



## The construction of language teacher identity in Ghana: A case study

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### Article Info

Article History:  
Received on 22  
February 2024  
Approved on 27 June  
2024  
Published on 1 July 2024

*Keywords: Identity;  
teacher identity;  
language teacher  
identity; identity and  
teachers of English*

### Abstract

The study investigated how English language teachers in Ghana construct their identities as teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ESL teachers who were selected through purposive sampling. The data was analysed qualitatively by coding, identifying, categorising and interpreting the emerging themes. It was found that the ESL teachers' identity is defined by three elements: personal attributes, professional attributes, and contextual factors. On the personal level, the identity of the ESL teachers is characterised by passion, diligence, self-efficacy, and sense of inadequacy. Professionally, subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and technological knowledge were found. Lastly, key contextual identity defining factors are curriculum and educational policies, classroom conditions and intrinsic motivation from teachers' success stories. The study recommends further investigation into other factors such as gender on non-native ESL teachers identity formation.

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p-ISSN 2252-6706 | e-ISSN 2721-4532

## INTRODUCTION

Research on teacher identity has received copious attention across various disciplines (Ampadu, et.al, 2021; Ayinselya, 2020; Yidana, 2017; Brandenburg & Gervasoni, 2016; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Sachs, 2005). This renewed interest in the concept is due to the unwavering position of scholars of the inalienable nature of the impact of teachers' professional identity development on their classroom performance (Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2017; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Teacher identity though not the only defining factor of quality education, has been found to be an integral part of it as "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (McKinsey & McKinsey, 2007:16).

However, in accounting for the complexities of teaching as well as re-defining the teachers' role as facilitator and co-creator of knowledge, there has been less attention paid to the identity of the teacher as subject matter expert (Bennett & Carre, 1993), which includes language teacher identity (Henceforth LTI). As a result, some scholars have called for deep reflections on LTI (Richards, 2021; Norton, 2013; 2000; Block, 2007).

While not a widely studied area within the field of language teaching, LTI plays a major role in unveiling how language teachers and student-teachers situate themselves in the social contexts they live in and in their classroom practices (Richards, 2021). Consequently, an understanding of the language teacher's identity construction is crucial in exposing the tensions and realities of language teaching and deepen the discussion on how ESL teachers perceive themselves and others around them in advancing the field of language teaching.

By far, the narratives on LTI centre on the global north (Martel, 2015; Darvin & Norton, 2015; Freeman, 2013; Danielewicz, 2005) and as Torres-Rocha (2019) indicated, these studies feature universal perspectives with native speakers often projected as determinants of the standard. A case has thus been made for studies to explore LTI in non-native contexts. Existing studies on the subject are dominated by native speakers domiciled mostly within English as a Foreign Language contexts (Li, 2023; Mansouri, 2021; Barahona, 2016; Trent, 2014) and a few ESL contexts (Hafeez, 2023; Stranger-Johannessen & Norton, 2017; Farrell, 2011; Miler, 2009). What is of scholarly interest here is how non-native teachers of English construct their identities as teachers of English as a second language in a non-native context.

In an ESL context such as Ghana there is generally a paucity of studies on LTI. The few studies conducted on the topic of identity in education are limited to teachers and pre-service teachers' construction of their identities (Ampadu, et.al, 2021; Ayinselya, 2020) and teachers' perception of their professional skills (Yidana, 2017).

Although in Ghana teachers of English are largely second language speakers, there is little or no study on how they construct their unique identity, firstly as teachers of ESL and secondly in a non-native context. This study therefore seeks to explore how ESL teachers in Ghana enact their professional identity in a non-native context. Specifically, the study seeks to determine factors that define the identity of ESL teachers in Ghana and how each factor is manifested.

### Identity and teacher identity

Identity is a multi-dimensional concept. It may simply mean how a person conceptualises him or herself, how other people relate with him/her and the characteristics that define the person (Pennington, 2015). Identity may also refer to 'how people answer the question, "Who are you"?' (Vignoles, 2017: 1). By this means, identity is how we understand and express who we are; how we position ourselves in relation to others in different situations; and those aspects of oneself that we choose to express in an interaction (Richards, 2021).

Often, features such as personal characteristics, talents, profession and socio-economic status, and group affiliations are used as a basis for marking people's identity (Gee, 2001; Pennington & Richards, 2016). At the same time, individuals may model their identity on societal value-constructs that define good and appropriate behaviours in a given situation. Such value-constructs serve us points of reference for the individual in modelling their identity.

