

Becoming a Different Teacher: Exploring English Teachers' Professional Identity Transformation after an In-Service Certification Program

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Abstract:

This study explores how English teachers experience professional identity transformation after completing an in-service certification program. Grounded in transformative learning theory, particularly Mezirow's concept of perspective transformation, this research adopts a phenomenological approach to examine teachers' lived experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with three English teachers who had completed the certification program. The findings reveal that teachers underwent significant shifts in their professional identity, beginning with the recognition of limitations in their prior teaching practices. These experiences prompted critical reflection, leading to the adoption of more student-centered and reflective pedagogical approaches. The study also shows that teachers reconstructed their professional identity, viewing themselves as more competent, confident, and responsible educators. However, this transformation was accompanied by challenges, including limited resources and lack of institutional support, which created tensions in implementing new practices. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of transformative learning in shaping teacher identity and underscores the need for contextualized support in professional development programs.

Keywords: English Language Teaching; In-Service Certification Program; Professional Development; Teacher Professional Identity; Transformative Learning.

Introduction

Teacher professional development is widely recognized as a critical factor in improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Empirical evidence consistently shows that well-designed professional development programs can lead to measurable improvements in instructional practices and student achievement. In-service certification programs, in particular, are designed to enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and pedagogical practices while supporting continuous professional growth. However, despite the growing investment in such programs, evidence regarding their broader impact remains uneven, especially in relation to teachers' internal professional development. While many studies have examined the impact of certification programs on teaching competence, considerably less attention has been given to how these programs shape teachers' professional identity.

Professional identity is a central aspect of teaching, shaping how teachers make instructional decisions and engage in reflective practice (Beijaard et al., 2004). It is not a fixed construct, but rather a dynamic and

evolving process influenced by personal experiences, classroom practices, and sociocultural contexts (Hogg et al., 2024). In the field of English language teaching, teacher identity plays a particularly important role, as teachers are required to continuously negotiate their roles in response to diverse learner needs, curriculum changes, and institutional demands. Despite its importance, existing research tends to prioritize observable competencies over the more complex, internal processes of identity formation and transformation, leaving a significant gap in understanding how professional development influences who teachers become, not just what they do.

Transformative learning theory provides a useful framework for understanding these changes. According to (Mezirow, 2000), transformation occurs when individuals encounter a disorienting dilemma that challenges their existing beliefs, prompting critical reflection and leading to the development of new perspectives. Recent studies have further emphasized that transformative learning involves not only cognitive change but also emotional and social dimensions, which contribute to identity reconstruction (Alosaimi, 2023; Zhou et al., 2025). However, there is still limited empirical exploration of how these transformative processes unfold in structured professional development settings such as in-service certification programs, particularly within specific disciplinary contexts like English language teaching.

In the context of English language teaching in Indonesia, teachers often face challenges such as limited resources, diverse student proficiency levels, and institutional constraints. These contextual factors can significantly mediate how teachers interpret and implement what they learn from professional development programs (Hogg et al., 2024). Consequently, transformation is not a linear outcome but a complex, situated process shaped by the interaction between program content and real-world teaching conditions. Despite this, few studies have explicitly examined how such contextual realities influence teachers' professional identity transformation after participating in certification programs.

The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of English teachers as they undergo professional identity transformation after completing an in-service certification program. This study is guided by the following research question: *How do English teachers experience professional identity transformation after completing an in-service certification program?* By explicitly focusing on teachers' lived experiences and identity reconstruction processes, this study addresses the limited empirical attention to identity transformation within certification contexts and positions itself to extend prior research that has predominantly focused on competence and performance outcomes. Furthermore, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the processes through which professional development can foster meaningful changes in teacher identity and offers implications for the design and implementation of certification programs in similar educational contexts.

Literature Review

Teacher Professional Development and Certification Programs

Teacher professional development plays a crucial role in enhancing instructional quality and fostering continuous improvement in teaching practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that structured professional development programs contribute to improvements in pedagogical competence and student learning outcomes. In-service certification programs, as a formalized model of professional development, are designed not only to standardize teaching quality but also to promote sustained professional growth.

However, a closer examination of the literature reveals a dominant emphasis on measurable and external indicators of success, such as teaching effectiveness and student achievement. While these studies provide valuable evidence of program impact, they tend to conceptualize teacher development as a linear process of skill acquisition. This perspective contrasts with more recent views that position teacher learning as a complex and multidimensional process involving cognitive, affective, and identity-related changes. In this regard, the literature shows a clear imbalance: although professional development is theoretically understood as transformative, empirical investigations remain largely confined to observable outcomes. This limitation suggests a need to critically re-examine how teacher change is conceptualized and studied, particularly by incorporating internal dimensions such as belief systems and identity formation.

