



The effect of E: Learning on EFL teacher identity

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Abstract

The current study explored the considerable impact of E-learning on EFL teachers' identity and described the changes on their identities after being exposed to E-learning. Therefore, it aimed to explore both internal and external E-learning factors that affected EFL teachers' identity and to highlight the degree of identity change for EFL teachers during teaching processes. This research relied on six participants' responses to semi-structured interview questions. The data were separately analyzed following the content analysis method. The results proved the impact of E-learning on EFL teachers' identity through internal factors (such as: motivation, attitudes, commitment, and autonomy) and external factors (such as: school environment and limited training programs). Furthermore, E-learning proved the great impact on changing the traditional role of the teachers and their professional identity to become facilitators of the learning process. In the light of the given findings, the researcher provided implications, limitations and future directions.

Keywords: E-learning, identity, EFL teachers, internal factors, external factors

1. Introduction

In most recent decades, English Language Teaching (ELT) dealt with the concept of teacher identity as one of the major topics of the field. Many definitions are associated with the concept of identity. According to Jansen (2001, p.242), teachers' identities are "their sense of self as well as their knowledge and beliefs, dispositions, interests, and orientation towards work and change" (as cited in Nel, 2012, p.145) [25]. As a consequence of the Information Technology (IT) use in the language teaching process; therefore, many researchers were interested in investigating teacher identity in relation to E-learning (O'Dowd, 2003; Warner, 2004) [26, 36]. According to Arkorful and Abaidoo (2014) [2], E-learning can be defined as the use of IT to reach varied materials related to the teaching or learning process. At the same time, it boosts students' learning through providing different kinds of resources and information at any time and place (Zhang *et al.*, 2004) [37]. Despite of the direct relationship between teacher identity and E-learning, there are some factors affects the identity through the technology use in the teaching practices (Gilakjani, 2013) [14]. For instance in studies by Dusick and Yildirim (2000) [11], and Valtonen *et al* (2015) [33], it is believed that positive attitudes contribute to raising teachers' ability toward integrating E-learning in the classroom. In other words, the use of E-learning depends on teachers' negative or positive attitudes (Latio, 2009) [24]. At the same vein, teachers are more eager to implement E-learning in their classrooms because it motivates students' learning (Habibi *et al.*, 2018; Ilter, 2009) [15, 19] and increases students' communication in classes (Heafner, 2004) [17]. E-learning serves for students' motivation; however, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers might not have a positive motivation or attitudes toward using E-learning in their teaching practices, which could influence their performance in the teaching process (Snoeyink & Ertmer, 2001) [29]. Additionally, teachers' beliefs toward E-learning define its implementation in a professional way (Vannatta &

Fordham, 2004) [35]. According to Hobbs and Tuzel (2017) [18], the beliefs and attitudes of the teachers about technology, whether it is positive or negative, influence their way of integrating it in the teaching practices and change teachers' traditional role to facilitators of students' learning process (Chan & Elliott, 2004) [6]. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions toward E-learning are considered as an influential factor that construct or reconstruct their identity and they are directly related to the internal and external factors of the educational environment (Lanahan & Boysen, 2005; Smerdon, *et al.*, 2000) [23, 28]. In a study by Roca and Gagné (2008) [27], teachers' enjoyment in employing E-learning is determined by their feelings about its productivity or less productivity in the teaching process. Moreover, there is a significant relationship between teacher's autonomy and E-learning that encourages them to continue using technological devices in classrooms (Roca & Gagné, 2008) [27]. At the same vein, commitment to teaching creates a strong feeling for teachers to adapt technology in the teaching practices (Skelton, 2012) [30], which might have a positive effect on the teaching process. On the other hand, school environment is a key external factor that affects teacher identity in relation to E-learning. The impact of school environment is mostly visible when there is shortage of technological devices in schools (Smerdon, *et al.*, 2000) [28], lack of technical skills (Dusick & Yildirim, 2000) [11], and limited technological training (Swan & Hofer, 2011) [32]. All these mentioned factors lead to teachers' isolation (Lam, 2002) [22].