In addition to these, identity is also defined by the context and activity one is engaged in. In this case, identity becomes a dynamic construct shaped by the context of teaching, for instance at the lower or higher level (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Other times, the constraints and restraints on identity are direct responses to the social networks and the kind of people and activities one engages with (Martel & Wang, 2015).

Identity can be personal or professional or a combination of both. On the one hand, personal identity is characterised by features such as age, gender, occupation, self-image, values, beliefs, among others (Richards, 2021). Personal identity could also be realised through verbal and non-verbal interactions with others (Martel & Wang, 2015; Clymer, et.al, 2020). On the other hand, professional identity is usually underpinned by the occupation of the individual and often intertwined with aspects of personal identity. One type of professional identity is teacher identity.

Identity plays a special role in teaching, as it is the case in other professions. A teacher's identity is therefore the culmination of both personal and professional traits. Sachs (2005:15) believes that teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience.

Obviously, this assertion by Sachs (2005) presents the complex nature of identity and for that matter teacher identity as the measuring scale of constructing 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' is subjective and will vary based on the individual teacher and their context.

Developing positive professional teacher identity undoubtedly results in quality education (Day & Gu, 2010). "Equally important in improving the quality of teaching and learning is how teachers perceive themselves and their profession as well as attitudes reflected in their practice, which in turn affect the quality of their teaching and students' achievements" (Ampadu, et.al, 2021:3).

What is more, teacher professional identity unravels the mystery enshrined in the complex nature of teaching in terms of how teachers teach and how they assist students' learning (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). In line with the literature on identity, teacher professional identity is not static but dynamic. It is therefore a continuing process of how teachers accept and live their role as teachers (Canrinus et al., 2012) and in a more intricate sense, how the individual wants to be perceived as one (Beijaard, 2009).

Ampadu, et.al (2021) have underscored the multidisciplinary nature of teacher identity. Similarly, other researchers have investigated teacher identity from various fields of studies including Philosophy (Noonan, 2007), sociology (Bernstein & Osen, 2009), and developmental psychology (Bosma & Kunnin, 2008). These studies show the growing interests in the field of teacher identity, which in turn affirm its importance.

Gee (2001) believes that teacher identity just like other identity types is contextual. Gee further postulates that, overtime, the teacher tends to develop multiple identities as they move from one context to another. This suggests that the teacher develops concentric as well as intersecting identities as they navigate contextual boundaries. It also further suggests that as the teacher moves from one context to another, so do their identities vary. Context in this case may encompass both the immediate and expanded environments. For example, from the classroom where the individual acts as a class or subject teacher, to the school environment and even to the larger community where the school operates. The context under consideration could also be extended to the education offices, teacher interest group meetings or any other environment where the individual's role as a teacher comes to play.

Castañeda (2013) categorised teacher identity into two domains: visible and invisible. Those items such as the teacher's classroom interaction, assessment and classroom material design constitute the visible domain, whereas the invisible domain entails the teacher's beliefs, expectations, emotions and personal understanding of oneself. These perspectives are influenced by certain intrinsic and extrinsic factors that project a holistic view of a teacher's identity. Ampadu, et.al (2021) classified these factors as personal or internal and contextual or external. The personal factors are based on the individual's personal beliefs, emotions and experiences. They could also be based on the person's age and gender (Burns, 2009).

Contextual factors are those external elements that the teacher engages with. They often contribute positively or negatively to the teacher's identity. Teachers' contextual factors usually take the form of working conditions, school and classroom culture, learner characteristics and population, school administrators (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Undoubtedly, a teacher's identity is hardly complete without "a co-construction involving one teacher and other significant agents, or teachers and the broader society to which they belong" (Avalos & De Los Rios, 2013:156). Thus, as

important as the internal factors are in the construction of teacher identity, the external factors are equally relevant, to achieve a level of balance.

### **Language Teacher Identity (LTI)**

Situated in the larger domain of teacher identity are unique fields or disciplines of teaching, such as English language teaching. A language teacher creates his or her professional identity by adapting and personalising the disciplinary or professional knowledge to their unique personal knowledge (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

Pennington and Richards (2016) re-conceptualised and categorised certain key competencies that under-gird the language teacher's identity. These are broadly categorised as foundational competencies of language teacher identity (comprising language-related, disciplinary, context-related, student knowledge identities) and advanced competencies of language teacher identities (theorizing from practice, and membership in communities of practice and profession).

