

# ***“My Past Language Learning is Irritating, But Not for My Future Teaching Career!”: A Look at One Male Preservice Teacher’s Teacher Identity Construction***

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## **Abstract**

Research on teacher identity construction has been widely conducted. The results yielded common theoretical underpinnings that teacher identity is a complex construct. In spite of its significance in teacher education programs, little attention has been on preservice teachers’ construction of teacher identity from their past learning experiences. It is for that reason that the present study was enacted. Employing a narrative inquiry approach, this study documented one male preservice teacher’s accounts of his past learning experiences and how he shaped the

teacher identity for his future teaching profession. The results of this study uncovered that pedagogical decision was effectively made by the participant after reflecting on his past learning experiences. It, additionally, helped reshape his complex identity as a future teacher in engaging students to learn. This paper ends with proposals for future research in preservice teacher education programs.

**Keywords:** teacher identity, preservice teacher, pedagogical decision, language learning

## Introduction

Research on teacher identity construction has been well conducted worldwide, for instance in China (Yang, 2019), Arab (Hayik & Weiner-Levy, 2019), Korea (Song, 2019), Canada (Marom, 2019), South Africa (Christiansen & Bertram, 2019), Indonesia (Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017), and America (Parsons et al., 2019). The research concluded that teacher identity is a complex notion (Andreasen, Bjørndal, & Kovač, 2019) and multiple complexities may emerge (Brown & Heck, 2018). Based on one of the latest studies, teacher identity encompasses several spheres; these are self-efficacy, commitment, motivation, self-image, task perception, and job satisfaction (Hanna, Oostdam, Severiens, & Zijlstra, 2019). These aspects signal the complex construct in teacher identity research (Brown & Heck, 2018). However, these well-established studies do not comprehensively address the extent to which teacher identity interlinks with learning experiences.

Previous works have also proven that teacher identity is influential to teacher's teaching performances, principally in the context of preservice teacher education programs (Churchward & Willis, 2019; McLean & Price, 2019; Yazan, 2019; van der Wal, Oolbekkink-Marchand, Schaap, & Meijer, 2019). Thereby, studies examining teacher identity have been directed into preservice teacher education programs for years (Bergey, Ranellucci, & Kaplan, 2019). Previous research has much focused on preservice teachers' teaching experiences and how they shape their teacher identity through the teaching practicum (Geng, Smith, Black, Budd, & Disney, 2019; Gómez, Mena, García-Rodríguez, & Peñalvo, 2019; Robinson & Knight, 2019; Simsek, 2014; Sugimoto, Carter, & Stoehr, 2017; Wetzal, Svrcek, LeeKeenan & Daly-Lesch, 2019;). This directs the current research on teacher identity to classroom practices carried out by preservice teachers focusing on their preparation, understanding of classroom atmosphere, teacher and student interaction process, as well as students' psychological and acquisition aspects in learning a language.

Interestingly, the quality of teaching performance carried out by preservice teachers cannot be separated from their past learning experiences (Baran, Canbazoglu Bilici, Albayrak Sari, & Tondeur, 2019; Damrow & Sweeney, 2019; Theelen, van den Beemt., & den Brok, 2019). It is for that reason that past learning experiences help contour views of these teacher candidates on how they can facilitate better learning enactment for students in the class (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Kloser, Wilsey, Madkins, & Windschitl, 2019). Thus, their reflection on the learning experiences serve as a source for pedagogical decision in teaching the students (Davis, Griffith, & Bauml, 2019; Jensen, 2019). This reflection is a socially constructed notion that teachers should constantly reshape themselves within their profession (Farrell, 2017).

The potential of pedagogical decision in preservice teacher education programs, for instance, has been investigated recently. In their study, Kang and van Es (2019) portrayed how videos were selected by preservice teachers as a pedagogic enactment in teaching students. A

participatory action research was conducted by exploring how an activist teaching approach was chosen by the participants (Lugueti & Oliver, 2019). They found that the participants preferred the approach to create student-centered pedagogy and solve misconceptions about teaching and learning. In the United States, secondary preservice teachers were examined in order to determine how they use STEM integration method in teaching the students. The results indicated that the participants successfully implemented the method albeit several difficulties emerged (Ryu, Mentzer, & Knobloch, 2019).

