The Effects of Teaching Abroad Experience on Professional Teacher Identity Development of EFL Teachers

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Abstract

This study investigates in what ways the teaching abroad experience contributes to in-service English language teachers' identity development. In the study, qualitative research approach was adopted and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine English language teachers were conducted. Reflexive thematic analysis of interview transcripts suggests that the teaching abroad experience provides unique opportunities for teachers' identity development. The findings point out that having multiple identities during the teaching abroad program, having more agency as a teacher, working with motivated students who are eager to learn the target language, and developing communicative competence have transformative effects in shaping the teachers' professional identities. Findings also highlight the need for more structured activities during the teaching abroad process to better facilitate teachers' identity development processes.

Introduction

Research on the impact of teaching abroad programs on language teachers indicate that it has remarkable benefits on teachers' professional and personal growth as evidenced in their improvements in linguistic and cultural competency, teaching skills, social networking, and self-efficacy (Allen, 2010; Barfield, 1994; Çiftçi & Karaman, 2019; Hauerwas, Skawinski, & Ryan, 2017; Jochum, Rawlings, & Tejada, 2017; Mutlu & Ortaçtepe, 2016; Marx & Moss, 2011; Rissel, 1995; Smolcic, 2013; Wernicke, 2010). Existing literature on language teacher study abroad programs generally addressed the pre-service teachers' perspective, whereas only a small percentage of existing studies have considered differentiating teachers from students (Allen, 2010; Cook, 2009; Erduyan, Werbińska, Yakışık, Guerra, & Ekiert, 2018; Ortaçtepe, 2015; Mutlu & Ortaçtepe, 2016; Plews, Breckenridge, & Cambre, 2010; Wang, 2009; Wernicke, 2010, 2016, 2017; Zhao & Mantero, 2018).

There are important differences between students and teachers in terms of their experience. For example, "while students tend to focus on learning as a means of acquiring more knowledge, teachers are more often engaged in new knowledge with the view of later transforming this into learning opportunities for their own students" (Wernicke, 2010, p.14). One might also expect such an experience to affect in-service and pre-service teachers' identity formation trajectories in different ways. As pre-service teachers continue their education, they develop their teacher identity, and further identity shifts can occur as they continue their career as a teacher working at schools and interacting with the school

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communities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Rather than being a fixed, unchanging, and imposed structure, teacher identity is actively built by the teachers through their experiences and the meanings they derive from those experiences (Sachs, 2005). Teachers' identities are further shaped by their experiences inside and outside the school, their perceptions about what it means to be a teacher, and their beliefs and values about the characteristics of the teachers whom they wish to become (Sachs, 2001).

The common characteristics of professional language teacher identity definitions in the literature highlight that it is a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional structure, influenced by individual characteristics, as well as cultural, social, and political factors affecting its development (Peirce, 1995; Richards, 2021; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005; Yazan, 2018). It develops in relation with others in social and institutional contexts (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Miller, 2009; Varghese et al., 2005; Yazan, 2018; Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Professional language teacher identity is reported to be affected by teacher education (Richards, 2021; Varghese et al., 2005), experience (Miller, 2009; Olsen, 2011; Richards, 2021; Yazan, 2018), past learning experiences (Duff & Uchida, 1997), personal histories (Varghese et al., 2005), the meanings and values learners attached to English (Bukor, 2015; Richards, 2021), language proficiency (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Richards, 2021; Selvi, 2018; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018), being a non-native or native speaker of the target language (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Moussu & Llurda, 2008; Ortaçtepe, 2015; Park, 2012; Pennycook, 2001), and cross-cultural experiences (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Varghese et al., 2005). Professional language teacher identity encompasses many roles and identities as being a language teacher and learner at the same time, being a native or non-native speaker of the target language (Duff & Uchida, 1997). As noted by Barkhuizen (2017):

> *Language teacher identities (LTI) are cognitive, social, emotional, ideological, and historical – they are both inside the teacher and outside in the social, material and technological world. LTIs are being and doing, feeling and imagining, and storying. They are struggle and harmony: they are contested and resisted, by self and others, and they are also accepted, acknowledged and valued, by self and others. They are core and peripheral, personal and professional, they are dynamic, multiple, and hybrid, and they are foregrounded and backgrounded. And LTIs change, short-term and over- time – discursively in social interaction with teacher educators, learners, teachers, administrators, and the wider community, and in material interaction with spaces, places and objects in classrooms, institutions, and online (p.4).*

Many studies in the literature show how teacher identity is reflected in classroom practice and the ramifications of those reflections on students' achievement (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Horowitz, Sorensen, Yoder, & Oyserman, 2018; Richards, 2021; Olsen, 2014, 2016; Mockler, 2011; Yazan, Uzum, & Selvi, 2013). In particular, the perceptions teachers develop regarding their profession play an essential role in their overall teaching practice, which is manifested in the way they organize their classroom activities, their professional development trajectories, their attitudes towards teaching (Beijaard et al., 2004; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Olsen, 2014) and cultural pedagogy (Menard-Warwick, 2013). Therefore, it is vital to investigate the professional teacher identity development process along multiple dimensions that mutually elaborate on each other.