As part of language teacher identity, teachers must have a background in the language and a high level of proficiency in the language being taught. Torres-Rocha (2019) identified four areas which broadly define the identity of language teachers. These include the subject area (which is predominantly English language), identity as native or non-native speakers, disposition towards cultures, and the language teaching methods employed in the classroom.

### **LTI in non-native contexts**

The role of non-native English teachers has been recognised worldwide as far as English language teaching is concerned. Abendroth-Timmer and Hennig (2015) believe that non-native teachers of the English language form an integral part of the discipline due to their ability to demonstrate intercultural awareness coupled with plurilingual skills which have become crucial in the space of English language teaching. In addition, 'issues such as what English to teach, what culture to emphasise, and what methods to follow undoubtedly are now priorities for English language teachers' practices (Torres-Rocha, 2019) and therefore for their professional identity development at the local level.

Through a constant fight, it is generally believed that the ideal English teacher is the native English speaker (Torres-Rocha, 2019; Philipson, 1992). This often leads to Native Speakerism with grave implications on the non-native English teachers' construction of professional identity. The result of this is that the non-native English teacher always seeks validation of their teaching by adopting the teaching methodologies that have been proven to suit the native speakers' contexts even if such methodologies prove otherwise for the local contexts.

To this extent, colonial legacy and native speaker bias are critical issues to be considered within the local context of teaching. Similarly, the native speakerism ideologies as well as low confidence among non-native speakers of the English language does affect teachers' level of productivity (Torres-Rocha, 2019; Holliday, 2005; Jenkins, 2006).

In addition, there is over-dependence on the foreign based teaching and learning resources as well as language teaching methodologies. However, many non-native English language teachers have recognised this as a limitation in their professional development and are taking steps to promote materials and pedagogical approaches that reflect their local realities.

Similarly, studies on the linguistic position of English language teachers in relation to their professional identity revealed that non-native English speakers often feel inferior about their competence in the language in comparison with their native speaker counterparts (Park, 2012; Jenkins, 2005; Pavlenko, 2003). This stance poses a major challenge to their professional identity as language teachers.

### **METHODS**

The study employed the case study approach of the qualitative paradigm in exploring and describing the unique identities of ESL teachers in Ghana. The motivation is to produce detailed descriptions of the deeper understanding of the issue of language teacher identity from the perspective of the participants, in line with best practices of qualitative enquiries (Creswell & Baez, 2021; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Yin, 2018; Barbour, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Being a qualitative study, a total sample size of ten (10) participants was used.

Using a purposive sampling method, Google forms were circulated among a group of ESL teachers to serve as initial instrument to recruit participants for the study and for their

demographic information. The main instrument for data collection was online interview. Thus, one-on-one in-depth telephone interview sessions lasting between 45 minutes to one (1) hour were held with participants.

To ensure consistency of the interview sessions with participants (Crowe et al., 2011), an interview protocol was adopted. The interview sessions were recorded with participants' permission. The recordings were later transcribed, coded thematically using the Framework Analysis (FA) approach and analysed, as presented in the ensuing sections.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Socio-demographic characteristics

Table 1. Participants' profile

*Participant	Sex	Highest level of education	Number of years teaching	Current level of teaching	Brief Profile
1(Afua)	F	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree	6	SHS	Teaching in an international private school based in an urban area and pursuing MEd
2(Kweku)	M	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree	9	SHS	Had taught in public basic schools in both rural and peri-urban areas. Currently teaching in a public SHS and pursuing MPhil English
3(Kofi)	M	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree	8	JHS	Has been teaching in a peri-urban school. Currently pursuing a sandwich programme (Masters in English language Teaching)
4(Kwabena)	M	Masters	20	University	Had taught in Primary, JHS, SHS in both urban and rural areas. Currently teaching English in a private University.
5 (Kwame)	M	Diploma in Education	4	JHS	Teaching at first post in a rural area and pursuing a 1 <sup>st</sup> degree in English on sandwich basis.
6(Adwoa)	F	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree	2	SHS	Teaching at first post, in an international private school
7(Ama)	F	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree	8	SHS	Teaching at first post in an urban public school
8(Yaa)	F	Masters	25	JHS	Had taught in Primary, JHS, and SHS in both rural and urban areas. Currently teaching in a JHS
9(Abena)	F	Diploma in Education	3	Primary	Teaching at first post in a peri-urban area
10(Yaw)	M	Diploma in Education	4	JHS	Teaching at first post in a rural area

\*Participant's names are pseudo names

The data presents rich and heterogeneous demographics. First, both genders, female and male, are represented in the data. Second, participants are teachers who have either taught or are currently teaching in rural or urban areas and in private or public schools. Third, they have varied number of years of teaching, ranging from 2 to 25 years. Finally, the data consists of participants who have either taught or are currently teaching English at different levels within the education system: primary, junior high school, senior high school, and university.

