identity development

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## INTRODUCTION

Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) has become the focus of a growing line of research in L2 teacher education since almost two decades ago (Clarke, 2008; Flores, 2020; Zhu, Rice, Li, & Zhu, 2020). Professional identity is assumed to be an analytical lens to examine how teachers define and imagine themselves as teachers, what roles and responsibilities they assume for themselves or are assigned to them, and how they understand their work throughout their teaching careers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Korthagen, 2004). Given the importance of professional identity in teachers' development and performance (Clarke, 2008), TPI has also been recognized as an essential part of teacher learning (Beijaard, 2019). Wenger (1998) has accented this point as he believes that "learning transforms who we are and what we can do," and, thereby, "it is an experience of identity" (p. 125).

Conceptualizing learning in terms of identity development, TPI is now considered to be a key aspect in PTs' apprehension and explication of their experiences of teaching practices in practicum sessions and other initial teacher education activities that provide the opportunities to (re)construct their self-images as L2 teachers (Beijaard, 2019; Yazan, 2018). In fact, PTs' professional identity is informed by their experiences of learning to teach and interactions with others involved in teacher education programs and school community, such as teacher educators, peers, supervisors, mentors, students, parents, and school staff (Trent, 2011, 2013; Yazan, 2018). Clearly, it is important to know about PTs' identities as they traverse initial teacher education programs. Conceived as an essential part of language teachers' learning to teach, TPI development has become the center of attention in L2 teacher education research.

While acknowledging the immense focus on practicing teachers' professional identity, one cannot help noticing that no study has provided long-term views of Iranian prospective English teachers' identity development within initial teacher education programs, carried out based on

the courses offered by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. This is despite the fact that initial teacher education learning spaces have been recognized as the most important stage in TPI development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Lamenting a paucity of research on TPI within initial teacher education programs in the Iranian context, the researchers of this study believe that L2 teacher education deserves further research from an identity perspective because there may be some aspects of L2 teaching that have not been investigated in terms of how teachers' engagement with teacher education program informs these aspects regarding teacher identity development. Moreover, limited focus has been given to Iranian prospective English teachers' perceptions of their roles as part of their professional identity as they engage in the process of learning to teach within a long timescale and across large samples, using a mixed-methods design. This academic negligence comes against a backdrop of calls by English Language Teaching (ELT) researchers (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Yuan & Lee, 2014) for conducting more research on prospective English teachers' identity development providing longer-term patterns of their identity development. Encouraged by such lines of reasoning, this study is a further step to capture evolutionary patterns of TPI development within an initial teacher education program in that it explores the PTs' perceptions of their roles as part of their professional identity at different stages of learning to teach in an L2 setting. The elements that proved to make up the structure of language teacher identity in the context of the present study can be high on the agenda for the development and design of L2 teacher education programs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Recent literature on teacher education highlights the significance of teacher education programs in TPI development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Flores, 2020; Kiely & Askham, 2012; Trent, 2013; Zhu et al., 2020). Teachers constantly negotiate and develop their identity as they engage in

the process of learning to teach. Learning to teach as a lifelong journey (Korthagen, 2004), which includes participation in initial teacher education programs, is a complex process of identity learning (Beijaard, 2019) and identity change (Garner & Kaplan, 2018). In line with the recognition of the importance of initial teacher education programs as the first and perhaps the most important stage in the development of TPI (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), some scholars believe that becoming a teacher is a process of identity formation rather than the acquisition of subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, theories of teaching and learning, and skills (e.g., Beijaard, 2019; Kanno & Stuart, 2011). *Becoming* implies that “individual language teachers may have different professional choices about who they want to be” (Xu, 2017, p. 122). In other words, becoming a teacher needs the development of professional identity and the formation of a special kind of self-image.

From this perspective, Yazan (2018) asserted that “teacher learning and teacher identity development are two intimately connected contours which are both driving forces underpinning [teacher candidates] TCs’ professional growth” (p. 31). A prominent approach reflecting this dimension of identity is the social learning theory. One of the recent development in this theory has been the conceptualization of teacher learning as a social and collective practice (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Communities of Practice (CoP), as one of the most influential socially-oriented theories of teacher learning, has informed this approach to teacher education.

Rooted in situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), CoP posits that learning to teach is a process of identity development, happening through PTs’ active participation and membership in teacher learning community while they engage in developing their theoretical and practical knowledge through coursework and the teaching practicum (Wenger, 1998). Through participation in initial teacher education programs, PTs experience three modes of identification as well as the modes of identity development (i.e., engagement, imagination, and alignment). Each of these modes,

according to Wenger (1998), represents one dimension of participation in initial teacher education programs, namely 1) PTs' direct engagement with the teacher learning community, the ways they engage with others, and the ways these relations reflect who they are, 2) PTs' participation in imagined communities through images of the community, both personal and collective, that place them in the different contexts, and 3) PTs' adjustment of their practices to adapt themselves with the teacher learning community as legitimate participants. Defining community in terms of a social enterprise and learning as participation in the social context (Lave & Wenger, 1991), any initial teacher education program can be considered as a CoP, a community of PTs who participate in and practice different activities of this community, which informs what they do and shapes who they are in relation to the community.