The teaching abroad experience can facilitate teachers' professional identity development across multiple levels, such as improving self-esteem and confidence in dealing with challenging situations (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013; Kinginger, 2009, 2013). This experience can be beneficial as it challenges sojourner teachers' beliefs related to their profession (Mayumi & Hüttner, 2020). In terms of identity formation, teaching abroad experience can be considered an experience that can trigger tensions, leading the teacher to purposefully explore his/her teaching-related beliefs, goals, self-perceptions and definitions, perceived action possibilities, and relations (Kaplan & Garner, 2018). It can affect sojourner teachers' perceptions about themselves and their responsibilities (Cook, 2009) and encourage them to re-evaluate their beliefs about learning and teaching (Bodycott & Walker, 2000), which could be considered as key aspects of identity exploration.

However, there are only a limited number of studies that specifically focus on investigating the effects of teaching abroad programs on teachers' professional identity development rather than on their cultural and linguistic gains (Erduyan et al., 2018; Ortaçtepe, 2015; Mutlu & Ortaçtepe, 2016; Plews et al., 2010; Mora, Trejo, & Roux, 2016; Wernicke, 2016, 2017, 2020; Zhao & Mantero, 2018). Existing studies generally focus on identity related constructs separately, such as professional growth (Allen, 2010; Barfield, 1994; Baecher & Chung, 2020; Biraimah & Jotia, 2013; Jochum, Rawlings, & Tejada, 2015; Jochum et al., 2017; Okken, Jansen, Hofman, & Coelen, 2019; Rissel, 1995), intercultural knowledge (Allen, 2010; Biraimah & Jotia, 2013; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; de Felix & Pena, 1992; Wernicke, 2010; Thompson, 2002), language proficiency (Allen, 2010; de Felix & Pena, 1992; Gleeson & Tait, 2012; Jochum et al., 2017; Rissel, 1995; Roskvist, Harvey, Corder, & Stacey, 2015; Thompson, 2002; Wernicke, 2010), self-confidence (Okken et al., 2019; Shiveley & Misco, 2015) and confidence in speaking the target language (Allen, 2010; Barfield, 1994; Rissel, 1995; de Felix & Pena, 1992).

Teacher Identity

Educational researchers have proposed several definitions to characterize teacher identity. Although there is no widespread consensus on a single definition (Beijaard et al., 2004), teacher identity is typically characterized as who you are as a teacher (Gee, 2000) and often associated with teachers' personality (Beijaard et al., 2004), attitude (Walkington, 2005), perceptions (Sachs, 2001), beliefs (Sachs, 2001; Olsen, 2014), personal values (Day, 2002), emotions (Olsen, 2014; Zembylas, 2003), and experiences (Flores & Day, 2006; Sachs, 2001).

Teacher identity is conceptualized as a complex and dynamic process (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Rodgers & Scott, 2008), established through experiences and the meanings teachers derive from those experiences (Sachs, 2005). Teachers can emphasize different identities under the influence of different discourses situated in different social contexts (Day & Kington, 2008; Sachs, 2001). Drawing on this situative nature of identity, The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI) is adopted in this study as a conceptual and analytical framework to represent different dimensions of teacher identity in a comprehensive way in line with its complex and dynamical nature (Kaplan & Garner, 2018). DSMRI characterizes teacher identity in terms of four components with three facets:

> *(1) ontological and epistemological beliefs relevant to teaching; (2) purpose and goals in teaching; (3) self-perceptions and self-definitions in teaching; and (4) perceived action possibilities in teaching and emphasizes three facets of it: content, structure, and process. Two teachers may have similar levels of commitment to being a teacher, but hold quite different assumptions, goals, values, emotions, and perceptions about teaching (content), which may be more or less aligned with each other (structure), and that emerge through different processes (process) (Kaplan & Garner, 2018, p. 72).*

Through these constructs, the DSMRI model aims to reflect the complexity of the identity development process and engages with different theoretical frameworks that offer different lenses into identity development, such as social-cultural or psychosocial perspectives (Kaplan & Garner, 2018). The framework reflects teachers' beliefs, values, emotions, and possible actions they are to take concerning these, highlighting the continuity, complexity, and contextuality of the identity development process.

Teaching Abroad and Language Teacher Identity

Within the context of this study, sojourner teachers are conceptualized as noted in Luxon and Peelo's (2009) study. Sojourner teachers are teachers who have gained experience in foreign education systems, which when integrated with their background in another educational setting, becomes a foundational knowledge resource for their future professional endeavors.