In the context of developing countries, additionally, research on learning experiences of preservice teachers and how they construct the teacher identity is of significance to improve the quality of the teacher education programs (Eret-Orhan, Ok & Capa-Aydin, 2018; Kazempour, 2018). Indonesia, as one of the high-developing countries in the world, is no exception. However, these issues are rarely discerned. In fact, scholars exclusively focus on preservice teachers’ perceptions of English as an international language (Lee, Lee, & Drajeti, 2019; Ubaidillah, 2018), ecological value orientation (Rachmatullah, Lee, & Ha, 2019), and professional identity (Ilfiandra, Setiadi, & Sumarto, 2019). Thereby, a more situated study is necessary to broaden the view of preservice teacher, their identity, and language learning experiences.

Given the inconclusive findings of the mentioned issue of preservice teachers’ learning experiences, the present study is designed to uncover how a teacher candidate shapes the teacher identity from past learning experiences. To achieve detailed investigation, this study recruited one male preservice teacher from a private university in Indonesia, Andy, a pseudonym. Living in a remote village of the eastern part of Pamekasan city, East Java, Indonesia, Andy attempted to move beyond the boundary in his English language learning and teacher identity construction. He encountered ineffective language learning experiences at schools and courses such as demotivating teachers and meaningless teaching and learning activities. He believed that pursuing a degree in English language teaching program in Malang, a large educational city in Indonesia, would help him construct his teacher identity. He shared his past experiences in learning English and reasons why he opted for English language teaching program for his study in higher education. He ended the narratives with future projections of how he would treat and facilitate his students in English language learning.

## Method

In this study, we employed a qualitative approach with semi-structured interview to capture the participant’s accounts of past learning experiences. The interview records were analyzed as narrative data. Thus, the aim of this study is to document personal untold stories with regard to the participant’s teacher identity construction (Clandinin, 2013; Mendieta & Barkhuizen, 2019).

The interviews started with the question, “*What major difficulties did you encounter in your English class in the elementary, secondary, and university levels?*”. It then continued with a more specific question, “*What made you engaged in learning English?*”. The conversation led to some other questions, such as “*How do you make use of school facilities to enhance your English?*”, “*What sort of motives have been enacting you to choose ELT major at university level?*”. Ultimately, the interview ended with the question “*How will you treat your students, reflecting from your learning experiences?*”.

The interview process lasted from 45 minutes to an hour using a smart phone as the recording tool. We did not set any specific inquiries to portray the participant’s stories since we acknowledge that this may hinder natural voices in the interview (Eastmond, 2007). The prepared questions were employed as general guiding navigation for the participant to recall his

memories in language learning. Afterwards, we transcribed the excerpts to obtain meaning from the recorded accounts.

After the data was transcribed, we began the narrative analysis by reading the transcript repeatedly (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and selecting emerging themes from the talking data. To ensure the trustworthiness, we matched the emerging themes with the transcription. This step was undertaken to uncover categorical contents within the transcripts (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

We attempt, in this study, to narrate the participant's past language learning. It starts from a brief profile of the participant: *Andy*, a pseudonym, is a final-year male preservice teacher in one private university in Malang, East Java, Indonesia. He spent more than ten years learning English as a foreign language. In this study, he shared his stories informs of a dialogue based on the guiding questions provided. His status of preservice teacher shed light on the identity struggle in an initial teacher education context. Interestingly, despite his depressing and frustrating past learning experiences, he struggled at the university to engage in a number of English language activities such as debating competitions, ELT research forums, and oral presentations. This involvement makes him a unique preservice teacher with complicatedness in his past language learning.