Regarding the importance attached in the literature to professional identity as a significant component in the career-long nature of teachers' learning, some scholars have explored different aspects of the concept. TPI has proved to be highly effective in systematizing teachers' professional roles (Korthagen, 2004) and their approaches to how they teach and develop professionally (Beijard, 2019). TPI has also been known to have a great impact on students' academic achievement and their identities (Cummins, 2011). Moreover, it is acknowledged that professional identity has an essential role in how teachers define themselves as members of the institutional settings where they work (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Zimmerman, 1998). This view of teacher identity might be looked at as a source of conflict. As various teaching methods and curricula in different settings of a certain discourse community might assign teachers pre-determined roles in line with their philosophical underpinnings. Teachers might undergo identity crisis or identity stress in adopting the new roles assumed by the new communities of practice they encounter.

This increasing awareness of the central place of professional identity in teachers' professional lives has persuaded researchers to conduct studies on L2 TPI in teacher education to explore how teacher education

programs can contribute to PTs' identity construction (e.g., Flores, 2020; Trent, 2010). A cursory glance at the literature reveals that most of the studies on TPI in the mainstream and L2 teacher education have been conducted qualitatively. Although such a dynamic and multifaceted concept as TPI has been framed well in qualitative methods, quantitative research, including surveys for a large population, and mixed-methods research should also be conducted (Barkhuizen, 2017; Rezaei, 2017; Varghese, 2017). The results of quantitative findings, combined with those of qualitative studies, contribute to macro levels of decision-making and policy-making in teacher education by providing a broad and large-scale perspective of teacher identity.

In L2 teacher education, many of the studies have focused on TPI formation in pre-service teacher education programs within the context of practicum, considering the pedagogical aspects of teaching English, such as using electronic devices (e.g., Trent & Shroff, 2013), adjusting teacher authority (e.g., Kanno & Stuart, 2011), and interactional activities (e.g., Farrell, 2011). Another focus adopted in L2 identity research is the process of identity formation as relating to the whole teacher education program (e.g., Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016) or a unit (e.g., Burri, Chen, & Baker, 2017).

Some other studies have investigated the tensions between the types of professional identities promoted in pre-service teacher education courses and those assigned to PTs in teaching practicum. For example, adopting a single-case study design in a context of school-university partnership, He and Lin (2013) explored a Chinese student teacher's professional identity development. Following critical post-structuralist identity theory and activity theory, He and Lin (2013) conceptualized the participant's practicum experience as boundary-crossing between the two activity systems of the school community and the university community. The results showcased the participant's realization of the difference between the trainer's transmission view of teaching and the university's progressive approaches to teaching L2. Despite having a critical view toward the

traditional methods of teaching, the participant had to adopt her mentor's style because the learners did not reply well to her way of teaching. He and Lin appraised this participant as an example of a student teacher arguing for her identity.

Similarly, in another qualitative study, Trent (2013) examined the role of the teaching practicum in TPI development amongst a group of eight pre-service English language teachers in Hong Kong. His pre-service participants experienced the "disassociation between the demands of their placement schools and those of their teacher education courses" (p. 12). The results showed how the participants' perceptions of such differences informed their TPI construction. To view pedagogical discourses as binary oppositions, Trent (2013) conducted another qualitative study on the process of identity development of a group of PTs during a 6-week teaching practicum in Hong Kong. Collecting interview data in multiple stages of teaching practicum, Trent reported that in the first interviews, the participants defined themselves as the types of teachers who believed in the assumptions of communicative language teaching. In the second round of the interviews, they positioned themselves as traditional teachers. However, the results of the last interviews showed the attempts of some participants to engage in teaching practices in line with communicative teacher identity, employing the professional role they found helpful in their teaching.

Adopting a CoP perspective (Wenger, 1998), some other scholars have explored L2 PTs' identity development through engaging in imagination and alignment in teacher education programs. For instance, employing interviews, Trent (2012) explored six L2 PTs' identity development during a research project while participating in their practicum. The results showed that the participants made the connection between their immediate experience of teaching and researching in the teaching practicum and their imagined world of teaching, conducive to imagine themselves as full-time teachers, which limited the opportunity to imagine themselves as teacher-researchers at the same time. Trent argued that the participants' identity development happened because of their direct engagement with the

research, their alignment with the necessities of the research project and practicum, and their imagination of how to help students with their language development. Using in-depth interviews, Trent (2011) also examined the perspectives of six L2 PTs about teaching and teachers at the completion of the initial teacher education programs. The findings revealed that the participants made the connection between past and future in their present teaching roles, imagining a future when they would be inspiring teachers. In fact, according to Wenger (1998), engagement in imagination creates a specific situation for reflective practice, which contributes to teachers' identity development. Imaginative reflection also helps teachers foster images about students, classrooms, and challenges in teaching that enables teachers to "try new identities" (p. 185).