The teaching abroad experience can allow teachers to reflect on their teaching philosophies by questioning their values and beliefs and enabling them to develop new values concerning teaching (Okken et al., 2019). Such reassessments of beliefs are seen as an indispensable part of professional

development and identity construction and transformation, and ultimately this can help them broaden their perspectives (Shiveley & Misco, 2015). For example, Zhao and Mantero (2018) reported that due to their teaching abroad experience, sojourn teachers' perceptions about teachers' role in the classroom shifted towards someone who provides guidance as a teacher. Moreover, how the participants conceptualize a competent language teacher had changed from someone who has excellent linguistic skills and pronunciation to someone with more pedagogical knowledge and language use in a cultural context.

Also, some studies reported the effects of this experience on teachers' instructional behaviors. Once the sojourner teachers observed how some of the instructional strategies were applied in the language classrooms during teaching abroad experience, they felt that they could apply those strategies to their classrooms back at home (Plews et al., 2010). Therefore, some changes can be seen in sojourner teachers' teaching methods, classroom management, and assessment strategies upon completing the teaching abroad program (Zhao & Mantero, 2018).

Existing research has also examined teachers' identity investments during their experiences and how they see themselves. Sojourner teachers reported that they enacted multiple identities, which had functioned as affordances, but also caused tensions (Mutlu & Ortaçtepe, 2016; Ortaçtepe, 2015; Plews et al., 2010; Wang, 2014; Wernicke, 2016). Sojourner teachers have multiple identities as language teachers and learners, and native and non-native language teachers (Mutlu & Ortaçtepe, 2016; Ortaçtepe, 2015; Wang, 2014; Wernicke, 2016) L2 users, and emerging scholars (Ortaçtepe, 2015) and the interactions among these multiple identities can enable teachers to explore their professional identities from different perspectives (Mutlu & Ortaçtepe, 2016). Ortaçtepe (2015) asserts that the participants' socialization processes and the different roles they adopted during their teaching abroad experience can help them have rich interactions with the natives, leading to some changes in their professional identities, especially in terms of their cultural competence. However, sometimes the roles ascribed to the sojourner teachers can also cause identity conflict and tension as the roles assigned to them and the roles they are willing to take upon might not be a good match and have to be negotiated through tensions (Plews et al., 2010; Wang, 2014; Wernicke, 2016). Therefore, the context can cause teachers to develop more fragmented professional identities (Mora et al., 2016).

However, personal differences can affect how participants interpret their experience (Erduyan et al., 2018) and the way sojourner teachers experience the teaching abroad program (Romero & Vasilopoulos, 2020). The differences in teachers' initial motivations and purposes for joining the program are critical factors shaping their learning experience. For example, while one of the participants can aim to build upon his/her prior knowledge and experience, the other can be motivated to acquire new knowledge (Plews et al., 2010). All in all, it is important to conceptualize the teaching abroad experience as another opportunity to use and negotiate meaning in the target language regardless of the variations sojourners face, rather than an experience offering immersive, authentic language use (Wernicke, 2016). It is important to understand how sojourners positioned themselves and how they are positioned, their roles in relation to the power and the social context, their assumptions about the culture, learning, and teaching to make discourses that work in racialized ways visible (Wernicke, 2020). "International service learning for teachers can be viewed as a professional development approach with inherent potential for providing the conditions for adult transformative learning: experience, dissonance, community, criticality, and as a product of these, continuous identity construction and reconstruction" (Baecher & Chung, 2020, p.46).

Although the reviewed studies offer valuable insights into how the teaching abroad experience mediates teacher identity development, research on teacher identity development during teaching abroad is still sparse. In particular, investigating how sojourners experience identity formation in context is needed (Kang & Pacheco, 2021). To that end, by adopting a critical perspective, the present study aims to contribute to our understanding of how in-service language teachers shape their professional teacher identity and conceptualize their role in teaching by investigating relevant factors involved in their experiences. More specifically, the current study aims to investigate the teaching abroad experience as a context for in-service teachers' identity development by pursuing the following research questions:

- How do in-service EFL teachers shape their professional teacher identity during their sojourn and conceptualize their teaching role due to their teaching abroad experience?

- Which situational components and factors were influential in the identity formation process during the teaching abroad experience?

The theoretical and analytical framework offered by Kaplan and Garner (2018) is employed to explore the influence of sociocultural factors on professional teacher identity formation in the teaching abroad context and to extract several interrelated themes about the process.

Method

Research Design

Qualitative research approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) and thematic analysis as a method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thorne, 2000) were adopted to gain insight into the lived experiences of a particular group (Braun, Clarke, Terry, & Hayfield, 2019), sojourner EFL teachers. More specifically, to center on the lived experiences of sojourner EFL teachers' professional teacher identity development, the study employed a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach was utilized to capture the insights of the participant sojourner teachers, facilitating a better understanding of the participants' perspectives inherent in the initial depiction of experiences within a specific context (Moustakas, 1994). Within the scope of this research, the phenomenon under investigation pertained to the experiences of sojourner teachers' professional teacher identity development.