Therefore, the developmental environment that depends dramatically on using technology in the teaching process serves to shape and reshape teachers' identity based on their situational understanding (Van Veen & Slegers, 2006) [34], and their relationship with information technology (Alvarez, 2008) [1]. Previous studies illustrate that technology; particularly E-learning, might affect foreign language teacher identity due to the low levels of technical proficiency and technological skills (Dusick & Yildirim,

2000) [11].

The results of the previous studies explain the presence of difficulties or challenges that can be presented in teachers' negative feelings toward the integration of E-learning in classrooms (Chen, 2008) [7]. Besides, the implementation of E-learning is believed to transform the teachers' role in the teaching practice. It shifts from an on-stage teacher to a facilitator who guides and encourages students' learning (Baran *et al.*, 2011; Bawane & Spector, 2009) [3, 4]. However, teachers may not have accessibility to technology in a sufficient way (Spencer, 2011) [31]. Therefore, more accessibility is required to also develop teachers' technological skills to promote their professional identity (Chere-Masopha, 2011) [8]. At the same vein, Englund *et al* (2017) [13], investigated the changeable role of novice and expert teachers after using technology in a Swedish university. Chere-Masopha (2011) [8]; on the other hand, examined the influence of personal, professional, situational and contextual factors of technology on secondary teachers' identity. Additionally, Hanson (2009) [16], studied the effects of E-learning on academic business and sciences academic identity. The current study is different in its emphasis on studying the impact of E-learning on EFL teachers' identity in one of the universities in Cyprus. Furthermore, it attends to explore the internal and external factors that influence their identity during teaching practices. Therefore, the present research directs to answer these two questions:

1. What are the factors that affect EFL teacher identity while integrating E-learning in the teaching practices?
2. To what extent does E-learning change EFL teacher identity?

This research might be significant in that it might raise educational policies' attention in terms of providing more technology-related training programs to EFL teachers. In turns, it would contribute to developing their skills in using educational technological devices in classrooms. Besides, the study's findings might improve schools' awareness to factors that construct and reconstruct EFL teachers' identity as related to E-learning.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The current study explored factors that affect EFL teacher identity when implementing E-learning in the teaching practices. Additionally, it examined the extent to which E-learning changes EFL teacher's identity. Therefore, the researcher designed the present research approach based on a qualitative method that permits for a deeper understanding of the participants in particular phenomena (Bengtsson, 2016) [5]. The qualitative approach encompasses a semi-structured interview used to collect deeper insights about the participants' attitudes, thoughts, and actions (Edwards & Holland, 2013) [12].

2.2 Participants and Context

The data of this study were collected from EFL teachers in one of the Cypriot universities in April 2017 spring semester. The participants were (N=6) EFL teachers amongst which four were males and two were females (M=4, F=2) and were enrolled in a Ph.D. program of English Language Teaching. Those teachers were of different ages, genders, and nationalities. The researcher used the judgmental sampling technique to choose the

participants based on appropriate standards (Karatepe, 2013) [21]. These criteria were to have EFL teachers enrolled in a Ph.D. program and come from national and international contexts.

2.3 Material

The semi-structured interview questions were designed thoughtful insight and review of available literature about E-learning and identity review. The participants responded to the interview questions in the department of Foreign Language Education (FLE) in one of the universities of Cyprus. The interview consisted of two parts: the first, it was related to the general information (such as gender, age, country, teaching experience, teaching method, and training program regarding E-learning). The second, it included statements of semi-structured interviews collected together after considering the factors that affected EFL teacher identity while applying E-learning in teaching practices. Other 15 questions were designed to investigate the E-learning impact on EFL teacher identity.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The data were collected in a one-week time. The interview timing ranged between 15 to 27 minutes. The researcher was able to collect six samples following an open-ended type of questions, which gave the respondents the opportunity to express their thoughts and naturally interpret their ideas regarding E-learning and teacher identity. The researcher designed these items to avoid achieving similar answers by the samples. Each participant signed a consent letter before engaging in responding to semi-structured interviews and after grasping the aims of the study and use of data. The participants were also informed about the freedom of quitting the interview process whenever a feeling of discomfort occurs. Later, the data were recorded using a tape-recorder then responses were transcribed into written scripts using a "Word Software Program" which after was categorized based on the most frequent and accurate responses for content analysis purposes. The interview data were separately analyzed following the content analysis method. As stated by Berelson (1952), it is a descriptive, organized and objective, process of analyzing the data in the studied phenomena (as cited in Bengtsson, 2016) [5].