Regarding the Iranian context, the vast majority of studies have investigated the practicing teachers' professional identity (e.g., Derakhshan, Coombe, Arabmofrad, & Taghizadeh, 2020; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). In fact, there is a dearth of studies investigating Iranian prospective English teachers' perceptions of their roles as part of their professional identity in L2 literature. Teachers' roles can be regarded as a potential area of research on L2 TPI in teacher education (Farrell, 2011). A review of L2 teacher education also indicates the importance of L2 teachers' role (Edge, 1988; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Wright, 2002). For example, Edge (1998) and Wright (2002) did talk about two major roles for L2 PTs to take on, namely language users and language analysts of English. According to Edge (1998), in the user domain, PTs should be able "to function socially as a user of English... which relates to their language ability" (p. 9); for instance, they might help a friend with an overseas application form. The user domain, apart from language improvement, covers PTs' knowledge of how the English language is used appropriately in a variety of situations. Furthermore, the user domain explores the teachers' "awareness of the socio-cultural context of language use" (Wright, 2002, p. 120).

The analyst domain, on the other hand, encompasses all areas of descriptive linguistics from phonetics to pragmatics and involves



“understandings of the forms and functions of language system-grammar, vocabulary, and phonology” (Wright, 2002, p. 118). In the same vein, Edge (1988) believed that in the analyst domain, PTs should be “able to talk about the language itself, to analyze it, to understand how it works and to make judgments about acceptability in doubtful cases” (p. 10). Thornbury (1997) referred to this language subject knowledge proposed by Edge (1998) and Wright (2002) as teacher language awareness and defined it as teachers’ knowledge of the underlying systems of the language which helps them teach successfully.

Research on teacher language awareness has mainly focused on this concept as a type of teachers’ content knowledge rather than as an aspect of their identity. However, a few scholars have explored this concept in teacher identity terms. For example, Andrews (2007) has considered language awareness a type of teachers’ personal, practical knowledge, which Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) regarded it as closely interconnected with, and sometimes used to mean teacher identity. A few empirical studies have also explored teacher language awareness as an aspect of teacher identity. For instance, in investigating teachers’ reflections on their professional role identities in Canada, Farrell (2011) reported three major roles, namely teacher as manager (e.g., entertainer, vendor), teacher as acculturator (e.g., social worker, socializer, care provider) and teacher as professional (e.g., knowledgeable, collaborator, learner). Farrell defined Knowledgeable as “Knowledgeable about teaching and subject matter” (p. 57) as an L2 teacher role that was related to teachers’ English language knowledge and language awareness. In another study, Beijaard et al. (2000) developed a model of TPI which considers teachers’ roles as pedagogical experts, didactical experts, and subject matter experts. According to them, “a subject matter expert is a teacher who bases his/her profession on subject matter knowledge and skills” (p. 754).

Indeed, L2 teachers’ roles have expanded in the past decades regarding the emergence of different approaches to L2 teacher education, which redefined teachers’ professional profiles. In view of this, the new

professionalism in ELT showcases teachers' awareness or acceptance of new roles, such as needs analysts (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), exploratory researchers, critical thinkers, transformative teachers, and, above all, critical practitioners (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). This new professionalism challenges teachers to reanalyze the traditional teacher roles, as well as the way they define themselves as L2 teachers. This dimension of professionalism is also a key to L2 teachers' professional development that directly impacts teachers' identity.

In line with the importance of teachers' role in L2 teacher education, identity researchers believe that TPI refers to how teachers define their roles as language teachers, and "how they enact their roles within different settings" (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 5). This idea is reflected in the definition of TPI forwarded by Korthagen (2004), who defined TPI as teachers' response to such questions as "what kind of teacher do I want to be? and how do I see my role as a teacher?" (p. 81). Walkington (2005) also believed that the L2 teacher professional role involves teachers' beliefs, values, and assumptions about how to teach, and forms and reforms as a result of changes in their teaching philosophies and beliefs. For the purpose of this study, the PTs' perceptions of their roles as part of their professional identity refer to their manifestation of the core beliefs the PTs have about the personal, professional, institutional, sociocultural, political, and pedagogical aspects of L2 teaching. These aspects also inform TPI because language teacher identity is personal, sociocultural, institutional, professional, and ideological (Barkhuizen, 2017; Mahmoodarabi, Maftoon, & Siyyari, 2021).

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Considering the importance of teacher education programs in teacher identity development and the significance of teachers' role as part of professional identity, this study aimed to investigate the prospective English teachers' perceptions of their roles at different stages of learning to teach. In

the light of the foregoing, the study seeks to address the following question:

Which professional identity profiles prevail in second-, third-, and fourth-year prospective English teachers within an initial teacher education program?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants of this study were 140 PTs enrolled in a four-year L2 initial teacher education program at five Farhangian University Branches (Tehran, Qazvin, Khorramabad, Shiraz, and Zanjan) in Iran. The aim of this teacher education program was to provide opportunities and experiences to help PTs enter K-12 schools with the necessary knowledge needed for their teaching acts. The program followed a predetermined and centralized syllabus. In the first two years of the program, the concentration was on language learning. From the third year, the program focused on language teaching. Moreover, in the third year of the program, PTs experienced teaching practicum under the supervision of a supervising teacher.

As for the quantitative phase, convenience sampling was employed and a total number of 140 (71 males, 69 females) PTs were invited to participate in this project. Their age ranged from 20 to 25, and they had no teaching experience. Also, they didn't participate in any other teacher training courses and workshops, except for the initial teacher education courses. Out of the questionnaire participants, 12 PTs (5 males, 7 females) agreed to take part in the three sets of the interview phase of the study as well.