### Findings from Interview data

This second part of the data focuses on the one-on-one interviews granted by the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcribed data were hand-coded to identify the patterns and themes in the data. The section also outlines the major themes derived from the data in relation to the key research questions. The figure below illustrates the key findings of this second part.

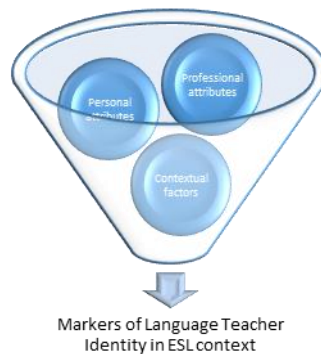


Figure 1. Language teacher identity in ESL context. Source: Field data

Figure 1 illustrates three elements: personal attributes, professional attributes and contextual factors that define the identity of ESL teachers in Ghana.

#### Personal attributes

The data revealed four key personal attributes that define the ESL teachers' identity: passion, diligence, self-efficacy, and sense of inadequacy.

#### Passion

Participants demonstrated strong passion and love for teaching the English language despite the odds associated with it. Almost all the participants had the enthusiasm in teaching the English language either as a matter of choice from the onset of their career, or as a passion they developed during the course of their career trajectory.

Kwabena indicated that:

*"I just like the subject, it was the very first subject I had the chance to teach after college...I'm really proud of the subject that I teach; I like it very much"*

Afua has a detailed account of why she is passionate about teaching the language.

*"Right from childhood, I loved English, and I remember I have to take my senior brother's novel; err he was a science student so the core err subject they have novels so when he came home on vacation, even as a junior high student and primary student, I would take his books to read. The language came to me with ease at school because I remember when I was in junior high, we also had monthly tests. And I could score like out of 40, I could score 38 or 35. So I was doing well and that's what motivated me and I am like okay if it is something that comes with ease why don't I continue in that ...that's what motivated me. And that's where I find myself today."*



It is evident from the data that accumulation of passion often results in increased knowledge of the dynamism of the field which births a commitment to diligence and life-long learning.

**Diligence**

The second personal attribute that defines the participants' identity as ESL teachers is diligence. Participants demonstrated this through a sense of urgency and commitment to duty. Most participants explicitly expressed that they always put in adequate preparation prior to every lesson, even though they have been teaching similar content over a period of time.

Ama did not mince her words when she stated that:

*"I need to have the facts; I need to know more before I go and teach it so... I will be at the same level or even higher than them because as a teacher, you are supposed to be higher than the students in terms of the knowledge."*

Likewise, Yaa opined that:

*"We keep learning each and every day and sometimes issues come up and you can debate and argue with your colleague. Recently, one came up like that so I had to ask a lecturer of mine for clarification."*

From the excerpts above, it is evident that the teachers define their identity through commitment to their profession. Also out of diligence is the teachers' willingness to know more about the subject. This stems from a position of self-awareness or knowledge of one's (in)capabilities compelling teachers to seek external support. This kind of support often takes the form of validation from books (research) and colleagues in order to confirm one's own knowledge. Such validations often lead to teacher self-confidence and self-efficacy.

**Self-efficacy**

This refers to teacher self-confidence in relation to mastery of material and instruction, and general assessment of one's capabilities as a second language teacher. Per the findings of this study, three factors contribute to teacher self-efficacy and confidence. They are education and training, proficiency in the language, endorsement from students and other sources, as well as students' overall performance in summative assessment.