Context & Participants

This study is based on the experiences of nine English language teachers who participated in the Fulbright teaching abroad program for 10 months in the US. The purpose of the Fulbright program is to create an opportunity for English language teachers to improve their teaching skills, raise their English language proficiency levels, learn about the American society and culture, and improve the quality of foreign language education at US universities. During the program, all the sojourner teachers were assigned to different universities in the US and expected to assist/offer Turkish language courses and take two courses per semester in English Teaching and/or US studies. In addition to teaching Turkish, they are expected to arrange Turkish Speaking Club activities and participate in extracurricular activities and social aid projects. Information about participants' demographic information and teaching abroad experience is provided in Appendix A.

The participants were recruited using convenience sampling within the reach of the researchers' professional social network, and a snowball sampling strategy was subsequently adopted. All of the participant teachers were experienced teachers, have a high level of language proficiency, and can be regarded as qualified teachers due to the requirements for eligibility and the competitive nature of the Fulbright scholarship program.

Participant teachers were all female English language teachers, between 27-41 years old, with teaching experience ranged from three to 18 years. Seven of them had master's degrees, and the other two were master's students. None of the teachers lived in a homestay, whereas only two of them had international roommates during their teaching abroad experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine sojourner English language teachers were conducted. The interview schedules were developed after a comprehensive literature review, and two curriculum instruction experts and EFL teachers with sojourner experience, were consulted (interview questions are presented in Appendix B). Two of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and a further seven were conducted online through Skype. The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes. All the interviews were recorded (with permission), transcribed, and subjected to reflexive thematic analysis following the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2019). First, researchers read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. Then candidate themes were defined by the researchers by putting the relevant codes together, which were then reviewed to generate the major themes, to represent "a pattern of shared meaning" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 845). The coding included both of the researchers to adopt a more collaborative and reflexive approach focusing on a richer interpretation of the data instead of merely seeking for agreement (Braun & Clarke, 2019). An excerpt from an analyzed interview is presented in Figure 1.

Four key themes were created as a result of the analysis of the sojourner teachers' study-abroad experiences, which collectively provide insights into the multifaceted dimensions of the teaching abroad experience that contributes to the sojourner language teachers' professional identity development, the central aspect of our research focus. These themes were (i) working with motivated students, (ii) having multiple identities (teacher, assistant teacher, and student) and transitioning among them, (iii) developing communicative competence, and (iv) experiencing more professional agency. The first theme about 'working with motivated students' explains how teachers experience with motivated and enthusiastic learners during their sojourn influenced their perceptions of themselves as teachers and their ontological beliefs and epistemological beliefs about learning, teaching, students, institutions, and the purpose of instruction, contributing their professional identity development. The second theme of 'having multiple identities' highlights the multiple and complex roles they have as sojourner teachers and also complex role transitions they experienced during this period. Navigating multiple roles facilitated a heightened self-awareness, it enabled them to gain a better understanding of student perspective, and expanded their teaching skills set as they get to observe other teachers, contributing their professional identity development. The third theme of 'developing communicative competence' highlights the role of sojourn experience in equipping sojourner teachers with enhanced language skills and cultural sensitivity. Sojourn experience enabled them to increase their communicative competence, confidence and accuracy in the target language, contributing their professional identity development. Finally, 'experiencing more professional agency' sheds light on how the sojourn experience offered them a higher degree of autonomy in deciding on objectives, resources, instructional approaches, and assessment methods. This opportunity to exercise greater agency, make them feel responsible and enabled them to make informed choices about the design and delivery of lessons, contributing their professional identity development.
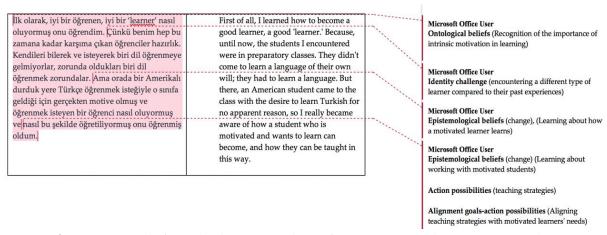
Figure 1. Example from the thematic analysis of an interview with a sojourner teacher.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, thick and rich descriptions were used (Creswell & Miller, 2000) together with authentic citations, excerpts that are the most representative of the research findings (Patton, 1990). Peer debriefing was employed during which an experienced colleague was invited to create an opportunity to reflect more on the data and the assumptions (Braun & Clarke, n.d.), and to analyze the research procedure all together (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Also, member checking method was employed to increase the credibility of the study, during which participant sojourner teachers were invited to examine and reflect on the themes in terms of their accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Seven participants agreed to participate in member checking and engaged in reflecting on the analysis process, indicating their approval of the analysis. As reflexive thematic analysis was adopted which theoretically and philosophically addresses the analysis process as being more than just simply representing the participants' experiences, member reflections were used, which implies being open to more reflexive responses (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The Role of the Researchers

