

# Experienced Efl Teachers' Professional Identity Construction: from Face-to-Face to Online Teaching

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**Abstract:** It has been established that professional identity impacts teachers' exercise of agency, autonomy and career development. Understanding the influence of teaching context on teachers' professional identity construction is crucial for supporting them to cope with challenges brought by contextual factors. Based on three EFL (English as a Foreign Language) experienced teachers' narratives of their experiences as they confronted with the transition from f2f to online teaching, this paper sought to understand the influence of the changed educational context on their professional identity. Results reported that all participants experienced reconstructions of professional identity in daily routines and knowledge/skills, but their teaching beliefs underwent different transitions. Additionally, adaptations to routines and knowledge/skills may not lead to belief negotiation, and existing beliefs may hinder or support their adjustments to the changes.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, with the advance of information and communications technology (ICT), teaching methods and techniques have been developed with the integration of information technology, which is believed to be the trend for future education. It is notable that during the events caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, online teaching integrated with ICT tools involved all Chinese universities in extending the class beyond the traditional face-to-face(f2f) classrooms. Nevertheless, teachers may find it struggling to enact online teaching, not just for the difference of fundamental interactions from f2f class, but also due to the lack of knowledge and skills preparation (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Baran, 2011). Also, communications play a crucial role in foreign language teaching, so EFL teachers may perceive substantial changes in terms of teaching methods, class organization, teacher-student communications and even the broader educational context, which would further affect their previous perceived professional identity (Jonker, März, & Voogt, 2018; Hargreaves, 2005). Given the sudden switch from traditional f2f teaching to complete online teaching, there is an imperative to further explore how the changed educational context affects teachers' professional identity construction.

## 2. Teachers' Professional Identity: Definition and Construction

Teachers' professional identity emerged in the 1990s as a separate research area (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). For years, its definitions and explanations varied with different emphases placed in the researches. Taking the perspective of "self", Brooke(1994), Farrell(2010) and Jonker(2018) propose that professional identity is how teachers characterize themselves as being professionals in the teaching context. From the perspective of development, most researches take a sociocultural view (e.g. Lasky, 2005; Eslamdoost, King, & Tajeddin, 2020; Gao, Tao, & Gong, 2018). Thus, professional identity can be seen as a dynamic construct through interactions with personal and sociocultural contexts (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Scotland, 2014). To trace the changes in the construction of teachers' professional identity, this paper refers to it as a dynamic concept.

The ongoing professional identity construction process is developed by teachers' active engagement and adaptations to multiple factors and conditions (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014). Regarding online teaching context, Laat, Lally, Lipponen and Simons (2007) indicate that teachers behave differently in digital and traditional f2f teaching environments. Hence, for the majority of teachers

who have adapted to the traditional teaching, online teaching presents challenges to their professional identity in terms of different teaching contexts and teaching experiences. Specifically, daily routines, knowledge/skills and beliefs are prominent factors that influence identity construction in ICT environment (Jonker, 2018). Specifically, daily routines include lesson preparation, lesson enactment and teacher-student interactions; knowledge/skills refer to pedagogical, technological, organizational and content knowledge and skills; beliefs refer to teachers' perceptions about teaching, learning and education (Jonker, 2018).

Through interpretation and reinterpretation of the interactions with personal and external factors, teachers' professional identity keeps on constructing and reconstructing over time (Eslamdoost, King, & Tajeddin, 2020). Lasky (2005) proposes that this construction process is evolving over career stages, which means it may be unchangeable or fixed at certain stages (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Long & Huang, 2017). For novice teachers, who are commonly identified as beginners with less than 2-year teaching experiences (Gatbonton, 2008), Rodríguez and Mckay(2010) suggest that they differ from experienced teachers who have worked more than 5 years in terms of knowledge, skills and beliefs. Therefore, novice and experienced teachers may also perceive different struggles in professional identity construction. In addition, since most novice teachers experience reality shocks caused by various and unpredictable authentic educational contexts in the beginning stage (Xu, 2013), it is hard to trace the single impact of online teaching context on their identity construction. On the contrary, experienced teachers hold relatively stable professional identity developed from long-term f2f teaching experiences, which may provide a better insight into the changes in professional identity as they adapted themselves to the new pedagogy, technology-based tools and modes of communication in online teaching context.