With regard to education and training, the teacher participants associated their level of education to their level of success and impact in the field. All things being equal, they believe that the more education and training they have in the subject, the more competent and confident they are in teaching the subject. Afua, again, is convinced that:

*"Having acquired the degree for teaching, so far I think I have done my best so far to be confident in what I do..."*

Similarly, Yaa recounted:

*"So when I started the TESL [Teaching English as a Second Language], I needed to teach myself and I had well explained foundation - grammar and phonetics with a lot of examples cited. To date, anytime I am teaching those very topics citing examples and making references are not a problem because I have got the TESL books for a lot of them."*

Similar to the views of all participants including Afua and Yaa, Yaw expressed confidence in his capabilities as a result of his college training. He asserted that:

*"I read a three-year diploma course at college, general option and in this course, I undertook ermm... principles and practice of teaching, which is currently helping me a lot because it deals with classroom activities and how to manage your classroom. Ermm... looking at the courses I pursued at the general option, err... the courses prepare everybody to be versatile, it makes you...such that even when you are posted to the school errrr...whatever is assigned for you there, you would be able to execute that position."*

In addition, the teachers believe they have attained appreciable levels of proficiency in the language although they admitted not at the level of native speakers. As second language teachers, they believe they exhibit the needed proficiency which qualifies them as teachers of the language. Kwame expressed:

*"I will put myself high because I think I'm not a beginner and I'm very fluent in my speech and my writing and my listening. I don't have any issues."*

The views of Ama do not differ from Kwame's:

*"I wouldn't say I am an advanced speaker, I am learning gradually, so I will call myself high-intermediate'. While Abena believes that 'I'm more than intermediate, so if there is anything above intermediate, I think that is where I would put myself'. However, Kofi maintains that 'when I listen to people speak and I listen to myself when speaking, I will rank myself low intermediate. Yes, because of how I see others."*

The third element that contributes to participants' self-efficacy is the endorsement they receive from students and other sources, as well as students' overall performance in the subject. The teachers often use these affirmations to self-determine their impact as far as the field of English language teaching is concerned. Yaa's submission below confirms this point.

*"Talking about uniqueness, I really think it's about my approaches. Ermmm.. students have approached me to tell me 'wow, we like the way you teach and sometimes you make the classroom environment friendly; you make us feel comfortable' and I like that, many of my students feel free and they can call me anytime."*

Afua equally added that:

*I am doing my best because... I teach first language speakers... in most of them have certain challenges. They are still influenced by their native language... they are not able to get grasp of most of the rules governing the language so if I can take errr the words of... and at the end of the exams they are able to get a B, I think I have done well; I am doing well. And someone whose exams scores he is getting 1's and Es but in the final exams he is getting a B, I think I have done well as a teacher."*

Similarly, according to Yaw:

*"I would say...err I have been teaching English language for the past four years; errr...I have managed to handle the first year batch of the school I was posted to, from JHS1 to JHS3, and I was able to attain 100% in B.E.C.E."*

As it is evident in the ensuing extracts, generally, the teachers exhibited high self-confidence and often ranked themselves high. However, they also admitted that as second language speakers of the language they sometimes feel handicapped, despite all the needed preparation they engage in. Also, the tension of not delivering to one's expectations compels the teacher to exert much pressure on themselves by putting in more effort at the preparation stage of lesson delivery. These fears often culminate into a feeling of inadequacy.

#### ***Sense of inadequacy***

As mentioned earlier, all participants expressed a general feeling of inadequacy irrespective of their achievements as ESL teachers. This testifies the contentions and tensions of non-native speakers and teachers of the English language. Adwoa bemoaned:

*"... ermmm currently I teach in a school that has multinationals so I have some British in my class, Americans, Indians, I have Lebanese in my class and so.. I... it makes me work harder every day because I kind of not a native speaker and I'm teaching ermmm..so all the time I feel I have to be a step ahead. So for me it makes me work harder, I never go to a class unprepared and I think that in a way if.. I were a native speaker I think I would have been more confident. I don't know but errrr.. when I get to the class*



*I'm still confident to teach whatever I am teaching because I prepared very well so it gives me the confidence to teach. Yes, but I would say that but if I were a native speaker, errrrm... I don't know but I feel that maybe...I wouldn't put so-o much pressure on myself; I don't know, yes."*

In the words of Kwabena:

*"I'm not a native speaker of the language so there are certain terminologies that I'm not so-o conversant with ... I'm not very sure of their usage. Sometimes when I'm tempted to use those terminologies, I take a look at it and tend to find other words to replace those and then use them; so it does affect me."*

Kweku recounted that:

*"...there are instances when you speak and you realize that there is this particular vocabulary I want to use, it's not that I don't use it, I really use it but for some reasons it just escaped me, you try and it doesn't come so you would be like, you know what, it's okay, let's just move on, so perhaps as a native speaker I don't think challenges like this would come up, so this affects the confidence level, especially when you are standing in front of people who think wow you know everything but some might be better than I am."*

