

English Language Teachers' Foreign Experience And Identity Development: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate how teaching experiences in foreign contexts impact the professional identities of Pakistani English language teachers. To conduct this study, a rigorous qualitative research design was employed to delve into the experiences and perceptions of participants in depth: semi-structured interviews were conducted. The participants were English Language teachers from various regions of Pakistan who possessed foreign teaching experience. The interview questionnaire was shared beforehand to help participants prepare and reflect on their¹ past experiences. Thematic analysis a robust method for identifying patterns, themes and trends was employed to extract meaningful insights and draw conclusions from the participants' experiences and perceptions. The findings of this study suggest that foreign teaching experience has positively shaped the identities of Pakistani teachers and led to the transformation of their roles from traditional teachers to adopting new roles such as teacher researchers, expert language teachers, and change agents.

Keywords: Foreign Teaching Experience, Identity Development, English Language Teachers, Teacher Researchers, Expert Language Teachers.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

A specific progression in the debate over teaching tactics has been observed in the last century, and the history of language education is vast, intriguing, and rather controversial. Numerous methods have names that are familiar enough, this includes "Grammar Translation Method, Audio-Linguistic Method, Direct Method, and Communicative Teaching Method". However, they may be broadly defined, methods are more than simply one tactic or approach, which makes them challenging to comprehend in real-world situations. Numerous factors such as social, educational, economic, political as well as theoretical factors (recent advancements in theories of language and psychological perspectives on language acquisition) as well as real-world experience, instinct, and original thought all had an impact on these methods of language teaching. They assemble several language-teaching philosophies to some extent but are characterized by a singular feature being overemphasized as the main concern in language teaching and learning (Liu & Shi, 2007). One major reason for advancements in second or foreign language teaching or learning is the need for communication in the global world.

ELT is a crucial component of the expanding global industry known as applied linguistics. According to research, during the 19th and 20th centuries, English played a significant role in

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international trade, diplomacy, education, and scientific and technological growth. After World War II, the socio-economic and political climate of the time led to a fast growth of the English language. As a language franca, colonization encouraged its continued spread to the uncolonized areas. ELT's current development and expansion might be considered a post-colonial endeavor (Ahmad, 2020). In this post-colonial endeavor, the teachers' role is significant.

Developing your identity as a qualified teacher is about expanding one's awareness and understanding of oneself. Teachers in their early careers who are adept at reflective thinking and self-awareness processes that support a strong sense of self-worth and enable the establishment of an effective instructional identity are more resilient in their roles as educators (Johnson, et al., 2015). However, the teacher's identity goes through some phases of transformation as the cultures get closer in the process of globalization.

Schools have increasingly embraced a greater diversity of cultures because of rising global change. In order to create an effective atmosphere for learning, teachers need to pay attention to the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds. Teachers need to become more culturally sensitive and develop their teaching skills in order to create a classroom where students value one another. Teaching abroad exposes teachers to innovative curricula, educational resources, and learning styles, all crucial to improving their instructional methods. Additionally, by interacting with a different culture, teachers can learn new things and expand their knowledge, which they can use in their teaching methods (Serin, 2017). Teaching in a new culture brings a world of new experiences to the teachers that influence them in many ways.

Foreign teaching experiences may help the teachers build their personal and professional identities in diverse ways, i.e., they may become less interested in their former surroundings and more receptive to interacting with the learning groups. They may become more eager to discuss academic rather than personal matters. Additionally, they are motivated to conduct academic research and disregard personal factors like a lack of effort or time, insufficient knowledge, or abilities (Serin, 2017). In other words, foreign teaching experiences shape a teacher's identity in a variety of ways.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

This research aims at analyzing impacts of foreign teaching experience on identity of English language teachers. Furthermore, it explores whether foreign teaching experiences help teach adult learners in Pakistan: if yes, how, and why not. The primary objectives of this research are listed below:

- To explore if foreign teaching experience changes the identity of Pakistani English language teachers.
- To investigate whether these changes are positive or negative.