As the researcher is considered to be the instrument of data collection in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2006), we made sure that our "values, interests and assumptions and the role that these play in the understanding of the research" (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999, p. 221) was recognized. The thematic approach highlights the importance of "researcher's active role in the knowledge production process" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 847). Therefore, we were engaged in a reflexive process (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995), and thought and reflected consistently and critically about their own experiences, feelings and beliefs and how they affected the research (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003). As both of us were former Fulbright scholars, we had very similar experiences to the participant sojourner teachers. To acknowledge potential for bias due to our shared experiences, we started talking about our own experiences, tried to be self-analytical about our interpretations of the data during the analysis, and paid attention to the value judgements as well as the descriptive ones to ensure methodological transparency for the reliability and credibility of our findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Moreover, we outlined the research design of the study clearly and defined our strategies to deal our roles as researchers from the beginning. Adopting reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013) ensured the inclusion of diverse participant perspectives. The study was approved by the Middle East Technical University human subject research ethics committee.

Results

Four themes that reflected how the sojourner teachers' teaching abroad experience impacted their sense of professional identity were identified. The first two themes were about the first research question: 'How do in-service EFL teachers shape their professional teacher identity during their sojourn and conceptualize their teaching role due to their teaching abroad experience?'. The themes created were (i) having multiple identities (teacher, assistant teacher, and student) and transitioning among them, (ii) experiencing more professional agency. The second two themes were about the second research question: 'Which situational components and factors were influential in the identity formation process during the teaching abroad experience?' and they were defined as (iii) working with motivated students, and (iv) developing communicative competence.

1. Having Multiple Identities and Transitioning Among Them

The sojourner teachers' responses indicated that they had formed their identity primarily through their combined experience as a teacher, a teaching assistant, and a student during teaching abroad experience. They all had prior teaching experience; however, this was a different teaching experience for them since back in their country they were teaching English, but in the USA, they taught their mother tongue in a different context by enacting multiple identities;

> *Well, being a student and a teacher in another education system was very different (ST 3).*

Responses of sojourner teachers indicated that their identity trajectory was highly affected by their experience both as teachers and students. Exposure to different instructional practices and environments had torn sojourn teachers between admiration and frustration, which seemed to inform their ontological beliefs, bringing further alignment of action possibilities to those newly adopted ontological beliefs. During the interviews, teachers commented on what they learned from their teaching abroad experience and reported gains, as exemplified in the following comment;

> *For example, we have a fixed syllabus in prep school, and that syllabus is typically put on this notice board. However, for example, after I went abroad, without waiting for the students to control the syllabus by themselves, I became a teacher who shares the syllabus with the students at the first meeting. I think I have advanced myself in the sense of how to become a more professional teacher (ST 2).*

When asked about how being a student affected their teacher identities, sojourner teachers described the traits they observed in their teachers/professors and then commented on how they attempted to appropriate them in their teaching practice. The sojourner teacher who has acquired the habit of distributing private copies of the syllabus at the first class after her teaching abroad experience is simultaneously reflecting on her self-perceptions about what kind of a teacher she is and how a teacher can be 'more professional.' Sojourner teachers stated that shifts in their roles during the teaching abroad experience allowed them to observe how their teachers/professors conducted their courses from the perspective of both a student and a teacher, which enabled them to develop a better realization of their students' perspectives. It was different from being only a teacher or only a student since they were fulfilling both roles in a foreign education system, which was accompanied with certain benefits for their teacher identity;

> *I took a German lesson. Observing that lesson as a student, foreign eh… I was immensely affected by being both a teacher and a foreign language teacher and a foreign language student at the same time. Students…which… of course, I… when you teach as a teacher for a long time you forgot how was it like being a student. What kind of stages does a person go through, what kind of difficulties they face as a student? ...being exposed to the materials she prepared as a student affected me much (ST 8).*

This teacher expresses that being a student helped her realize that she forgot the difficulties of being a student. She also had the opportunity to observe a 'good language teacher,' and 'being exposed to the materials she had prepared' had specific effects on her teaching. The experience provided teachers opportunities to observe positive role models informally and consider the type of teacher they aspired to become in light of this experience. They thought about how their role identity as a teacher and action possibilities align with them as the DSMRI suggests. The quotation below exemplifies how sojourner teachers were influenced by their professors' professional attitudes and behaviors

> *For example, I took a course called Linguistics Anthropology. That teacher was a very different teacher. Well in the lessons with him, in the lesson I took from him, for example, his approach to the students was very different. It was very enlightening for me to observe this. Well, he was not grade-oriented, rather he was more learning-oriented (ST 9).*

In terms of the DSMRI framework, sojourner teachers' 'enlightening' experience of a different teaching style during SA seemed to have raised their awareness of their own role identity (e.g., being teacher-centered versus learner-centered), which stimulated further identity exploration.