The participants also admitted having difficulty with certain concepts sometimes. challenges Some of the areas mentioned are accent and pronunciation, grammatical functions, verb phrases/clauses, reading comprehension and literature. Ama recounted that:

*"One major topic I think I have issues with is are verb phrases, and clauses...yeah.. grammatical functions especially. sometimes they go through changes and the functions sometimes become problematic."*

Also according to Yaw:

*"Personally I have problem when it comes to literature because of ermm.. my background, I... didn't have an interest in reading, so teaching literature is something that gives me problem and when it comes to teaching literature, I had a colleague staff who pursued literature at the SHS, so when it comes to literature she's an expert, so I contact her to help with that."*

Similarly, Abena asserted that:

*"... sometimes when I have low knowledge of what I'm going to teach, sometimes I feel handicapped and then I would er....just use some traditional method to do everything, so sometimes there is a need for me to go back and research. So at certain points these things happen which would distract me."*

### **Professional attributes**

The second major marker of language teacher identity in an ESL context covers those characteristics that distinguish the teacher participants' profession. These include the subject-matter knowledge (also known as content knowledge), pedagogical knowledge and technological knowledge. They are presented in the ensuing sections.

#### **Subject-matter knowledge**

As alluded to earlier, teachers show their professional identity through knowledge of their subject-matter. It covers the teachers' mastery of the content of the subject they teach. All the teacher participants showed enthusiasm about the subject. However, they equally reported some peculiarities about the subject which they often resolved by drawing on the expertise of colleagues and through research. Such accounts underscore the important role of peer-to-peer tutoring, availability of reference materials, knowledge of and access to the use of computers and the internet.

With confidence, Ama narrated that:

*"I know my syllabus in and out so... I am very conversant with the syllabus. I will say I am conversant with it; I am confident teaching it a-a-nd, I think I am best, errm with regard to the teaching of the English language."*

Kofi also added that:

*“In terms of content knowledge, I would say..I always do my very best when it comes to the grammar aspect. I would also rate myself good when it comes to comprehension.”*

But for Adwoa, mastery of subject matter should not be a difficult task in the 21st Century due to technological advancement and availability of teaching and learning resources. She affirmed that:

*“Now the internet is there. Apart from research, we now have a lot of the books in the open market, so we may not depend on only one or just on your curriculum, there are books you can consult; you go to YouTube you ask... you are teaching this in this particular class ‘blabla’; the methodology and everything you need would be there, so by little research.”*

### ***Pedagogical knowledge and practice***

The teachers also expressed professional identity through their pedagogical knowledge. They assess their learners’ learning needs and adopt appropriate instructional strategies based on the context and the learning needs of learners. This is demonstrated through their teaching philosophies and classroom practices that they reported on.

Kweku in his account indicated that:

*“Errm... in my teaching I usually erm...make my students the center of my teaching. I like it when even my students make the knowledge themselves with me as a guide for them. So that is what I really believe in. I serve as a guide helping them to identify the knowledge or guide them to acquire the knowledge. That’s a facilitator. I don’t believe that I know everything, yeah, so to be like a god to my students, no. I don’t believe in that philosophy, I rather believe that errmm.. I am in the classroom to guide them, to help them to find the knowledge and to use it.”*

Like wise, Adwoa expressed her thoughts saying:

*“One thing that I can really say is that, I am not somebody who is erm impatient. I am very affable, I try to make my teaching look very good, especially open up to students, make them feel free, not to feel intimidated. In the course of teaching if you feel like you have some questions to ask; you are not too clear about something, open up and just ask the question and sometimes if you ask the question and erm... for some reasons I think I can’t answer, I will let you know that I haven’t heard this before. I don’t really know this. Go out there and read; I will also go and do my research then next time; we could share ideas and clarify things. As I mentioned earlier, I’m very patient; I try to make students feel very comfortable so that at least the classroom work would actually progress.”*

In addition to the earlier views, Kofi added that:

*“Whenever I get to a classroom, mostly I employ the discussion method when I am teaching. So I just pose the question to them; they discuss among themselves. Whatever you think about it, you bring it out so it keeps them active; yeah so it’s good.”*

Interestingly, none of the teachers explicitly mentioned that they employ the tenets of any specific language teaching method such as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and the Audio-lingual Method. It is however possible that the teachers unconsciously adopt some of their classroom principles and strategies from existing language teaching methods. What is clear is that there is no deliberate attempt at linking classroom practices to existing language pedagogies. Consequently, what is evident is content knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge.