1.3. Problem Statement

Nowadays, the benefits of foreign teaching experiences cannot be ignored or denied, and these experiences influence teachers' identities and teaching methodologies in many ways. However, this research aims at exploring impacts of foreign teaching experience on English language teachers' identities. Moreover, it will analyze what sort of impact the international teaching experience on the identities of Pakistani teachers, whether positive or negative. The question arises if and how foreign teaching experiences influence English language teachers' identity.

1.4. Research Questions

The research questions served as the foundation for this study are listed below:

- What changes does foreign teaching experience bring to the identity of Pakistani English language teachers?
- How does foreign teaching experience positively transform the identities of Pakistani teachers?

1.5. Significance of Study

This research is noteworthy in a variety of ways. It investigates the impacts of foreign teaching experiences on English language teachers' identity and explores the impacts foreign teaching experience has on the identity of Pakistani teachers. Ling, Burman, Cooper, & Ling (2006) argued that instructors who travel to teach abroad have holistic professional growth because they learn about themselves in a new culture and obtain both teaching and daily life experience, which together make up the values that teachers take back with them. Thus, it is essential to look at how teaching abroad affects Pakistani English language instructors' sense of self development.

2. Literature Review

English language teaching is a substantial professional area, contributing to a more extensive worldwide industrial expansion. English language teaching as well as learning is becoming a crucial component of practically each economic system since it is a primary language of communication throughout the world, particularly in post-colonial states. An organization's "lifeblood" is stated to be an effective form of communication. English language instructors across the globe may not be in charge of any particular industry. However, they are the "lifeblood" of the business world by teaching the appropriate communication skills to several workers, organizers, and administrators in the current international economic scenario (Murphy, 2007).

Developing and modifying various ELT approaches and methods to assist language learners in effectively communicating in the new language depends heavily on research in applied linguistics and second language acquisition. Approach, technique, and strategy are three concepts used in Larsen-Freeman & Anderson's (2011) discussion of language instruction. Considering the features of language, its acquisition process, and its mode of communication, the term "approach" relates to basic theories and philosophies. A teaching method is a set of tactics and techniques for delivering classroom instructions utilizing various materials and activities, and the way that strategy is put into practice is called a teaching technique. An instructional method is a subsection of a technique consisting of a collection of steps that teachers use to construct lesson plans in order to accomplish certain goals.

Numerous elements can influence how someone's identity develops. These elements include background, gender, culture, place of employment, age, and prevailing school and classroom norms. Thus, the concept of identity is a reflection of how individuals view themselves and the roles they perform in different circumstances. A teacher is a real person outside of the classroom; it is there that he negotiates his identity with the students. In a classroom, instructor and students confer their identities via developing social interaction of a specific situated community, about its specific activities and interactions. Teachers' ability to negotiate and build identity on a moment-by-moment basis is largely determined by their understanding of the school, the classroom's potential, the students, their surroundings, the opportunities available to them, the curriculum and policies, and the supervising teacher. As a result, creating an identity is intricate, dynamic, evolving, and multifaceted (Hussain, Manshoor, Abbasi, Awan, & Farid, 2012).

Language proficiency can significantly impact how identity and professional abilities are shaped in language teachers since there is a strong connection between identity and language,

and via language identity formation is rhetorical. Language teachers' perceptions of themselves and how they behave in educational contexts can change because of improvements in their language abilities and expertise acquired through foreign teaching experiences, which can have a significant impact on the process of identity development of teachers (Zhang & Wang, 2022). In this way, it is proved that the process of identity development of teachers is greatly interlinked with foreign teaching experiences. However, this relationship cannot be ignored or denied since much research, i.e., (Markoulias, 2010) (THOMAS, 2012) (Choe, 2016) have clearly shown that these experiences are greatly beneficial for the process of identity development of teachers.