2. Experiencing more Professional Agency

Agency is known to be influential in the formation of identity (Erikson, 1968). In this study, sojourner teachers reported that the institutional environment abroad acknowledged their agency in many ways. Most of them were encouraged to design their courses and were free to decide many instructional issues by themselves. Such an atmosphere promotes teacher involvement and provides 'triggers' for identity exploration (Vedder-Weiss, Biran, Kaplan, & Garner, 2018).

> *It was the first time that I found myself in such a situation that I had that much freedom, but I had to be careful as well. First of all, when preparing my lesson plan; at what time, when I will attend classes was entirely up to me. It was the first time I had encountered such a thing, I mean before that, it was always predefined that when I will be teaching and for how long…even making a lesson plan was a great experience for me (ST 6).*

A teacher's professional knowledge and skills that he/she brings to the instructional environment is vital for his/her professional agency (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). As the above quotation suggests, such an environment can pose significant challenges and offer a plethora of instances for identity exploration. In this comment, the teacher reports that being able to do such planning was a great experience. When we examined the responses of sojourner teachers related to this theme, we saw that they conceptualized agency as a process that includes freedom and responsibility, which was indicated by this teacher and can be seen in the following comments:

> *More well … I was free in my teaching. What I mean with free is that I prepared both the syllabus... It both gave me more responsibilities, and I was able to shape the lessons I taught as I want. This was a very different experience for me (ST 3).*

Sojourner teachers' responses indicate that this agentic dimension of their experience was significant to them. In particular, during their teaching abroad experience, teachers were held accountable for their instructional choices, which motivated them to assume even more responsibility. Given the minimal sense of agency they had in their teaching before, the experience seemed to help teachers develop their professional identity by encouraging them to exercise agency in their practice.

3. Working with Motivated Students

The most salient category in our analysis was about the change in sojourner teachers' ontological beliefs about students, teachers, institutions, or education systems. Their responses indicated that their experience with highly motivated students eager to learn the target language was markedly different from the student profile they had been used to in their hometown, which led the participants to question their beliefs about student motivation:

> *They were very motivated, they took it very seriously, so I think that the difference of that profile affected my lessons, or that learning and teaching environment. …and it forces the teacher to do that, so when you don't give them a satisfactory answer one day, when you don't present the material, they clearly demand more about it, when they do not understand it, they are asking for more and asking if we can arrange an extra meeting on weekdays (ST 2).*

Teachers' identity exploration begins with a strong discrepancy between the student profile they were used to and the student profile they encountered in the teaching abroad context. Sojourner teachers were delighted to work with highly motivated students and considered it a 'valuable experience.' Sojourner teachers defined their students' behaviors as demanding, and they reflected on how the push from students changed their instructional preparation and practices. According to the DSMRI framework, it can be stated that such contextual changes triggered significant identity exploration opportunities for the teachers as it inflicted changes in their beliefs about students' needs:

> *I realized that the students can find this information everywhere when they really want, that is, they can definitely access the information they want. What I need to change is skill and a little bit of language awareness (ST 4).*

The analysis of the interviews indicated changes in sojourner teachers' ontological and epistemological beliefs about students, institutions, how students learn, or the purpose of instruction. They also mentioned some changes in their instructional behaviors or action possibilities as a teacher, which is in line with the change in ontological and epistemological changes they experience in terms of the DSMRI.

> *Actually, I was still the same teacher, but more like, eh… so the information you learn in class is actually important, but what you do outside of the classroom, what you do with extracurricular activities is also very important. I can say that it (teaching abroad experience) added awareness about how much extracurricular activities are important in language teaching. With my teaching experience abroad... Apart from that, I realized the importance of keeping students active, keeping their interest alive. I also understood the importance of doing activities that will improve the desire to produce in the target language, that is, the desire to express something in that language, rather than sitting in the classroom with notebooks, pencils, and books (ST 7).*

Teachers also reported that they began to question what they should expect from their students and experienced some disappointment with having less motivated students when they were back in their home country. This situation indicated frustration and tension for the participant teachers, but then they also reported some action possibilities to improve students' motivation, as the following quotation exemplifies;

> *I started to devote more time to explain what they can do with this language…, why we learn English in the classroom (ST 1).*

In terms of the DSMRI framework, these statements indicate a change in sojourner teachers' ontological beliefs in alignment with specific action possibilities for teaching. In this case, as they experienced the effect of motivation on the success of L2 learners, they reported that they began to allocate more time for motivating their students.

4. Developing Communicative Competence

Although all the sojourner teachers were highly qualified English language teachers, they still found the teaching abroad experience valuable in improving their language skills. Some participants highlighted the positive effects of being exposed to 'different accents' and 'the real-life language.' However, the development of communicative competence due to sojourn teachers' teaching abroad experience turned out to be a significant language skill that contributed to their teacher identity, as exemplified in the following quotation;

> …but in which situations do people say what more often... I have learned this. Actually, this might be the reason why I want to work on pragmatics right now. I've learned a lot about the pragmatic side of things. When do I say "sorry" and when do I say "I beg your pardon"... Is "I beg your pardon" just a phrase I hear in movies, or is it something that's actually used? These kinds of changes happened because I was exposed to real life. Otherwise, it's not like I didn't know the Present Perfect tense and then learned it (ST 1).