In addition to the pedagogical strategies, the teachers also showed commitment to learners’ learning process and academic success. Commitment in this case is demonstrated through accommodation of learners’ mistakes and respect for learners’ views. In the words of Afua:

*"I am interested in the... let's say in my students attaining maybe good grades at the end of their study but am also more interested in my students picking the values they need for their lives. The key things they need on their life journey that would help them as much as errm they passing their examinations. So...when I'm teaching I try to juxtapose whatever I'm teaching to real life situations and real life activities so that in the end it's not just about the examination but it's about life as well so that's what I'm interested in; them passing their exams just as I make the teaching very real to them so that even if you don't pass, in life you would be able to use the English, or you will..., it will benefit you."*

Kwame added by saying that:

*"I have students who.... who want to learn, as well as students who are happy to be in my class because in the secondary school, we are subject teachers and my students are always waiting to see me, yeah, they have to be at our meeting place, by the time I get there my students are waiting for me and when I'm done with my lesson they say thank you, we enjoy this lesson today. We look forward to next week. So I see that they are enthusiastic learners; maybe not for all of them but for most of them."*

### **Contextual factors**

The contextual factors look at how macro level structures such as educational ministries and policies shape the identity of teachers of English as second language. The participants reported that there are structured curriculum and educational policies which support their efforts as ESL teachers. For example, Kofi reported that:

*"When you look at the curriculum, it has topics that are supposed to groom the kids, the learners and these topics are graded based on the levels, the specific levels, so you realize that, whenever you pick a topic, erm.. the content or the scope of that topic is well defined in the background such that you know where to go and where to stop, so it does, it helps."*

However, they noted that sometimes the policies and curriculum interfere with their preferred methods of teaching. Abena recalled that:

*"I could remember I...I was teaching comprehension; it was a comprehension lesson that I was handling and then I started using just my normal discussion method but the curriculum specified that, the kids should brainstorm, yeah, so when I was preparing and I realized that the curriculum calls for brainstorming method, I used the brainstorming for that particular lesson."*

Yaw however expressed his disapproval for an educational policy when he opined:

*"I am not really excited about some of the policies like the NALAB policy where students have to be taught in their L1 at the very basic level up to primary three... I am saying this because I found myself teaching students with only one language, most of them their L1 and these were people whose parents were not elite, it's just the local language everywhere, then I ask myself, where would these students pick up the English language?"*

Other contextual factors identified are classroom conditions, working environment including resources and motivation. Generally, teachers in the rural areas reported small class sizes but their urban counterparts complained of unusually large class sizes which do not support effective teaching in an ESL context. There is also inadequate teaching and learning resources. Abena lamented that:

*"The classroom atmosphere is not the best. Class size is very large; the class size is not less than 50."*

For Adwoa:

*"The class size is very large, the classroom per the building infrastructure is not as big to accommodate the number of students I teach, especially JHS 2 and 3. I think that their furniture is not accommodating because you find girls that are plumpy sitting on very tiny or dual desks."*

Similarly, Kwabena expressed his frustration when he stated that:

*“Well, the classroom conditions I will say it's disturbing; it's disheartening; it's demotivating because even though the student number is low, an average of 16, the logistics are not there. Er... in my school for instance, the JHS department uses a maker board, but the markers are not forthcoming. In English language class, you will definitely need flashcards for treating vocabulary, but the cards are just not there ...”*

With regard to motivation from school authorities, the responses were unanimous. The major source of motivation is intrinsic, and it comes from the achievements and success stories of both present and past students. Kweku clearly expressed that:

*“I derive my intrinsic motivation from erm...how my learners react when I have a class. You realize that they are also trying everything possible to grasp the concept; so as they are trying to know the concept, it motivates you more that oh if they are willing, they are ready to learn, why not? I have to be, yeah, that's what motivates me.”*

According to Yaa:

*“The motivation comes as far as the students are concerned. You know as a teacher, as you groom them through JHS 1,2 and 3 and your students get exposure to the secondary school, they do very well; teaching over 20years, 22 years, some of them they meet you and are like 'You taught me in this school'. I've finished Telecom University; I have finished Presec; I am working; I have finished University of Ghana; I'm in Tech; that's motivation but in terms of management, there is nothing.”*

Kwame concluded by saying:

*“The thing is if you look at one or two students who do well or who contribute sometimes, you feel motivated to do more.”*

## Discussion

The present study investigated factors that define the identity construction of ESL teachers in Ghana. The study further examined how each of the factors is manifested. The key findings that emerged from the study suggest that ESL teachers' identity is defined by three elements: personal attributes, professional attributes, and contextual factors. These findings partly confirm Yazan and Lindahl (2020: 2) opinion that LTI 'captures the intricacies between personal and professional dimensions of being a language teacher and offers a holistic lens to view teachers' knowledge, beliefs, values, priorities, and aspirations'.