3. Finding and Discussion

The current study relied on the responses of six participants from different nationalities; namely: Algerian (1), Iranian (1), Nigerian (1), Turkish (1), Turkish-Cypriot (1), and Syrian (1). Their ages ranged from 26 to 32 year olds, four of them were males and the remaining were females. Regarding the participants' teaching experiences, it was limited between two to nine years in both public and private schools. The participating teachers also attended different types of training programs about E-learning, such as: seminars, conferences, and courses. Besides, they all practiced communicative approach and E-learning in their English language teaching.

3.1 Factors impact EFL teacher identity while applying e: learning in teaching practices

3.1.1 Internal factors

In the first research question: 'What are the factors that affect EFL teacher identity while integrating E-learning in

the teaching practices?' The researcher focused on highlighting the internal factors that affect EFL teacher identity when using E-learning in the foreign language teaching. All respondents stated that their motivation toward using E-learning in the classroom is triggered by students' engagement in learning the foreign language. They also stated that electronic devices contribute to raising students' motivation in the classroom as similar to claims by Heafner (2004) [17], Habibi *et al* (2018) [15], and Ilter (2009) [19]. For instance, some participant stated that:

"...I support using E-learning in the class, it might help students' learning, and it enhances students' understanding the content. It increases communication among students and teachers..."

"...I love using E-learning for language teaching because it helps to get the attention of students, they stick more, communicate more, incorporate more, and be able to answer questions more..."

At the same time, EFL teachers use E-learning in the classroom because it provides different types of recourses that help their teaching practices and achieve a better learning than the traditional method. For example, some participants mentioned that:

"...I believe E-learning is more than effective than the traditional method because I have many different resources visual and audial source of information. I can stimulate different areas of learners' minds or brains while using these electronic devices than traditional approach. So I prefer E-learning..."

"...With the technology and the resources that we have, using traditional methods might not respond to the learners' needs..."

One participant illustrated that the motivation to integrate E-learning in the classroom comes from the purpose of timesaving. In other words, the technology helps EFL teachers in achieving the aims of the teaching process with perfect time management. The teacher mentioned that:

"...For example, in the traditional way, when you want to look up for a word in a dictionary, students may open several pages, see examples, most of students do not have an idea what is phonic transcription is. Then they look at the word, see the phonic transection, which tells you how to pronounce the word; they will not be able to understand. But if they use online dictionary, E-dictionary, they can have access to the original word, to the pronunciation of the word, to different examples, to the synonym of the word, etc., in a short period of time..."

Additionally, E-learning provides several explanations for using different types of electronic devices by students in classrooms. The teacher clarified that:

"...I remember I always asked my students to utilize their phones for momental research during the class. Actually, all devices are welcomed in my classrooms; it just makes students more involved in the learning process..."

Furthermore, in this study, the entire EFL teachers stated that their motivation for using E-learning in their teaching practices derives from their students' and their feeling of enjoyment when integrating technology as has been explained in a study by Roca and Gagné (2008) [27]. Similarly, one teacher stated that:

"...Like there was an activity that I was doing in the class few months ago, which required students to use mobile phones so they were motivated and I enjoy using it..."

At the same vein, using E-learning methods by EFL teachers contributes to an increase in their desire to pursue in its implementation for future teaching practice (Skelton, 2012) [30]. The majority of teachers explained that:

"...Looking at benefits of technology and benefits of E-learning, I am more than motivated to continue using E-learning technology..."

"...Yes I do have, I always have this desire, because for me it facilitates learning and teaching as well..."

"...Yes I have the desire because I think it is an obligation..."

"...Definitely, it is a massive field and there are a lot to be learnt, so as long as there is something to learn I am in it..."

On the other hand, one of the samples illustrated the limited support of educational policies about integrating E-learning in foreign language teaching. The latter fact can be considered as a hindering factor that diminished teacher's motivation in the light of technological development.