### **Instrumentation**

To explore the PTs' professional identity development, a reliable and valid English Language Teacher Professional Identity Scale (ELTPIS) developed by Mahmoodarabi, Maftoon, and Siyyari (2021) was employed. The ELTPIS demystifies English language teacher professional identity in terms

of six constituent factors that consider L2 teacher identity as: researching and developing one's own practice, language awareness, institutional and collective practice, engaging learners as whole persons, appraising one's teacher self, and sociocultural and critical practice.

Each item is measured on a 6-point Likert scale, varying from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Based on the data obtained in the present study, it was found that the scale enjoyed good reliability in all three administrations (the first administration,  $\alpha=0.87$ ; the second administration,  $\alpha=0.90$ ; the third administration,  $\alpha=0.89$ ). Furthermore, to deeply explore, explain, and elaborate on the quantitative results, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 PTs who agreed to be interviewed. The interview questions were developed based on the main aim of the study (see Appendix for a sample of interview questions). Two L2 experts' critical judgment of the interview content was considered as content validity of the interview questions. The experts' comments resulted in a few changes in some of the interview items for more clarity.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

In the current study, a sequential explanatory mixed-methods quantitative-qualitative design to both data collection and analysis was employed (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). Initially, the PTs were asked to fill out three rounds of the same questionnaire (ELTPIS): at the end of the second year, third year, and fourth year. Due to the better accessibility to the participants, the online version of the questionnaire was created employing the Google Docs application. The online survey was then shared on internet groups and channels, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, which had the PTs in Farhangian University Branches. The participants were also assured that their information would be kept confidential.

Then, after each round of the questionnaire administration, 12 PTs were asked to participate in the interview phase to gain further insight into the participants' identity development. In this phase, after obtaining the

interviewees' informed consent, 36 semi-structured face-to-face and video call interviews were recorded by one of the researchers of this study as the interviewer. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study before conducting the interviews. The interview with each of the interviewees took about 30 to 45 minutes. The checking procedure and follow-up telephone contact were used when the researcher was uncertain about whether she had gained a point. To generate more clarifications from the interviewees, the interviewer employed probing as a strategy in interview research. Probing was achieved both nonverbally (e.g., gestures, pauses) and verbally, including direct and indirect questions. Moreover, structuring and various active listening techniques, such as summarizing, clarifying, paraphrasing, and restating were also utilized in each of the interviews. The recorded data were then transcribed verbatim. To check the authenticity of the data and member checking, the interviewer shared the transcribed data with the interviewees, and asked them to provide feedback and comments on their statements. The interviewees provided no revisions.

## **Data Analysis**

In order to know which professional identity profiles prevail in the second-, third-, and fourth-year participants, three separate sets of Freidman test were run on the six factors for each group. To generate meaning from the qualitative data, the systematic approach to qualitative inquiry and analysis strategies guided by grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were followed. Through initial coding, the researchers split the data into separately meaningful segments. In the second cycle of coding (i.e., axial coding), coded data were placed into appropriate categories. In other words, the researchers put together the data which were fractured during the first stage to find new meaningful relationships between them. During selective coding, the researchers accumulated the data into the most important categories which were most relevant to the emerging concepts.

During all of the above stages, theoretical sampling, memo writing, and constant comparison analysis of the data were simultaneously

employed. To ensure the inter-rater reliability, two expert L2 researchers checked again all the processes of data analysis carried out by the researchers of this study. Furthermore, to increase the dependability and response consistency of the research, all the participants were provided with the same questions in different forms with similar foci. In addition, to avoid subjectivity, the researchers attempted to provide a bias-free account of the participants' answers. Research credibility was checked through the data collection procedure at the outset of each academic year by taking into account only the results of those PTs who were present at all measuring times.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Results

The data that emerged from the questionnaire administrations were analyzed with respect to the six factors of ELTPIS. To respond to the research question, three Friedman tests were run to compare the mean ranks of the professional identity profiles within each group.

The result of the Friedman test (Chi-Square=548.419,  $df=5$ , Sig=0.001) indicated that there was a significant difference in the mean ranks of the second-year PTs' professional identity profiles. Table 1 shows that the second-year PTs had the highest mean score on language awareness (M=5.31). This was followed by institutional and collective practice (M=2.96), engaging learners as whole persons (M=2.18), appraising one's teacher self (M=2.01), sociocultural and critical practice (M=1.99), and researching and developing one's own practice (M=1.96).

**Table 1:** Mean rank (second-year PTs)

Factors	Mean Rank
Factor 2	5.31
Factor 3	2.96
Factor 4	2.18
Factor 5	2.01
Factor 6	1.99
Factor 1	1.96

Regarding the third-year PTs, the result of the Friedman test (Chi-Square =619.315,  $df=5$ , Sig=0.001) suggested that there was a significant difference in the mean ranks of the third year PTs' professional identity profiles. Table 2 demonstrates that the third-year PTs had the highest mean score on institutional and collective practice (M=5.37). This was followed by language awareness (M=4.28), engaging learners as whole persons (M=3.88), researching and developing one's own practice (M=2.95), appraising one's teacher self (M=2.92), and sociocultural and critical practice (M=2.75).