In English language teaching, foreign teaching experiences have a dominant place. Foreign teaching experiences have a significant role in development of teachers' identity. Moreover, research has proven that these experiences are advantageous for the personal development of teachers. For example, Markoulias (2010) has found that international teaching is advantageous for both new and experienced teachers, and the experience can improve their communication skills with other colleagues and their exposure to alternative educational resources and curricula. Furthermore, he argued that exposure to other cultures and practices, particularly for monolingual teachers who have only experienced their own culture, helps them understand the difficulties students from diverse cultural backgrounds could encounter in the classroom. Analogously, THOMAS (2012) has stated that teachers with international teaching experience can broaden their perspectives on questions of national identity and become more aware of a world outside of their own through their foreign student teaching experiences. Increased global knowledge of today's educators would better equip them to locally help youth acquire the ability to decide rationally and intelligently for the common benefit being citizens of a democratic society with a diverse culture on a global scale. In another research, Serin (2017) has investigated that regardless of students' English proficiency or cultural background, teachers with experience teaching abroad can use their cultural empathy and cross-cultural competency to assist students enhance their abilities and expertise about other countries as well as their society. Returnee teachers also have extremely noticeable improvements in their character, including more adaptability, self-assurance, and general maturity.

Apart from the personal development of teachers, foreign teaching experiences also have pedagogical benefits. According to Li & Edwards (2013), Chinese EFL teachers only adopted a few new teaching techniques they had acquired from a professional development course in the UK. Regarding curriculum design and lesson planning, the returning instructors switched from authoritative figures to supporters, mentors, and facilitators. Ospina & Medina (2020) have explored that the teachers who attend in-service training earn a graduate degree while living in the host nation, keeping up with emerging trends in methodology. They not only developed into reflective educators but also considered their methods and made the required modifications and alterations so they could succeed in the new educational environment. Modifying instructional methods helped teachers satisfy the students' needs and resolve issues caused by linguistic and cultural disparities.

Along with teachers' pedagogical benefits and personal development, numerous research studies have revealed the importance of foreign teaching experiences in the professional development of teachers. Many researchers have investigated the fact that different well-organized international teachers' training programs significantly impact teachers' professional development in numerous ways. In a survey of 91 English teachers at a Chinese secondary school who had studied abroad, Wang (2014) discovered that majority of teachers considered studying in a foreign country to be a greatly significant accomplishment for enhancing their language skills and that the duration of the teachers' stays among countries where English is the primary language, is an essential component in how well-versed in the language they

consider themselves to be. Choe (2016) reported that during 4-week teachers training session in United States, forty-two English language teachers from Korea considerably enhanced their writing, speaking, and listening abilities.

This finding adds more evidence to earlier research about the advantageous accomplishments of studying in a foreign country on communicative competence of teachers. Due to the interrelationship between identity and language and discursive nature of identity formation, language proficiency could significantly impact how self-aware and capable language teachers feel about their professional abilities. Language teachers' perceptions of themselves and how the teachers act in the context of language teaching can shift because of improved language abilities gained through international experiences, which can impact the development of their professional identities. Similarly, Zhang & Wang (2022) came up with the conclusion that by enabling them to create various competing identities as experts in language teaching at universities, and transformative agents, international experiences had a favorable effect on the formation of identities of English language teachers of Chinese college. Although travel is a valuable learning and development tool for educators, it cannot be expected that after a teacher spends time abroad, their behavior will automatically improve because the education and identity formation process for educators is quite complex. Returnee teachers have to cope with a position that requires them to manage their recently developed professional personas with the interplay of many personal (like autonomy, availability, and power), interpersonal (like an official learning network), and social variables.

Apart from all other benefits, foreign teaching experiences have a prominent impact on language teachers' intercultural competence. Intercultural experiences of learning, according to Bodycott & Walker (2000), assist instructors in becoming more aware of their perspectives on culture, learning, and evolution. Participants in this survey stated that their communications with American citizens and other educators from various cultures had helped them become more aware of other cultures. The instructors become more conscious of the cultural diversity in the environments where they live and teach. Moreover, the cultural component of learning a foreign language has drawn increasing attention in recent years, and teachers are now required to encourage their students' development of intercultural competence. To determine how and to what degree Iranian English teachers' beliefs and attitudes on intercultural competency teaching are reflected in their classroom practice, Nemati, Marzban, & Maleki (2014) researched the instructors' thoughts and attitudes. The findings showed that although language teachers rarely incorporate cultural elements into their lessons to foster intercultural competency in their students, they seem to understand the value of culture in teaching other languages. Nevertheless, Iranian EFL teachers expressed a favorable attitude toward the classroom's teaching practice. Similarly, Suzuki (2021) focuses on a particular sample of pre-service English teachers in Japan who took part in the programme of study abroad (SA) as part of the teacher training and explores if this influenced their perspectives on the use of English for cross-cultural communication and discovered that their sophisticated understanding of EFL communication was what caused their perceptions about English to change.