"...Policy should be interested because unless the policy wants it the minister of education can do anything about it. And as a teacher you should be supported by the policy, I mean you cannot buy one or two tablets from your own bucket but what about other students, what are you going to do with them. For me, I am doing my best to teach but some friends leave it, they said that I am tired, no one supporting me, stated policy all over the same so they leave..."

Teachers' attitudes toward using E-learning are considered as an internal factor that contributes to affecting teachers' identity. Negative attitudes and feelings about the utilization of E-learning in the classrooms were expressed between the participants (as in: Chen, 2008; Snoeyink & Ertmer, 2001) [7, 29]. These negative feelings result in levels of anxiety and fear about using technological devices for different purposes. For instance, technical errors, limited technological training (Swan & Hofer, 2011) [32], and students' background contribute to forging these negative feelings. Some respondents stated that:

"...Let us say not fear, I have concern of failing using the technology in the classroom, this failing is resulting of technical errors. Sometimes, when I use the technology I have electricity outage, I have connection breakdown..."

"...Yes I experienced it well; they tried to introduce me

something new, I felt a little bit anxious about it. I said are we going to be trained about this? ... So, I want to feel secure first of all otherwise yes I have fear..."

Despite of the contribution of E-learning in creating a negative feeling, EFL teachers demonstrated an augmented level of trust in applying technology in their teaching processes as some teachers mentioned:

"...Personally, I do, I got more benefits from using E-learning in the classroom..."

"...Well, I trust it to a great extent because of the learning differences among the learners. For example, some learners do prefer learning with visual information, other learners prefer with audial information, while I cannot reach these various resources in traditional approaches..."

"...of course, E-learning is wonderful, it gives students the knowledge... So I trust E-learning..."

Moreover, the massive development of educational technological devices imposes a feeling of responsibility on teachers to employ E-learning in their teaching processes (Ikenouye & Clarke, 2018) ^[20]. Besides, technology helps teachers to develop self-satisfaction about their foreign language teaching practices. Therefore, the sense of responsibility and self-satisfaction dramatically increase EFL teacher's commitment toward their job fulfillment (Skelton, 2012) ^[30]. For example, some of the participants mentioned that:

"...Through E-learning students participate a lot and when my student are participating in the class, I have a sense of job satisfaction as a teacher, I feel I am really a good teacher..."

"...I think it is my responsibility to give some time outside the class to talk to students, try to integrate them into this new environment and motivate them first so that the situation will motivate me..."

Regarding EFL teachers' autonomy, it was considered as one of the internal factors that shape teachers' identity in relation to E-learning. In this study, the respondents demonstrated a range of autonomous attitudes while using E-learning in language teaching in varied contexts (Roca & Gagné, 2008) ^[27]. A number of participants stated that E-learning forces foreign language teachers to look for new materials and resources that can support students' learning outcomes from one hand, and can increase their autonomy on the other hand.

"...I can stimulate different areas of learners minds or brains while using these electronic devices than traditional approach. So I prefer E-learning..."

"...For adulthood, they do not want someone to control them, so E-learning is the ability to not being controlled so by doing these they are be able to learn..."

From another perspective, E-learning is perceived as a factor that encourages for teachers' non-autonomous attitude in the classroom. In another words, integrating technological devices in the classroom makes teachers lose control of their learners' practices during the teaching process. Some of participants explained that:

"...It is a bit difficult to control, because I cannot control their minds, I cannot observe what they are doing..."

"...I was doing my best on the stage in the classroom, I just recognized ones of them instead of listening to me they were playing games and this is the negative side of this situation..."

"...They may learn or play games, sometimes they chat. E-learning does not give teachers the ability to monitor the language learning process like the traditional approach..."

Therefore, the internal factors such as: motivation, attitude, autonomy, and commitment to teaching affect EFL teachers' identity when using E-learning in their teaching processes. Similar to Day *et al* (2006) ^[10], recommend examining these factors that are key determinant in shaping teachers' identity in diverse contexts.