### 3. Research Aim and Questions

This paper aimed to examine how experienced teachers' professional identity were affected as they went through the transition from traditional f2f teaching to online teaching. The main research question was: what changes happen to participants' professional identity concerning daily routines, knowledge/skills and beliefs after the enactment of online teaching?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Participants

This study was conducted in a local university located in central China. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, this university launched online teaching since the beginning of the semester. Taking full account of factors, such as age, years of teaching, degree and professional title, three experienced teachers --- Zheng, Xia and Li (pseudonyms) were selected as participants with average 18.7 years of teaching in School of Foreign Languages (see Table 1 for an overview). Zheng is the director of College English department, both Xia and Li were awarded in provincial competitions and selected as outstanding teachers in the past 5 years. Before the event, none of the participants ever tried online teaching.

Table 1 Basic Information Of the Participants

Teacher	Gender	Age	Years of teaching	Education background	Professional title	Teaching subject	Prior online teaching experience
Zheng	Female	52	29	MA in English Education	Professor	College English II	No
Xia	Female	41	17	MA in English Education	Associate professor	College English II	No
Li	Male	36	10	MA in Applied Linguistics	Lecturer	College English II	No

## 4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative approach was adopted to investigate the three participants with a specific focus on their perceptions towards the three aspects related to professional identity construction. Narrative inquiry, which is generally used in identity research (Tsui, 2007, Long & Huang, 2017), reveals people's self-perception and self-identity in external contexts through story telling and retelling (Schultz & Ravitch, 2013). In this study, interviews guided by open-ended questions were carried out with each participant after 18 weeks of online teaching practices, ranging from 40 to 60 minutes. Participants were asked to recall and recount their experiences before and after the online teaching. This way, they could be directed to compare the different situations in f2f and online teaching, which made it easier to focus on the possible changes they might encounter with regard to professional identity construction.

Participants' narratives were audio-taped, transcribed and sorted according to f2f and online teaching contexts. Firstly, transcripts were read several times in order to establish an overall understanding of each participants' experiences. Secondly, open-coding was conducted to the transcripts to generate a list of analytic codes which had been continuously relabeled and revised. Then, by conducting axial coding, codes were examined by focusing on the three aspects that impacted professional identity construction. Finally, selective coding was employed to compare and contrast the similarities and differences in the three participants' identity construction processes and outcomes.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Daily Routines Adaptions

It is interesting to note that all participants referred the beginning 1-2 weeks as their transition period to online teaching. During this time, Zheng and Li applied live broadcast to simulate f2f classroom experience, for which they prepared the same lesson content, materials and activities as f2f lessons. Having tried a few lessons, they both started to reflect on their practices and referred to the lack of real communication was the biggest problem. Zheng remarked:

I could not see students' faces! In f2f classroom, I know at a glance whether they have understood or not. In the live broadcast, the audio question-answer part took too much time due to the network lag, making it hard for me to go with the lesson scheme.

Xia tried recorded lesson in the beginning weeks, so she had to follow a different way from f2f lessons to design the content and procedures by utilizing digital tools on a mobile learning platform. She found challenges of identifying students' actual performances, because she only got feedback from students' video watching duration time, the discussion board and homework. Due to the lack of audio-visual interactions, she felt she was "losing control of the class".

In later teaching, adaptations and solutions were made based on their reflections. For lesson preparation, all participants revealed they need more time than traditional lessons. Li reported he spent a lot of time gathering or creating materials that could be used in online environment. Xia noted:

The preparation work was more intense. Although I had taught this course before, I had to revisit the content in details and then decide what should be present in live broadcast and what should be assigned as self-study tasks before and after class.

For subsequent lesson enactment, all participants employed live broadcast, which they reflected as the means to transfer knowledge as f2f lessons. However, they could not cover that much content as in f2f lessons because they had to pause to check students' understanding and wait for replies. Group chat and mobile learning platform were applied as complements to live broadcast. Xia mentioned she posted project-based group activities on Xuexitong, using which she could stimulate students' group learning and ensure they were also involved after class. Zheng and Li used group chats to make up the missing discussion part in the class. According to Zheng: "Since they are my old students, they were active in communicating with me and telling me what problems did they have". Li reported: "Although I was much more involved in collecting materials than in traditional

lessons, MOOCs and other Internet resources really saved me much time in explaining every point. Though I did not know whether some of the students just negatively learn for test”.