Until now, the main focus of the past researchers was to explore the benefits of foreign teaching experiences in multiple ways i.e., personal benefits for teachers (Markoulias, 2010); (THOMAS, 2012); (Serin, 2017); pedagogical benefits (Li & Edwards, 2013); (Serin, 2017); (Ospina & Medina, 2020); professional benefits (Wang, 2014); (Choe, 2016); (Zhang & Wang, 2022); intercultural benefits (Bodycott & Walker, 2000); (Nemati et al., 2014); (Suzuki, 2021), and the most recent research (Zhang & Wang, 2022) drew attention towards examining how foreign experiences affect the formation of professional identities of English language teachers of China. However, this study is conducted to explore the impacts of foreign teaching experience on Pakistani English language teachers' identity development.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Wenger's Social Theory of Learning serves as the foundation for the theoretical framework of this research. This model suggests that not only our identity but also our practices, perception, and sense of community are influenced by our social interactions and engagement with the world. According to this social model of learning, social interaction is an act of understanding and learning. Identity, community, practice, and meaning are the four facets that are influenced and shaped by each other (Adams, 2010).



(Wenger, 1998)

2.2. Conceptual Framework

Identity, a notion from Wenger's Social Theory of Learning, serves as the conceptual framework for this study. In social context, the concept of identity highlights the complex and fleeting character of human identities rather than undermining uniqueness. It underscores the importance of active participation in smaller social structures and larger social frameworks, highlighting the interdependent relationship between both personal and societal (Aoyama, 2021). According to Wenger's (1998) analogy of identity and practice, identity is defined as one's experiences as a member of particular, actively formed groups. For membership in such groups, it is necessary to possess both experience and competence. Due to the continuous nature of our community participation, the identity trajectory is highlighted. In simpler terms, identity is an ongoing temporal process that develops over time and location.

3. Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach is chosen for this study. According to Denzin (1989), this approach offers in-depth accounts of the experiences, feelings, and ideas of the respondents and simultaneously interpret the intentions behind their responses. Qualitative research methodology also allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the human condition in particular contexts. Moreover, by using a qualitative methodology, researchers may get insight into people's inner experiences and comprehend how culture affects metaphorical interpretations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

3.1. Research Tool

In this study, semi-structured interviews of teachers with foreign teaching experiences across Pakistan were conducted to collect data for this study. As the flexible nature of the interview encourage the researchers to elicit further information from the respondents or ask follow-up questions if they sound interested in what they are stating. This method gives the researcher the freedom to follow up on a lead that the interviewee leaves open or to ask for further details from the topic. In semi-structured interviews, respondents aren't restricted in how they express their viewpoints (Semi-Structured Interviews, 2018).

3.2. Research Sample

Semi-structured interviews of Pakistan's English language teachers with foreign teaching experiences were conducted. Participants involved in this study have had experience in different foreign countries, i.e., Saudi Arabia, the UK, and the US. Most of them have taught in Saudi Arabia, and some have experience in multiple countries. The time duration of participants' foreign teaching experience ranged from one year to nineteen years. There are four female participants and four male participants in this study.

4. Data Analysis

The thematic data analysis was conducted according to the research questions. Based on interviews with eight Pakistani teachers who have taught in different countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UK, and the US, it was observed that living and teaching abroad has a diverse impact on the teachers' identity, especially as Pakistani teachers. The foreign teaching experience has positively influenced the teachers' identities and significantly impacted their professional competence as English language teachers through presenting themselves to various educational as well as cultural environments. This experience has also transformed them from just teachers to teacher-researchers. The teachers have shifted from traditional approaches to more innovative and creative ones, incorporating technology into traditional classrooms. The foreign teaching experience has enabled them to focus more on speaking skills and listening skills rather than focusing on writing skills and reading skills, as an essential component of language teaching.

One of the respondents has stated his response in the following words.