This teacher was very confident in her language skills. She stated that she did not learn about particular grammar subjects during her experience, which she already knew, but gained cultural awareness and an understanding of the 'appropriate language' (Byram, 1997) in a given situation. She said, "…I learned what people say more and in what circumstance; I learned when people say more in different situations." In general, such comments highlighted the sojourn teachers' perceived gains related to sociolinguistically and pragmatically appropriate ways of using the language. These statements also reflect their beliefs about the level of competence a language teacher should have in the target language.

Our analysis of the interviews mainly focused on the reported changes in the sojourner teachers' professional identities from various perspectives due to their teaching abroad experience and whether those changes have shaped their instructional behaviors or attitudes. The following quotation exemplifies how the teachers' classroom behaviors align with their beliefs about competent language teachers and the corresponding action possibilities.

> I am correcting it with my students in this way too... Sometimes there are role plays, like you are a waiter, you are a customer ... They use a certain kind of language. I say no, I was there, it doesn't work like that ... I adjust the class accordingly, this kind of a change, this way I can give them small tips about this topic (ST 5).

Teachers reported to have instructional decisions that project their experience in the classroom. As the quotation above shows, 'she has been there' and had the experience first-hand, so she feels confident and knowledgeable to help her students learn the appropriate language use. Even if it may be limited to the places they had been to, they still feel like they have more to offer as a language teacher, as the following quotation suggests;

> Upon my return, for example, when I teach English here, I give a lot more detail when something about New York passes in any reading text because I really was there and I know what happened. For example, one of my students will now go to a fashion school there, on Fifth Street, I have many memories to tell about the place (ST 7).

These quotations reflect the growth in the confidence of a teacher who can go beyond the traditional textbook knowledge about cultural elements relevant to the target language and reflect their changing perception of a competent teacher as someone who complements his/her subject matter knowledge about the target language with cultural competence.

Discussion, Conclusion, & Suggestions

The main goal of this study is to investigate in what ways sojourner teachers' teaching abroad experience inform their professional teacher identity development. Our findings suggest that sojourner teachers' sense of identity was influenced by the novelty of the situation. Teachers' responses emphasized the difference in students' profiles as the most salient part of their teaching experience. This emphasis on this aspect of teaching abroad experience highlights the importance of the relationship between the learning environment, students, and teacher identity development. Students are integral to the teaching and learning environment, and these contextual factors are known to influence the formation of professional teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). Previous research suggests that language learners' identity is of paramount importance in terms of language teacher identity (Rudolph, 2016; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). Therefore teacher-student interaction is among the elements that influence language teacher identity both directly and indirectly and these could be seen in the short-run or in the long-run (Morgan, 2004). Moreover, altering the learning environment dramatically impacts teachers' professional identities and their approach to teaching (Keiler, 2018) as being in a new environment as a professional force them to create new meanings and understandings from their earlier experiences too (Baecher & Chung, 2020). In the light of this finding and the previous literature, it becomes more evident that sojourn experiences enable foreign language teachers to encounter novel situations and diverse teaching and learning environments with various student profiles, which can serve as a catalyst for professional identity development.

Another factor that led sojourner teachers to explore their teacher identity was related to the diversity of their roles during the teaching abroad experience, which enabled them to enact multiple identities. The opportunity to assume multifaceted roles as learners, teachers, and teaching assistants during their sojourn enabled them to enact and investigate multiple identities, which influenced their professional identity development. Plews et al. (2010) assert that the responsibilities assigned to the sojourner teachers define their place. In their case, participants were neither identified as teachers nor as students, but they were mainly assigned the observer role by the host institution/teacher, which was not considered a good match with how they identified themselves as expert language teachers. Similarly, Johnson (2001) and Wang (2014) mentioned sojourner teachers reported dual identifications as both teachers and the learners of the language and that they experienced some tension negotiating this identification process. Wernicke (2016) also reported similar dual-identity-related tension and highlighted that the participant teachers had to negotiate the expected native-like proficiency related to their language teacher identity. In contrast, the pursuit of multiple identities by sojourn teachers was reported as a positive factor by Ortaçtepe (2015) and Mutlu and Ortaçtepe (2016), where the teaching abroad experience has shaped the participants' identities as both professional teachers and learners. Our results also corroborate these findings since sojourner teachers' comments strongly indicated that their identity formation process was positively affected by how they reenacted multiple identities during their teaching abroad experience. The opportunity to explore diverse identities and negotiate among them enabled sojourner teachers to developed more nuanced teacher identities. Navigating these multiple identities, sojourner teachers develop a better understanding about the inherent complicities of learning and teaching languages and about diverse learner and teacher perspectives, which ultimately enhancing their professional teacher identities.