## **5.2 Knowledge/Skills Adaptions**

Knowledge/skills adapted to online teaching were examined through technology, pedagogy, content and organization aspects. In the beginning 1-2 weeks of online teaching, Zheng and Li only saw the need to gain technological knowledge and skills because they deemed the differences between online teaching and f2f teaching just a matter of form. Later, failures in recognizing students’ understanding made them realize that technological knowledge is a basic but not a pivotal point to successful online teaching. Li reflected that ICT tools must be applied with specific pedagogy to facilitate learning activities. Therefore, they accepted that they need to acquire additional knowledge. Zheng recalled as follows:

I went through many educational ICT reforms, like the application of PPT slides, Micro-teaching, etc. It is kind of interesting to learn new things, and it is never too late to learn. Hence, I do not see learning how to teach online a tough task. However, for high-quality teaching, a good grasp of technological knowledge is not enough. It should go along with pedagogical knowledge.

Through the whole process of online teaching, both Zheng and Li noted the content knowledge was barely changed due to their long-existing understanding of College English course. As for organizational knowledge, Li proposed he had to adapt different planning and managing skills according to the teaching activities conducted so that he could make sure students best approach the goal. Moreover, he had to study teaching methods in details in order to make the teaching procedures go in the right way. While Zheng still followed the f2f teaching procedures in live broadcast, she did not identify the development of additional organizational skills.

Different from other participants, Xia identified organization and pedagogy as the skills that she struggled mostly through the whole semester. In addition, she did not meet many difficulties in technological and content knowledge application. She remarked:

Compared with f2f teaching, I had to grasp more teaching strategies and organizing skills to active students’ online learning. I always liked things to go under my control, but I could not know whether students were involved or not while sitting in front of computers. So I had to plan activities or questions to stimulate students to do something all the time, like thinking, answering, and group discussing. That can also be called learning by doing.

## **5.3 Negotiation of Beliefs**

The three participants reported differently on their beliefs towards teaching job and online teaching as they transitioned from f2f to online teaching. Zheng did not see any changes in her beliefs before and after online teaching. She believed it is the teacher’s responsibility to make every effort to make teaching workable even under tough conditions, so she was willing to meet new contextual changes from the start. Besides, her firm belief in lifelong learning supported her to go through various technological challenges. In her online teaching practices, she tried to duplicate f2f classroom by using live broadcast and transferred knowledge by using the traditional teacher-centered method most of the time, which is also the foremost task she believed teachers should undertake. Although she noted that lack of in-class communications was the biggest problem in online teaching, it was still workable by utilizing communication platform to improve out-of-class interactions.

Xia mentioned that her belief towards teaching job was affected by online teaching experiences. She concluded her position in f2f lessons as a manager. She perceived that most students were unable to maintain focus through the lessons. Therefore, by presenting content knowledge, providing guidance and monitoring students’ reactions, she tried to thoroughly control students’ learning and put herself at the center of the lessons. She commented that teachers were always told the advantages of student-centered teaching method, but the large class size and the class time limit made the f2f teaching most of the time teacher-centered. Whereas, online teaching led her trial to a more student-centered teaching practice, which accordingly made her regarded herself more like organizer and designer. She commented:

I was more concerned about getting students involved, so I consider more about students' needs and interest in order to arouse their learning autonomy. Since I could not cover that much contents in live broadcast, I assigned self-study tasks or group work after class. This pattern worked like a blended curriculum, which successfully stimulated students' active learning and reduced my workload.

Li believed that teachers were primarily transmitters of knowledge both in f2f and online lessons. He put forward that online and f2f teaching were essentially the same, and the key for adapting to online teaching was the clear teaching objectives and proper employment of resources. Given the increasingly enriched electronic teaching resources, online teaching no longer required simple knowledge transfer from teachers. MOOCs, Micro-lessons and other video resources provide multiple language inputs instead of the single input from the subject teacher, which help prevent students from boredom and develop their self-learning ability. Thus, he reflected himself as a resource-provider most of the time through online teaching. Nevertheless, he held a slightly negative attitude towards the teaching effect of the online course. He proposed that College English course requires the development of comprehensive ability to use the language, but online lessons only train listening, reading, translating and writing skills, not involving speaking.