Teacher Professional Identity in English Language Teaching

Teacher professional identity is a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by teaching experiences, social interactions, and contextual influences (Beijaard et al., 2004). Rather than being a stable attribute, identity is continuously negotiated through practice and interaction, reflecting an ongoing process of meaning-making. Supporting this view, Golzar (2020) emphasizes that identity is reconstructed through engagement with students and classroom realities, while Hogg et al. (2024) further highlight the role of sociocultural and institutional contexts in shaping identity trajectories.

Despite this shared understanding, existing studies differ in their analytical focus. Some emphasize individual agency and reflective practice as drivers of identity change, whereas others foreground structural constraints and contextual influences. This divergence indicates that teacher identity cannot be fully understood without integrating both perspectives. In the field of English language teaching, this complexity becomes even more pronounced, as teachers are required to navigate linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical expectations simultaneously.

Zhou et al. (2025) demonstrate that shifts toward student-centered pedagogy are often accompanied by changes in professional identity, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between practice and identity. However, most studies examine this relationship in informal or classroom-based contexts, with limited attention to structured interventions such as certification programs. As a result, there is insufficient understanding of how formal professional development initiatives contribute to identity transformation, particularly in underrepresented contexts such as developing countries.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory, developed by Mezirow (2000), provides a conceptual lens for understanding deep and meaningful change in adult learning. Central to this theory is the notion of a disorienting dilemma, which disrupts existing assumptions and initiates critical reflection. Through reflective processes, individuals reconstruct their perspectives and adopt new ways of thinking and acting. Recent studies have extended this framework by emphasizing that transformation is not solely cognitive but also involves emotional and social dimensions (Alosaimi, 2023). Zhou et al. (2025) further argue that these dimensions are integral to professional identity reconstruction, as transformation entails changes in how individuals perceive themselves and their roles.

While previous research has successfully applied transformative learning theory to teacher development, much of it remains focused on identifying general patterns of change rather than examining the depth and complexity of individual experiences. Moreover, there is a tendency to infer transformation from observable outcomes, rather than directly investigating the lived experiences that underpin such changes. This indicates a methodological gap in the literature, particularly the lack of phenomenological approaches that can

capture the subjective and contextual nature of transformative processes within professional development settings.

The Role of Context in Identity Transformation

Teacher identity is shaped not only by internal processes but also by external contextual factors. Studies have shown that institutional conditions, availability of resources, and sociocultural environments significantly influence how teachers interpret and implement new practices (Hogg et al., 2024). These findings suggest that teacher transformation cannot be understood in isolation from the contexts in which teachers work.

However, existing research presents differing perspectives on the role of context. Some studies view contextual factors primarily as constraints that limit the application of new knowledge, while others highlight their potential as enabling conditions that support innovation and adaptation. This dual perspective indicates that context functions both as a barrier and as a resource, depending on how it is negotiated by teachers.

In many cases, particularly in developing educational settings, contextual challenges such as limited resources and institutional rigidity may create tensions between newly acquired knowledge and existing practices. These tensions are critical, as they may serve as catalysts for reflection and transformation rather than merely obstacles. Therefore, understanding identity transformation requires a more nuanced analysis of how teachers navigate and make sense of these contextual dynamics.

Research Gap and Novelty

Although previous research has demonstrated the impact of professional development programs on teaching practices, limited attention has been given to how such programs influence teachers' professional identity through transformative learning processes. Existing studies tend to either focus on measurable outcomes or examine identity in informal teaching contexts, resulting in a fragmented understanding of teacher development.

Furthermore, there is a lack of studies that integrate three key dimensions simultaneously: (1) structured professional development in the form of certification programs, (2) transformative learning as a theoretical framework, and (3) teachers' lived experiences captured through a phenomenological approach. This gap is particularly evident in the context of English language teaching in Indonesia, where empirical evidence on identity transformation remains scarce.

Addressing this gap is both theoretically and practically urgent. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of teacher development by linking external interventions with internal transformation processes. Practically, it provides insights into how certification programs can be designed to support not only competence development but also meaningful identity reconstruction.

Therefore, this study offers a novel contribution by examining how English teachers experience professional identity transformation after completing an in-service certification program, using transformative learning theory as a guiding framework and a phenomenological approach to capture the depth of their lived experiences. This integrated perspective enables a more comprehensive understanding of teacher change as a multidimensional and contextually situated process.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore English teachers' lived experiences of professional identity transformation after completing an in-service certification program. Phenomenology is particularly suitable for this study as it seeks to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences.