As an English language teacher and English literature teacher, significance of reading and writing cannot be denied. Now, in foreign countries, especially in the West, some people read a lot. They make reading part of their life, academic growth, and society. People going on the train will read, and they continuously read. Unfortunately, in Muslims and particularly in Pakistan, the reading habits are dying fast. Moreover, with the international exposure, I now have a strong conviction, which I had already had before I departed. However, my conviction has gone to another level of self-belief that I must promote reading and writing habits, research culture and English-speaking culture.

The above response shows how the respondent's identity has changed from a "Traditional Teacher" to "an Expert Language Teacher." International teaching experience has transformed teachers into expert language teachers and converted them into "Teacher Researchers."

As another respondent has stated in his interview:

I always wanted to do something scholarly in linguistics, so I've worked on research papers about cross-cultural differences, English as a lingua franca, and language in the second language classroom. Then, all the gaps, either of creed, sect, culture, or nationality, got more vibrant and clearer. So, what I've really learnt was dealing with multinationals in an international scenario, and language is a hallmark.

Moreover, international teaching experience has transformed the identities of Pakistani teachers in many positive ways. Along with converting them to "Expert Language Teachers" and "Teacher Researchers", it has also changed their identities from "Dependent Teachers" to "Change Agents".

Analogously, one of the respondents has quoted:

Since I've returned to Pakistan, I have tried my best to be as interactive and communicative as possible, I do not try to be teacher-centered just to deliver a lecture, though my students sometimes complain that they do not understand my method, and I explained to them that look,

it's end of the day language, and you must practice it. So, I make my students read during the class and explain things to one another. I make my students take notes. I make my students do pair work activities in class. So, I try my best to allow them to become self-learners. So, my classroom is a kind of mini-flipped classroom.

5. Findings

The thematic analysis helped identify how the foreign teaching experience impacts the Pakistani English language teachers' identity development and draw the following findings in this regard:

Diverse Impact of Living and Teaching Abroad: The eight teachers included in the study were found to have diverse teaching experiences in countries like Saudi Arabia, the UK, and the US. This suggests that the effects of foreign teaching experience depend on the cultural and educational contexts in which the teachers were immersed.

Positive Impact on Identity and Professional Competency: Foreign teaching experience, no matter the cultural and educational contexts, positively impacted the teachers' identities and significantly impacted their professional competence as English language teachers. Exposure to different cultural and educational environments broadened their perspectives and enriched their teaching practices, enhancing their effectiveness as English language teachers.

Transition to Teacher-researcher: The foreign experience transformed the Pakistani English language teachers' identities. A notable transformation was the transition from traditional teachers to teacher-researchers. Engaging in foreign teaching experiences encouraged them to adopt a more reflective and research-oriented approach to their practices. The experience stimulated their curiosity and encouraged them to critically examine their teaching methods and outcomes.

Focus on Effective Communication in Real-Life Situations: Another significant change noticed by the participants because of the foreign teaching experience was the increased emphasis on listening and speaking skills in language teaching. The foreign teaching experience exposed the teachers to the importance of effective communication in real-life situations and motivated them to prioritize these skills in their teaching practices. This shift aligns with contemporary language teaching theories and methodologies that emphasize communicative competence.

Overall, it has been found that foreign teaching experiences greatly contributed to the identity development of Pakistani teachers. These experiences have strongly influenced their identities in many ways, as these experiences provide them with opportunities to become expert language teachers, teacher-researchers, and change agents in the typical education system. In this study, it was noticed that foreign teaching experience only has positive impacts. Moreover, these experiences provide them with opportunities to shape their identities and enable them to cope with different challenges and situations they face upon returning to their own country.

6. Conclusion

The role of foreign teaching experience in the process of identity development has been a significant debate over the years (Bodycott & Walker, 2000; THOMAS, 2012; Li & Edwards, 2013; Serin, 2017; Zhang & Wang, 2022). This study has investigated the impacts of foreign teaching experience on Pakistani English language teachers' identity development. Moreover, this research has been conducted on Pakistani teachers who have experience teaching in different countries, i.e., Saudi Arabia, the UK, the US, etc.

After collecting data through online and face-to-face interviews and analyzing it qualitatively using thematic analysis, this study can be safely wrapped up by saying that the foreign teaching experience has positively shaped the identities of Pakistani teachers and transformed them from typical teachers to teacher researchers, expert language teachers, and change agents.

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