As part of their personal and professional identities, the participants believe that their level of education and mastery of subject-matter define them as unique teachers of English. This belief to a great extent supports earlier views held by identity scholars on the inalienable connection between education or training and identity (Yazan, 2018, Olsen, 2011; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Tsui, 2011).

Also evident in the findings of the study is the seemingly conflicting identities ESL teachers portray. The teachers, despite being appreciative of their mastery and contribution to the field of ESL, are equally mindful of their possible shortcomings as non-native speakers. This confirms Barkhuizen's (2017:4) earlier finding that '... language teachers constantly strive to make sense of themselves; reflexively, they work towards understanding who they are or who they desire or fear to be'.

Conclusively, the teacher's demonstration of passion, diligence, self-efficacy and sense of inadequacy posits a continuous process of making sense of their experiences and re-shaping such experiences into becoming the best version of themselves. In so doing, the teacher participants '... exercise their own agency, have their own strongly held views of themselves as teachers, and are not merely passive instruments of larger geopolitical forces, unknowingly colluding in the linguistic-imperialist enterprise of English language teaching' (Hayes, 2017: 4).

In negotiating their professional identity, the teachers' subject-matter mastery and pedagogical knowledge were evident in classroom practices that create an enabling environment

for learners. This signifies the resilience of the ESL teachers. Despite sometimes being concerned with their non-native status (Pennington & Richards, 2016), ESL teachers often uphold the knowledge and best practices of classroom engagements. What is evident is a general preference for teaching strategies developed through local standards over the traditional language methodologies and principles. Consequently, although the language teaching methods and principles are learnt in school, their processes and strategies are not always followed in actual practice.

On the contextual dimension, Matsuda (2017) and Mercer (2017) have earlier highlighted the contribution of external factors (context) to LTI. These external factors include classroom furniture and teaching and learning materials. Additionally, Fan and de Jong (2019) and Gu and Benson (2015) have also established that contextual constraints lead to the renegotiation of language teachers' identity. In line with these previous studies, the current study also echoes the constraints of curriculum and policy mandates, large class sizes, inadequate teaching and learning resources and poor teaching and learning environment as adversely impacting on the novelty of teachers within ESL contexts.

However, within the confines of the current study, curriculum constraints appear to be largely political and economic. This perhaps explains, for instance, why language teachers do not follow the principles of language teaching methods but rather resort to principles of general pedagogy in teaching the language. Due to these contextual constraints, the participants' agency as ESL teachers is often challenged, which is often the plight of ESL and foreign language teachers (Martel, 2015).

Finally, although literature affirms engagement in professional associations as a means of identity formation among ESL teachers (Trent, 2017), the current study participants did not engage actively in such communities of practice despite their admittance of its benefits. It can thus be concluded that the participants' identity is not influenced by professional associations. The study participants however gained legitimacy and recognition of their efforts informally through their colleagues and students' success.

## CONCLUSION

The current study corroborates the pluralistic nature of language teacher identities as teachers enact the different aspects of their identities. In attempts to make sense of their own identities, the teachers harmoniously wove through the ideals of their past, present and future while simultaneously strive to embrace the tensions underpinned by self, others and context.

It is worthy of note that these tensions are important because they serve as catalysts in ensuring that ESL teachers keep evolving and modelling into their ideal selves. Expectedly, identity is often mediated or constrained by limitations and expectations of duty that are rooted in both 'cultural traditions and dominant social discourses' (Gao, 2017). To this extent, I would like to conceptualise LTI as constituting the micro, meso and macro spectrums of dynamic identity formation which intertwine with the realities and tensions of self (micro), professional (meso) and contextual (macro) dimensions.

To extend the discussion of TLI further, future studies may explore gender dimensions of identity enactment in ESL contexts. This will put into perspective the uniqueness of each gender in LTI constructions.

In addition, it will be interesting to observe the disparity, if any, between locally trained and foreign trained ESL teachers. This will help us to understand if the type of training received and place it was received do influence the identity of the teachers involved.

## FUNDING STATEMENT

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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