In line with phenomenological principles, this study aims to capture the essence of participants' experiences by focusing on how they perceive and interpret their professional identity transformation. The researcher engaged in *bracketing* (epoché), a process of setting aside personal assumptions and prior knowledge, in order to approach the data with openness and minimize bias. This reflective stance was maintained throughout the research process to ensure that the findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

Participants and Context

The participants of this study were three English teachers who had completed the Indonesian in-service teacher certification program (Program Pendidikan Profesi Guru). They were selected using purposive sampling, as they met the criteria relevant to the research focus, namely having completed the certification program and having teaching experience both before and after the program.

The selection of a small number of participants is consistent with phenomenological research, which prioritizes depth over breadth in exploring lived experiences. The participants were teaching in different educational contexts, including schools with limited facilities and resources. These varying contexts provided rich and diverse perspectives, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how professional identity transformation is experienced and negotiated within different institutional settings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method was chosen to allow participants to freely express their experiences while still maintaining focus on the research objectives. The interview questions were designed to explore teachers' experiences before, during, and after the certification program, including their perceptions of changes in teaching practices, beliefs, and professional identity.

To align with phenomenological inquiry, the interviews emphasized eliciting detailed, first-person accounts of lived experiences. Participants were encouraged to describe specific events, feelings, and reflections, particularly moments that challenged their prior assumptions (disorienting dilemmas) and prompted critical reflection. Probing questions were used to deepen the descriptions and uncover the meanings participants attached to their experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). This approach was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data, particularly in studies exploring lived experiences.

The analysis followed six recursive phases as outlined by Braun and Clarke:

- 1. Familiarization with the data**

The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to gain a deep and holistic understanding of participants' experiences.

2. **Generating initial codes**

Significant statements and meaningful units related to teachers' experiences of change were identified and systematically coded across the dataset. In line with phenomenological analysis, this stage involved *horizontalization*, where all relevant statements were initially treated with equal value before being clustered into meaningful units.

3. **Searching for themes**

Codes were then organized into potential themes by identifying patterns and relationships among them.

4. **Reviewing themes**

The emerging themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence within themes and clear distinctions between themes.

5. **Defining and naming themes**

Each theme was clearly defined and named to capture the essence of the participants' experiences, particularly in relation to professional identity transformation.

6. **Producing the report**

The final themes were developed into a coherent narrative, supported by representative excerpts from the data and interpreted through the lens of transformative learning theory.

Although thematic analysis was used as the primary analytical method, the interpretation of the data was deeply informed by phenomenological principles. After identifying themes, the researcher engaged in *essence extraction* by synthesizing the core meanings across participants' experiences to construct a composite description of the phenomenon. This process aimed to reveal the invariant structure of professional identity transformation as experienced by the participants.

The analysis was conducted iteratively, moving back and forth between the data, codes, and themes to ensure depth, consistency, and fidelity to participants' lived experiences.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed based on qualitative research criteria.

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, iterative analysis, and the use of rich, thick descriptions. The researcher also applied bracketing to minimize bias and maintain focus on participants' perspectives.

Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear and systematic research process, including consistent use of the interview protocol and detailed documentation of data collection and analysis procedures.

Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in the data, as evidenced through the inclusion of direct quotations in the findings. This allows readers to trace the connection between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations.

Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

Together, these strategies enhance the rigor, transparency, and trustworthiness of the study, ensuring that the findings authentically represent the lived experiences of the participants.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on the thematic analysis of participants' lived experiences. Four major themes emerged, reflecting the process of professional identity transformation among English teachers after completing the certification program.

Re-evaluating Prior Teaching Beliefs through Disorienting Experiences

The findings reveal that teachers began to question their previous teaching practices after encountering situations in which their methods were no longer effective. All participants reported experiencing student disengagement prior to joining the certification program.

For instance, one teacher noted that “students were getting bored with the methods” used repeatedly in the classroom. Another participant highlighted that traditional approaches such as excessive lecturing and board writing were no longer effective, particularly when teaching Gen Z learners. Similarly, one participant explained that vocabulary-focused instruction often resulted in student boredom, prompting the need to explore alternative strategies.

These experiences indicate that teachers became increasingly aware of the limitations of their existing pedagogical approaches. The disruption of routine practices led them to reconsider their assumptions about effective teaching.

Developing Reflective and Student-Centered Pedagogical Awareness

After completing the certification program, teachers demonstrated noticeable changes in how they approached teaching. Participants described a shift from routine, unstructured practices to more intentional and structured instructional approaches.

One teacher explained that prior to the program, teaching mainly involved delivering content, whereas after the program, they became aware of various teaching strategies and began adapting their methods to suit students' needs. Another participant emphasized that their lesson planning became “more focused and structured,” indicating increased attention to instructional design and assessment.

All participants also reported a transition toward student-centered learning. They incorporated various interactive strategies such as role-playing, project-based learning, videos, games, and visual aids. These changes were reflected in students' classroom behavior, with teachers observing increased engagement, enthusiasm, and participation.