## Findings

### **Andy's past learning experiences as a catalyst for sustained motivation in language learning**

In the interview, Andy embarked on learning English in an English course based in his hometown, Pamekasan city, East Java, Indonesia. He attended the course because his mother induced him to learn English language. Despite his disliking of the language, Andy endured ill-fated experiences in the learning process, particularly in memorizing vocabulary and pronouncing words. This is depicted in his narrative accounts:

*At first, I didn't like English. It is very difficult to learn, especially in pronunciation. I think it is different from writing. In grade five of elementary school, my mother forced me to learn English in an English course in my city. I tried hard to attend the course. But, it is always hard for me to memorize vocabulary. I can't speak since my English words are very limited. I also find it hard to pronounce English words because it is always different between the words written on the paper and how we have to pronounce them. That's why I didn't like English at that time. Moreover, facilities in my course (also in my school) are lacking. We only have one tape recording with very old cassette to learn listening. It is annoying!*

The above circumstance experienced by Andy continued as he pursued higher education in Malang city, East Java, Indonesia. At the university, Andy began to realize that learning English is not limited within his prior experiences. Speaking itself does not suffice anymore. At this level, he is required to obtain sound knowledge of English academic words and write research proposals effectively. He narrated that:

*At the university level, I feel that everything is different. Learning English is not only about speaking, pronunciation, and vocabulary memorization. I learn that academic writing is highly appreciated. I see how my lecturers appreciate students who can write academically. It is different from learning English in my previous course and school which only discuss about speaking.*

When asked about the role of teacher motivation in his learning journey, Andy noted that one of his young lecturers at the university dedicated his time to student research discussion. Andy engaged fully in this activity due to his lecturer’s motivation. He voiced that:

*I have one lecturer. He is still very young. He spent time for us (me and my friends) to hold weekly research discussion. It is of course for free. I have high motivation in this activity and engage fully in the discussion. This is what I like from learning. The role of teacher is of significant to boost my motivation.*

Our conversation ended with a question of what sort of motives have been enacting him to choose ELT major at the university level. Andy confessed that his prior learning experiences have enacted him to choose English language teaching program for his major at the university. He brings with him a mission, that is, to equip his future students with effective English learning experiences and help them improve their English skills. Looking back to his past experiences, he does not want his future students to experience ineffective learning conditions, receiving ill-equipped facilities, and having low proficiency in English. This is clearly seen from his narratives:

*I want to be a good teacher who teaches students with passion, effective teaching methods, and caring. Because I have learned from my past experiences, so I think now I can facilitate what my students actually need. Of course, difficulties in learning English, I hope, do not come and happen to my students in the future.*

### **Teacher identity construction is shaped by Andy’s past learning experiences**

After revealing his experiences in learning English, we then interviewed him, “How will you treat your students, reflecting from your learning experiences?”. He accounted that:

*Well... I know now that my past learning experience was not that good. I mean... I have to struggle with inducement from my mother until my secondary school and higher education levels. Luckily, in my university, I met a very young and enthusiastic lecturer who devoted his time assisting students to learn research and best practices in English language teaching. He motivated me a lot. I think it is important for teachers. I will do the same thing of course. I will motivate my students and engage them in discussion forums during their study. It will facilitate them with effective learning.*

For Andy, drawing back on his past learning experiences is a key factor for his motivation to facilitate better learning for his students. He was much inspired by his teacher and attempted to share similar values. It, by no means, is a typical teacher identity that he brings in his future profession.

## **Discussion**

### **Multi-facet learning experiences: Between pronunciation and vocabulary enactment**

In this study, we portrayed narrative accounts of one male preservice teacher with regard to his past learning experiences and how this notion relates to his teacher identity. Teacher identity is a multi-facet tenet (Alsup, 2006) and a fluid construct. It is, by no means, influenced by institutional, instructional, and discourse practices within the community (Chen, 2010). In

his narrative accounts, Andy experienced ineffective English language learning in his journey of being English as a foreign language learner. He encountered difficulties in learning pronunciation. For a non-native English speaker, pronouncing English words may be deemed enduring since non-native English speakers tend to maintain their local identities such as accent and stress (Ahn, 2019). Andy is a non-native English speaker in his learning journey. It is, thereby, uneasy for him to succeed in pronunciation learning.