**Table 2:** Mean rank (third-year PTs)

Factors	Mean Rank
Factor 3	5.37
Factor 2	4.28
Factor 4	3.88
Factor 1	2.95
Factor 5	2.92
Factor 6	2.75

As for the fourth-year PTs, the result of the Friedman test (Chi-Square =438.901,  $df=5$ , Sig=0.001) also yielded that there was a significant difference in the mean ranks of the fourth-year PTs' professional identity profiles. Table 3 shows that the fourth-year PTs had the highest mean score on engaging learners as whole persons (M=5.35). This was followed by language awareness (M=4.05), appraising one's teacher self (M=3.80), researching and developing one's own practice (M=3.66), sociocultural and critical practice (M=3.56), and institutional and collective practice (M=3.28).

**Table 3:** Mean rank (fourth-year PTs)

Factors	Mean Rank
Factor 4	5.35
Factor 2	4.05
Factor 5	3.80
Factor 1	3.66

Factor 6	3.56
Factor 3	3.28

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The above analyses yielded a number of focal points in the PTs' perceptions of their professional identity as their learning outcomes. These focal points comprised language awareness, teaching L2 as institutional and collective practice, and engaging learners as whole persons, each served as a critical source for the second-, third-, and fourth-year PTs' perceptions of their roles as part of their professional identity, respectively. It is worth pointing out that the items of language awareness factor are representative of language analyst and language user roles as proposed by Edge (1998) and Wright (2002).

## Qualitative Results

From the qualitative data, more evidence was obtained about the PTs' perceptions of their roles as part of their professional identity. The major findings derived from the analyses of the transcribed interviews were as follows: teaching L2 as language-oriented practice, teaching L2 as institutional-oriented practice, and teaching L2 as learner-oriented practice.

### *Teaching L2 as Language-oriented Practice*

The PTs who perceived their roles mostly as *language users* and *analysts* of English often clarified this by defining themselves as PTs who attempted to improve their language knowledge, enacting language-oriented identity. They elaborated this by stating that without adequate knowledge about the English language, they cannot be good teachers. For example, one of the participants said:

#### Vignette 1

*I believe that knowledge about the language, for example, knowledge about vocabulary, different theories of grammar, and parts of speech should be considered as the first and perhaps the*



*most important part of teaching. Understanding different parts of language with its rules definitely helps me use English in a grammatically acceptable way.*

Focusing on the language analysis-related outcome of their understanding of language, the PTs maintained that they should be able to analyze and discuss language points with their students. The vignette below from one of the PTs reflects this view.

#### Vignette 2

*If I want to be a good teacher, I should have enough knowledge about English, know how to talk about it with others, and know how to split language up into pieces. For so doing, I need to be prepared with technical knowledge of the English language, such as knowing about its forms and functions, phonology, and morphology. It gives me confidence if I could analyze and discuss language points with my students and other people.*

Moreover, the PTs commented that they improved their language knowledge through teacher education courses. For example, one of the interviewees stated that:

#### Vignette 3

*Language teacher education courses, such as reading, listening, grammar, and linguistics courses, helped me improve my knowledge of English. I hope in the future I can use this knowledge in my teaching. But I am not sure whether I can make the connection between these two kinds of knowledge or not. I hope in the upcoming courses I can learn more about how to teach English.*

Using English correctly in different situations was another learning outcome that the PTs achieved through attending the teacher education courses:

Vignette 4

*I think of English as a tool for communication in different contexts and situations for various purposes. I try to become proficient in using English for effective global communication. I think I need to know not only about English itself but also about how to use it.*

Vignette 5

*I think teachers with limited proficiency in using English correctly would not be taken seriously by their students or even by other teachers, principals, or parents. So, improving my English knowledge is my priority.*

The vignettes from the PTs are characterized with several instances of language terminology, such as *grammar, morphology, and parts of speech*, which manifested their language-oriented identity as English analysts. Using English correctly in different situations or using English to communicate well with other people were other learning outcomes that the PTs achieved through attending the teacher education courses, indicating the English user role on the part of the participants. The PTs obtained this linguistically oriented teacher identity, or in Thornbury's (1997) words, teacher language awareness from language subject knowledge. The results also showed that the content areas which had been covered in the first two years of the initial teacher education program promoted and facilitated the PTs' language improvement components rather than L2 teaching components. Many of the classroom activities had been planned to raise the PTs' awareness of general English skills without considering how they could make connections between these issues and the pedagogical components of their professional roles. The related finding on the importance of language awareness in the process of learning to teach was the positive opinion that the PTs made

about the courses as spaces for language improvement that helped them improve their professional knowledge, thereby, their identity.

### ***Teaching L2 as Institutional-oriented Practice***

The analysis of the second round of the interview data also suggested that the third-year PTs established themselves as teachers who had to follow the policies of schools and the traditional way of teaching while teaching. The following vignettes are some sample statements.