## 6. Discussion

From three participants' narratives of their professional identity adaptations to online teaching, it can be seen that they underwent different changes in terms of daily routines, knowledge/skills and beliefs. For Zheng, she did not recognize any changes in her teaching belief. As she underwent the contextual transition, she actively accepted online teaching with support of her intrinsic belief in teachers' responsibilities. In the beginning weeks, she directly transferred the same pedagogical, content and organizational knowledge gained in f2f teaching to online teaching. After realizing the limitations of online teaching, she developed specific pedagogy along with technological skills, which was coherent with her personal belief in lifelong learning. Through the whole online teaching practice, it can be seen that daily routines and knowledge/skills adaptations were made to Zheng's online teaching, but her teacher-centered teaching belief was unaffected. Her existing belief in teaching job hindered new trails, and therefore, all efforts she made were to duplicate prior f2f teaching environment.

For Xia, who implemented mostly teacher-centered f2f lessons, she underwent changes in professional identity with regard to daily routines, knowledge and beliefs. She struggled with the feeling of "losing control" from the beginning, which made her unable to match daily routines with her existing belief. With the learning of specific pedagogical and organizational skills in order to cope with the changed teaching context, she gradually went from thoroughly controlling to assisting students' learning. She also perceived changes in her position from a manager in f2f teaching to the combination of organizer and designer in online teaching, which reflected the transition in her teaching belief from teacher-centered to more student-centered. It should be noted that she held the same objective no matter in which context, that is to facilitate students' learning. Therefore, she was open to new teaching routines and flexibly adapted knowledge and skills by combining technological tools. Moreover, she even saw online teaching a stimulus for exploring new ways to promote teaching quality. The conflicts between realities and teaching belief prompted Xia to adapt daily routines and knowledge to the new context, and the successful implement accordingly resulted in belief adaptations.

Li showed confidence in his competence for enacting online teaching since the beginning due to his successful f2f teaching experiences. Although he continuously saw teaching job as knowledge transferring, he adapted the source of knowledge and the way to deliver knowledge, for which he took resource providing as a major task in online teaching. It seemed that his professional identity was adapted to online environment on the practical level so that he could fix problems emerged during the practices. However, his professional identity was unaffected on the conceptual level, which still maintained the teacher-centered view of teaching job. In addition, the negative sentiment towards the effect of online teaching also accounted for his barely altered professional identity.

EFL teachers in this study more or less experienced reconstruction of professional identity in the aspects of daily routines and knowledge/skills, but their teaching beliefs underwent different transitions. All teachers shared professional identity traits as reflective practitioners and learners, which further led to their constant experiments and improvements. Nevertheless, since Zheng only set making online teaching workable as her primary goal, she made temporary adaptations that did not lead to reconstruction of her professional identity. For Xia, employing student-centered pedagogical and organizational skills achieved significant teaching effects, which was accompanied by reconstruction of professional identity. Li sought opportunities to make knowledge transferring flexible and efficient in the online teaching context, which prompted him to build an additional identity of a resource provider but did not alter his underlying belief in teacher-centered curriculum.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has shown the changes in experienced EFL teachers' perceptions of their professional identity under the sudden transition from f2f to online teaching context. Professional identity construction is a dynamic and complex process formed across continuous adaptations to daily routines, knowledge/skills and beliefs. On the one hand, teachers' adaptations to online context are supported or hindered by their inner beliefs and confidence, which were formed from long-term teaching practices. On the other hand, their practices and perception towards the effects of actual online teaching practices, in turn, affect their beliefs. Although the epidemic forced this online teaching, it should not be simply regarded as a temporary substitute for f2f teaching but an opportunity for teachers to reflect on and find possible breakthroughs on previous teaching. Given the development of teaching with ICT, it is critical for teachers to adapt multiple professional identities in light of educational changes.

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