3.1.2 External Factors

As for external factors, the school environment influences EFL teachers' identity during the use of E-learning in the teaching process. The respondents of the current study mentioned that electricity problems, unavailability of technical materials, Lack of facilities (Smerdon, *et al.*, 2000) ^[28], and shortage of authentic resources contribute to constructing EFL teachers' identity as related to E-learning. Some of these factors are stated among teachers as the following:

"...Sometime, it might consider as a problem when there is no electricity, so I should change my plan..."

"...Also, the availability of E-learning tools, school environment is important thing as well, the facility they have, resources in the classroom. Like in some classes there are smart boards but as a teacher you are not allowed to use them, I think it is kind of decoration. Also, there is a projector in the class but you have to bring your laptop and connect it to the projector..."

Furthermore, the data analysis illustrates that limited training programs about E-learning implementation in foreign language teaching lead to negative attitudes or feelings by EFL teachers. These attitudes and feeling are therefore a result of insufficient knowledge and inadequate technical skills in using these technological tools in classrooms as have been previously explained by Swan and Hofer (2011) ^[32]. As a reaction to the limitations of training programs about E-learning, a tremendous work on accessible training programs for teachers' preparation to deal with information technology is highly recommended (Christensen & Knezek, 2018) ^[9]. For example, some respondents explained that:

"...Pre-service education program should at least have one specific separate course about utilizing technology..."

"...I need to have skills and the knowledge to be able to utilize it effectively. For example, I do not know how to use my computer in the teaching process..."

3.2 The impact of E-learning on EFL teachers' identity

The second research question: 'To what extent does E-learning change EFL teachers' identity?' was forwarded to

point out the common responses that clarify the degree of identity change for EFL teachers' identity after being exposed to E-learning practices. To state the matter differently, E-learning contributes to a change in teachers' role from teacher-centered to a facilitator (Baran *et al.*, 2011; Bawane & Spector, 2009) ^[3, 4]. For example, some of the respondents stated that:

"...In E-learning, I am more like a facilitator, so that changes my role and obviously it affects my identity the way I consider myself as a teacher..."

"...I need to be seem like an up to date person, I am following up to date tendency, popular technology devices, I need to seem like a role module for my students..."

"...It makes me realize that I am just another learner I will never stop learning and makes me a better teacher that's how I think it contributes to my identity. I think this is one of the key role of technology, it helps me in reshaping my identity..."

Another interesting point deals with the construction of professional identity through E-learning by one of the teachers as has been previously discussed in a study by Chere-Masopha (2011) ^[8]. The teacher explained that:

"...I have also myself learn how to do things using technology even if the class or school management does not ask me to do. I have to do that so it is part of continuing my professional development. So it helps changing my professional identity..."

To sum up, the data analysis reveals a number of internal and external factors that influence EFL teachers' identity in E-learning. Additionally, E-learning contributes to shaping teacher identity during the foreign language teaching process.

4. Conclusion

This research was conducted in the department of FLE by the contribution of EFL teachers (who were Ph.D. candidates at the same department) to investigate the E-learning effect on EFL teacher identity. The results demonstrate that the internal factors such as: motivation, attitude, commitment, and autonomy affect EFL teacher identity while integrating E-learning in the foreign language teaching. Additionally, the external factors such as: school environment and limitation in the training programs contribute in shaping EFL teachers' identity through the application of E-learning in teaching practices. Furthermore, E-learning proves the great impact on changing the traditional role of the teachers and their professional identity to become facilitators of the learning process.

The findings demonstrate that educational policies should provide more technology-related training programs that would contribute to developing EFL teachers' skills in using educational technological devices in classrooms. Furthermore, educational policy stakeholders are asked to offer sufficient technical devices to increase teachers' motivation in their teaching practices. Schools, also, should devote careful attention to the factors that might construct and reconstruct EFL teachers' identity as related to E-learning. Considering the limitation and future research, the first deals with the selected method of semi-structured

interview for collecting data. Future research might consider a quantitative method as an additional approach to measure the mentioned factors and to gain more in-depth answers. The second deals with the focus of the study on Ph.D. students as respondents for data collection. Future research therefore might be conducted with different participants to have the results more generalizable.

5. References

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