#### Vignette 6

*Before entering practical teaching sessions, I defined myself, based on what I learned from theoretical courses, as a communicative teacher. But when I encountered the real situation of teaching, I realized that it is not easy to use those principles in my teaching. I had to follow the school's predetermined textbooks and policy.*

In the same vein, another PTs stated that:

#### Vignette 7

*I am the kind of teacher who has to be a good seller of school interests. In practical teaching sessions, I had to teach upon my supervisor's requests based on school policy. This kind of teaching was similar to my previous teachers' way of teaching at high school. Anyway, I preferred to align myself with school policy and the supervisor's requests.*

In the vignettes, the PTs' choice of words such as *had to* showed that they had no other options, except following the school policies and their supervisors' requests. As a result, they aligned themselves with the prescribed rules and policies of the schools where they taught and adopted a

fixed conception of teaching. This apparent acceptance of alignment over the meanings of teaching underlines the strength of these PTs' situated identity that institutional policies assigned to them. The ways in which the PTs responded to being situated as particular types of formal/traditional teachers within schools were indicators of an institutionally assigned identity, which is in conflict with their actual identity as communicative teachers. Therefore, previously schooled into a didactic educational system, experiences of observations of other teachers in schools, and practical teaching helped the third-year PTs confirm their professional identity as formal teachers. This instrumentalist and transmission-oriented perspective of the institutional policy assigns to teachers an identity of conformity to the institutional flavor and expert knowledge through alignment with expected norms that highlights the importance of educating the PTs in the way that they are expected to teach.

### ***Teaching L2 as Learner-oriented Practice***

When asked how they imagined themselves as future teachers regarding their teaching roles and responsibilities, the fourth-year PTs clarified their imaginations by referring to being sensitive to their students' learning, enacting learner-oriented identity. They described themselves as teachers who care about their prospective students' learning achievement and consider them as the most important factor in their teaching. This view toward students manifested itself in the PTs' idea in a way that they described a good teacher as one who not only has adequate knowledge about English but also needs to enhance her/his knowledge about students.

They also imagined themselves as future teachers who should think about the student learning viewpoints, the challenges in the classroom, and the possible ways to manage struggles in the classroom. Furthermore, they believed that they should teach based on students' age, language proficiency level, and needs. They did so by thinking about their own learning needs

and other learning challenges once they were students by asking themselves self-reflective questions. For instance, one of the participants noted:

#### Vignette 8

*To know about my future students' needs, I think about my learning needs as a student when I was in high school or ask myself some questions, such as If I were the student, what would I expect the teacher to do? I think about the expectations that I had from my teachers. Then, I try to make connections between my previous learning needs and my future students' expectations.*

Moreover, the PTs' thinking underscores their attempts to generate proper conditions for their students' autonomy. The following vignette is one of the PTs' words in this vein:

#### Vignette 9

*I envision my role as a teacher who encourages and helps his students learn independently. I will give them more freedom of choice, such as choosing the assignments when possible.*

The participants utilized different devices (e.g., their own present and past learning experiences, apprenticeship of observation, teacher education training courses, practical teaching experiences) to stimulate their imagination to create a picture of themselves as teachers and develop mental images about the imagined community of the school teachers, students, and possible future classrooms that helped them develop a sense of membership in the imagined community of school. They used such images to locate and orient themselves, see themselves from different viewpoints, explore new possibilities, and improve students learning. According to Kiely and Askham (2012) and Barkhuizen (2017), pre-service teachers continually imagine themselves as the kind of teachers they will be in the future. This

finding also supports the notion that identity is future-oriented, drawing upon the capacity to imagine a transformed self that involves learning (Kiely & Askham, 2012).

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to explore the Iranian prospective English teachers' professional identity development as they engaged in the learning spaces of L2 initial teacher education programs. The high scores of the second-year PTs on the language awareness component were quite remarkable, representing a linguistic-oriented approach toward their professional identity. The data analysis also showed that the second-year PTs had a major contribution to the enactment of *collective identity of language analyst and language user* roles as part of their professional identity. Furthermore, according to Wenger (1998), the PTs' participation in the L2 teacher learning community (i.e., initial teacher education program) as language learners, users, and analysts fostered the development of an identity as "a nexus of multimembership" (p.159), conducive to the development of a collective identity.

In the first two years of the initial teacher education program, the PTs were exposed to a number of language learning courses; as a result, language awareness emerged as the most highlighted learning outcome, which served as a critical source of the PTs' professional identity development. The results also suggested the predominance of a language analysis and language user orientation in the initial teacher education training course components in the first two years of the teacher education program, which provides a limited space for identity construction as relating to the language teacher domain of teaching English. This finding is in line with Edge's (1988) idea that in the early stages of teacher education programs applied linguistics plays an essential role in PTs' language improvement components. In addition, the results back up the findings of Yuan and Lee's (2014) study that the first two years of pre-service programs

prepare PTs with necessary language knowledge and reflect PTs' attitudes about language. Subscribing to Beijaard et al.'s (2000) model of TPI, teachers who perceived themselves as subject matter experts hinge upon their profession on subject matter knowledge, like the participants of this study who defined themselves with regard to the subject matter knowledge. Furthermore, in investigating teachers' reflections on their professional role identities, one of the categories Farrell (2011) reported was the role of L2 teachers as "knowledgeable about teaching and subject matter" (p. 57) as his participants' professional role identity that is in line with the result of this study.