Vocabulary memorization is also Andy's complicatedness. Albeit myriad vocabulary learning methods have been introduced in EFL contexts (Yaacob, et al., 2019), memorizing activity seems to be the most desirable vocabulary teaching method used by EFL teachers. Andy's accounts prove that his English teacher guided the students, including him, to this conventional learning method. Similar to these two complexities, the lack of facilities is also problematic. Andy's learning experiences confirmed this fact. He discouragingly voiced that lack of facilities is 'annoying'. It is generally acceptable that the teaching and learning of English enacted in developing countries remain unsatisfactory. One of the reasons is the lack of facilities (Afrough, Rahimi, & Zarafshan, 2014; Cheng & Lee, 2018).

### **Realizing the new position of self: In pursuit of academic writing skill and future views of being a teacher**

As he noted, Andy's past learning experiences reached its better nuances in his tertiary education. He began to realize that learning English at this level requires higher knowledge of English skills, especially in the academic writing class. Andy attempted to survive in his writing class by involving himself actively in a research forum led by his lecturer. In tertiary education, academic writing skill is a challenge requiring a set of linguistic repertoires possessed by graduate students as well as advanced knowledge on their written topics (Carter, Salamonson, Ramjan, & Halcomb, 2018; Chand, 2014; James, 2018; Strobl, et al., 2019). Moreover, he encountered motivational enactment from his lecturer in his academic writing class. L2 motivation serves as an indispensable aspect in a writing class (Sasaki, 2011).

Interestingly, this study captured Andy's future projections of being an English teacher. His enduring learning experiences have set him a mission he brings to his future career. His enthusiasm to facilitate effective learning for students comes from his past struggling experiences. Research has for years argued that motivation to teach should be consistently geared in teacher profession since it evolves students' excitement in learning (Büssing, Schleper, & Menzel, 2018; Husny Arar & Massry-Herzllah, 2016; Kim, An, Bell, Jean-Sigur, & Basch, 2018; Stupnisky, BrckaLorenz, Yuhas, & Guay, 2018; Whitaker & Valtierra, 2018);. Andy, reflecting on his past learning experiences, exclusively focuses on the vital position of teacher motivation to engage students in learning.

This study has documented how Andy's teacher identity was constructed, drawing back on his past enduring learning experiences. The narratives serve as anticipatory projections in his future teaching career. Two essential findings which emerged from Andy's accounts were effective teaching methods (Ferguson & Danielson, 2015) and teacher motivation (Han & Yin, 2016), both of which he would convey to the future students. Despite this, depressing experiences in learning are subject to, in a broad view, impact on future teacher identity of preservice teachers and concurrent with their practices in the classrooms (Peng, et al., 2014).

## **Implication for language teachers**

This study acknowledges the essence of teacher identity shaped by a particular past learning experience. In this regard, Andy shared his enduring past language learning and how he mirrored to this very irritating experience. Looking at the results, this study implies that teacher candidates hold a belief drawn on from their memories. This belief may be practiced in the future career inasmuch research has for years proven that teacher belief is interlinked with classroom practices (Eisenbach, 2012; Farrell & Ives, 2015; Farrell, 2017; Zheng, 2013). Teachers are encouraged to recall their past learning experiences so that they reflect on these and enact more effective pedagogic decision in classroom practices. Through effective teaching in the class, the implication continues to emerge in a long-term belief of their student teachers who later aspire to be an effective teacher in their profession.

## **Conclusion**

This study attempted to unveil how one male preservice teacher in Indonesia constructed his teacher identity from the lens of his past learning experiences. The results indicated that the participant portrayed his future teacher identity based on his past experiences, projecting two underpinning frames to practice; these are, effective teaching methods and teacher motivation. The participant’s personal experiences signal how his future teaching career would evolve in the profession. Furthermore, this multiple construction of identity serves as a teacher pedagogical decision in teaching and learning. Drawing on the participant’s enduring learning experiences, it is concluded that preservice teacher self-reflection examined in this study has served as a source to facilitate effective learning for students. By this means, the construction of teacher identity is, in itself, opened for reconstruction and yields a new dimension through the power of narratives (Wang, 2017). This study surfaces challenges for the future research. One possible inquiry to enrich this study is through a wider exploration of the possible impact of past depressing and frustrating experiences on future teacher identity, whether it is taken into account or not, especially in the classroom teaching contexts.

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