Reconstructing Professional Identity as a “True Teacher”

A key finding of this study is the transformation of teachers' professional identity. Participants described not only changes in teaching practices but also shifts in how they perceived themselves as educators.

One participant explicitly stated that after completing the program, they felt they had become “a true teacher—not merely someone who turns up to teach.” This reflects a shift from viewing teaching as a routine task to understanding it as a meaningful and responsible profession.

This identity transformation was characterized by several aspects, including increased confidence, greater responsibility toward students' learning, improved competence in lesson planning and assessment, and a

stronger commitment to continuous improvement. Another teacher noted that better preparation enabled them to face students with greater confidence, even in challenging situations.

Experiencing Tensions between Transformation and Contextual Constraints

Despite these positive changes, participants also reported challenges in implementing their new knowledge and practices. Several constraints were identified, including limited facilities and resources, lack of institutional support, students' low readiness and motivation, and technological limitations such as restricted internet access and malfunctioning equipment.

One teacher expressed frustration with the lack of institutional support, explaining that they often had to provide their own teaching materials. Another participant described difficulties when students were reluctant or unable to engage with technology-based learning activities.

These challenges sometimes resulted in feelings of frustration and exhaustion. However, teachers also demonstrated adaptability by modifying their strategies, such as using printed materials when technology was unavailable or adjusting lessons to match students' abilities.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings in relation to existing theories and previous studies, particularly transformative learning theory and teacher professional identity.

Disorienting Experiences as Triggers for Reflective Change

The findings show that student disengagement served as a critical trigger for teachers to question their established practices. These experiences can be understood as *disorienting dilemmas*, as conceptualized by Mezirow (2000), which initiate the process of transformative learning.

Consistent with this theory, the participants' dissatisfaction with traditional teaching methods prompted critical reflection on their assumptions about effective teaching. This supports previous research suggesting that professional growth often begins when teachers encounter situations that challenge their existing beliefs.

From Practice Change to Reflective Pedagogical Awareness

The shift toward student-centered pedagogy reflects not only a change in teaching strategies but also the development of reflective awareness. Teachers moved from routine content delivery to more intentional and adaptive instructional practices.

This finding aligns with studies highlighting that professional development can enhance teachers' ability to critically evaluate their teaching and respond to students' needs. The integration of interactive strategies and increased student engagement further supports the view that changes in practice are closely linked to deeper cognitive and pedagogical transformations.

Identity Reconstruction through Transformative Learning

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of professional identity reconstruction as a core outcome of the certification program. The transformation from "just teaching" to becoming a "true teacher" reflects what Mezirow (2000) describes as *perspective transformation*.

This process involves not only acquiring new skills but also redefining one's professional self. The findings are consistent with previous studies that emphasize the role of reflection, experience, and learning in shaping teacher identity. Importantly, this study extends prior research by demonstrating how structured certification programs can facilitate identity transformation, not just competence development.

The Role of Context in Mediating Transformation

The findings also highlight that transformation is not a linear process but is shaped by contextual realities. Institutional constraints, limited resources, and student-related challenges influenced how teachers implemented their newly acquired knowledge.

This supports the argument that teacher identity is context-dependent and continuously negotiated within real-world conditions. While previous studies often emphasize the positive outcomes of professional development, this study reveals the tensions between ideal practices and practical limitations.

Importantly, these challenges did not entirely hinder transformation. Instead, they prompted teachers to adapt and negotiate their practices, demonstrating resilience and agency. This suggests that contextual constraints can function not only as barriers but also as conditions that shape the nature of transformation.

Conclusion

This study examined how English teachers experience professional identity transformation after completing an in-service certification program, using a phenomenological approach grounded in transformative learning theory. The findings indicate that transformation is a multidimensional process, beginning with disorienting experiences that trigger critical reflection and leading to shifts in both pedagogical practices and professional self-concept.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that changes in teaching practices are closely intertwined with identity reconstruction. Teachers move from viewing themselves as knowledge transmitters to reflective practitioners with greater responsibility, confidence, and pedagogical awareness. However, this transformation is not linear, as it is mediated by contextual constraints such as limited resources and institutional support.

Theoretically, this study contributes by extending transformative learning theory into the domain of teacher professional identity within formal certification contexts, bridging the gap between competence-based professional development and identity-focused research. Methodologically, it offers a nuanced perspective by capturing transformation as a lived and contextually situated experience.

Practically, the findings suggest that professional development programs should integrate reflective and identity-oriented components, alongside providing contextual support to sustain transformation. Future research is recommended to adopt longitudinal designs and broader samples to further examine the sustainability of identity change.

In sum, this study highlights that effective professional development involves not only changes in practice but also transformation in how teachers understand and position themselves as professionals.

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