The data analysis also yielded the *institutionally situated identity of formal teacher* as the role that the third-year PTs were mainly oriented to in their professional identity. This result reflects the idea of Pennington and Richards (2016) who believed that inexperienced teachers with a traditional or formal pedagogical role mostly adapt an institutionally situated identity. Zimmerman (1998) argued situated identities could be related to specific situations and referred to the ways teachers align their teaching practices with assigned roles and expectations. This kind of institutional and default teacher identity is natural for inexperienced teachers to assign because institutional policies, expectations, and constraints force teachers to rely on a relatively formal and impersonal role in teaching (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Institutional constraints also inform a TPI which prioritizes teaching in a prescribed manner, leading teachers to follow behaviorist, survival-oriented teaching methods.

The data showed that the most elaborate account of identity development in the third-year PTs was observed in the contribution of teaching practicum experiences to the enactment of the institutionally situated identity of formal teachers. The practical teaching activities engaged the PTs in fulfilling a task that would be part of their real-life experience as L2 teachers. The PTs' identity development through engagement in teaching in a real academic setting sheds light on the significant impact of teaching practice on teacher identity development. The

practical teaching activities also afforded opportunities for the PTs to practice alignment with wider structures dominating the educational system. In numerous studies, the contribution of teaching practicum experience to teachers' identity development has been acknowledged (e.g., He & Lin, 2013; Trent, 2010, 2013). The result of this study is in line with He and Lin (2013) and Trent (2010), who explored the types of identities assigned to PTs in teaching practicum. Based on the findings of these studies, in practical teaching, PTs were expected to rely on the traditional style of teaching to transmit language information in a teacher-centered fashion and follow pre-determined syllabi, textbooks, and lesson plans.

Yet, the current finding is not in accordance with the result of the study conducted by Trent (2013). He has reported that some PTs were able to exercise agency in their teaching practicum experience. Regarding the difference between the result of this study and the picture of the teaching practicum portrayed by Trent, it can be argued that the PTs in this study did not rely on their ideal language teacher selves; that is, language teachers' images of who they desire to be or become. Indeed, because of the domination of transmission-oriented ideology on teacher education in the Iranian context, the PTs shifted to their ought-to language teacher selves while teaching, referring to the kind of teachers they were expected to become by the particular setting of school.

Another result of this study revealed that the role the fourth-year PTs mainly claimed to have as part of their professional identity was *imagined future identity of needs analysts*, which represents a student-oriented approach to teaching where the teaching starting point is the learners. According to Pennington and Richards (2016), "some new teachers begin their teaching from an informal identity which reflects a more learner-centered teacher identity" (p. 4). The data analysis suggested that the PTs emphasized the personal growth and self-acceptance of their students by encouraging them to think deeply about their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Moreover, the PTs agreed with the participation of their students in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning, which contributes to



students' learning by doing what they need to do in order to learn (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). In this vein, the PTs went beyond a mere focus on developing students' linguistic skills, encompassing consideration of other aspects of their identities, such as social and emotional ones. Such an outlook on students requires the PTs to analyze students' needs in terms of educational factors, as well as issues associated with students' learning objectives. Therefore, the PTs' decisions and actions were informed by students' identities and a whole person analysis toward teaching L2. Students' identities also have a crucial role in needs analysis because learning needs vary with what learners want to be and become through the target language (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The fourth-year PTs were inexperienced teachers who took their teacher identity from the future, imagined themselves as language teachers of needs analysts. Becoming a teacher is guided by the imagination, which could be translated into learning as identity. The PTs referred to their past and present learning experiences as language students to imagine target language domains in order to identify their prospective students' expectations and specific linguistic necessities, and then try to address their needs in their imagined teaching. The PTs' imaginations of their future possibility as teachers, and making sense of their classroom practices in their imagined community of future classroom can also be viewed as a stage in identity development- -“the stage at which the training programs end and the learning experience becomes a readiness for work” (Kiely & Askham, 2012, p. 514). The result of this study is consistent with the findings of Trent (2011, 2012), who reported teacher imagination as an aspect of L2 PTs' professional identity formation. Trent (2011) explored that his participants reconstructed their professional identity through imagining themselves as future inspiring teachers by thinking about their past teachers who had inspired them to become teachers. In another study, Trent (2012) reported PTs developed the identity of full-time teachers by making connections between their immediate experience of teaching and researching in the imagined world of teaching.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was conducted to explore Iranian prospective English teachers' perceptions of their roles as part of their professional identity at different stages of learning to teach. The results showcased different ways in which the PTs negotiated their roles and reconstructed their professional identity.

The second-year PTs' professional identity development through engagement in the teacher education courses emerged from drawing on their membership in teacher learning community as language analysts and users of English. This finding showed the potential of initial teacher education programs for fostering the PTs' negotiating identity as a nexus of multimembership. Practical teaching experiences also took the third-year PTs' engagement with the reality of teaching beyond the learning experiences in teacher education courses and facilitated interactions with L2 learners, peers, mentors, school teachers, and other stakeholders, which, according to Wenger (1998), fostered boundary encounters.

Teaching practicum experiences also helped the PTs develop a sense of belonging to the school community by aligning themselves with its rules and policies, which helped them develop their professional identity in a prescribed manner, informing the institutionally situated identity of the formal teacher. Engagement in the initial teacher education program also served as a space for the fourth-year PTs' identity development through imagining the kinds of experiences and challenges involved in activities on the part of their prospective learners' learning needs. The fourth-year PTs' identification of themselves concerning their learners' needs was also the identity development observed in the form of learner-oriented attitude toward learners as whole persons, all conducive to the imagined future identity of needs analyst.

Based on these observations, it is suggested that teacher education should begin by exploring the PTs' identities. Teacher education, viewed in this way, should emphasize TPI construction and provide opportunities for PTs to explore who they are as teachers. Furthermore, recognizing and

addressing PTs' perceptions of their professional identity can positively inform teacher education design and programs. Informed by CoP, the results of this study suggested that fostering the PTs' identity development includes a focus on such dimensions of identification as engagement, imagination, and alignment. As the results indicated, L2 PTs' engagement with imagination could provide the opportunity for identity development. Thus, to help PTs' identity development, teacher education should provide a pedagogy of imagination to move the teacher learning community's boundaries away and expedite its interaction with imagined communities. Accordingly, integrating a pedagogy of imagination into teacher education programs paves the way for PTs to imagine their possible future as L2 teachers and reflect on who they are, where they come from, who they could be, and where they can go (Wenger, 1998).

The results of this study further showed the close connection between the PTs' identity development and their engagement in the teacher learning community. As for PTs' effective engagement in the process of learning to teach, L2 teacher educators should focus on different aspects of engagement, such as PTs' diversity of perspectives and their multimembership in the teacher learning community. As the findings showed, the PTs had multiple perspectives on the various aspects of their roles. The variegation of the PTs' perceptions of their roles was mainly a result of their different apprenticeship of observation experiences as former students, micro-teaching activities, and their engagement with various components of the initial teacher education courses. Consequently, ways to realize the diversity in the PTs' perspectives in the practice of teacher education programs can be considered by L2 teacher educators. Therefore, for a teacher education program to serve as an effective learning space for TPI development, it should consider the PTs' diversity of perspectives, ideas, local experiences, teaching experiences, and observations. Regarding the PTs' multimembership in the initial teacher education and school communities as English language learners, users, analysts, and teachers, L2 teacher education should not only acknowledge the experiences that PTs

achieve through engagement in social activities of different communities but also help them develop “identity as reconciliation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 159) by addressing the tensions which emerge from the discrepancies between those communities.

Furthermore, the results showed the PTs’ propensity to view the university and school discourses as binary oppositions. Therefore, in the initial teacher education courses, it is essential that L2 teacher educators avoid reinforcing a dichotomous view of these two discourses. Instead, they can help PTs develop a worldly-wise understanding of L2 teaching and acknowledge the legitimacy of different perspectives on teaching English. Moreover, the analysis of data identified the PTs’ experience of practicing alignment with the established rules and requirements of the school setting through both adopting and examining the established knowledgebase in light of their own ideas. Understood as such, L2 teacher educators can provide opportunities for PTs to practice two-way directions of alignment. The bidirectionality of alignment integrates an emphasis on the necessity of PTs’ initial alignment with the macro structure to achieve legitimacy and membership in the L2 community with a focus on PTs’ agency and autonomy (Wenger, 1998).

Limitations are linked to the dynamicity and context-specific nature of TPI. Further contextualized research is therefore needed in other educational settings around the world to provide evidence of PTs negotiating the same type of identities in this study or several other aspects of their language teacher identity. Moreover, this study was limited to pre-service L2 teachers. Future studies can investigate serving teachers’ professional identity at different levels of their teaching within different contexts.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## **Appendix: A Sample of Interview Questions**

### **Interview questions for the second-year PTs**

1. How do you come to define your role as an English language teacher as a result of participation in the theoretical courses of the teacher education program?
2. What does it mean to you to be an English language teacher?
3. How do you think the teacher education program has affected and will probably affect your teaching?
4. What do you do to improve professionally?
5. What are your main responsibilities as a language teacher toward yourself and your students?



**Interview questions for the third-year PTs**

1. How did you come to define yourself as an English language teacher as a result of participation in the theoretical courses? After you entered the teaching practicum sessions, how did your understanding of teaching change? Did you maintain the understanding you had developed in the courses? If this understanding changed, why did it change?
2. What were your expectations of the teaching practicum before entering it? How well do you think your expectations were met?
3. Based on your teaching practicum experience, do you think you can apply the theories and methods you have learned to your teaching?
4. How do you think the teaching practicum has affected you as a teacher?
5. What are your attitudes toward schools' policies and practices? How do you deal with assigned duties which differ from your own preferences?
6. What challenges did you encounter in the teaching practicum? How did you deal with these challenges?

**Interview questions for the fourth-year PTs**

1. How has your understanding of teaching changed or improved during your participation in the teacher education program?
2. How do you define yourself as an English language teacher as a result of the completion of the teacher education program?
3. How do you describe your visions of your roles as an English language teacher in the future? Imagine you are a teacher, how do you see/picture your role as an English language teacher based on your imagination of the classroom situations, students, school policy, other teachers, and possible challenges that teaching may involve, and how do you deal with them?
4. Based on your experiences during the theoretical and teaching practicum courses, what challenges do you imagine you may face as a full-time English language teacher in Iranian schools or any other educational settings?