The results of the study highlighted an essential aspect of language teacher identity during teaching abroad experience which is the impact of immersion to real life use of the target language in authentic context. Sojourner teachers' appreciation for this kind of exposure was related to both the development of their own communicative competence and enrichment of their instructional practice. This finding resonates with the related literature (Allen, 2010; Biraimah & Jotia, 2013; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; de Felix & Pena, 1992; Wernicke, 2010; Thompson, 2002), that points out a heightened communicative competence and authenticity, and enriched pedagogical skills among the sojourner teachers as they were able to draw from their immersion in authentic language context. Considering the

dissonance between the language textbooks used in Turkey and the real-life use of the target language in authentic context reported by sojourner teachers (Ortaçtepe, 2015), teaching abroad experience can be transformative and can increase the real-world relevance of the language sojourner teachers are using and teaching in classroom. All in all, this impact of teaching abroad experience on sojourner teachers' communicative competence and instructional practice proves to be valuable for professional teacher identity development.

Previous studies suggest that institutional contexts can affect teacher identity formation (Block, 2013; Morgan, 2004). Our results pointed that the institutional structures emphasized sojourner teachers' agency as teachers and increased their accountability for their instructional efficiency, which was interpreted as freedom by the sojourner teachers. The literature points out that agency can play an important role in identity formation in the context of language and intercultural communication (Norton, 2013). Thus, it is essential to define how much agency the participants have in the given social structure (Block, 2013). Although participants were working at different institutions in this study, they all mentioned having more agency as a teacher, such as deciding what to teach with materials of their own choice. Being able to overcome the responsibilities that the sense of agency brings enabled sojourners to feel more confident about their skills. Confidence as a language teacher due to sojourn experience (Zhao & Mantero, 2018) and being able to exercise professional agency as a teacher (Benson, 2016; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018) can also be positively linked to professional identity development. 'The achievement of agency,' even in a particular social context, could hopefully affect sojourner teachers' language teacher identity in the long run (Benson, 2016).

Literature points out that there are many factors to consider in teaching abroad experience, and there is no best way to make it more productive (Benson et al., 2013). However, the results of this study highlight the importance of a more structured program which would be more effective in improving the sojourns' sense of self-awareness of their strengths and deficiencies, which is a key component of professional identity development. Otherwise the quality of the cultural experiences depends mostly on mere luck, and some individual factors such as personal initiative and self-determination skills might affect how the teachers develop relationships with the native speakers both professionally and personally (Plews et al., 2010). The quality of such programs that aim to support teachers' professional development could be improved by considering sojourner teachers' needs carefully to design a program that meets their needs (Zhao & Mantero, 2018). During the sojourn experience, identity should be regarded as a key factor in professional teacher learning, and teachers should be provided with opportunities to develop alternative understandings of being competent language teachers (Wernicke, 2017) and teachers' reflexivity during the identity development process in the teaching abroad experience should be supported (Wernicke-Heinrichs, 2013). To this end, the results of this study adds to the argument that to promote reflexivity and professional identity development, teaching abroad programs should be more structured.

Plews et al. (2010) and Zhao and Mantero (2018) reported the identity formation aspect of the teaching abroad experience as an essential component, which brings the sojourner teachers opportunities to develop their teacher identities as they live in the host country and get exposed to the cultural practices, beliefs, and values, and appropriate these experiences in a meaningful way for themselves. The results of this study also indicated the importance of rich experiences for the sojourner teachers in terms of identity exploration. However, it also showed that they were not always fully aware of this process or the provided opportunities in that sense, which highlights the need for exploration and construction strategies for supporting professional identity formation as advocated by Kaplan and Garner (2018). Implementing structured reflections as pre-during-post sojourn, can guide sojourner teachers in this sense (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Farrell, 2011; Plews et al., 2010; Smolcic & Martin, 2018). Additionally, autoethnographic work can strengthen sojourner teachers' ability to explore and criticize their teaching abroad experiences and develop their identities (Sahling & De Carvalho, 2021;

Pennington, 2020). Teaching abroad programs should guide sojourners to become more conscious of the process and promote their active participation in their professional identity formation process. To further facilitate this, technology-enhanced interventions, such as blended learning while developing pre-post sojourn workshops (Hepple, 2018), online mentoring during the sojourn (Jackson, 2018), and/or applications of computer mediated communication such as wikis and blogs could be used to promote interaction among the sojourner as a post sojourn intervention (Lee, 2018) and possibly facilitate identity development. Thus, we suggest incorporating reflective practices and tailored facilitation to enable sojourner teachers harness the opportunities for professional teacher identity development during their sojourn experiences.

Also, this study highlighted the importance of a mindset of exploration, openness to exploration, change, and development for teachers' effective identity development. Experience affects teachers' identity construction (Beijaard et al., 2004; Olsen, 2011; Richards, 2021; Yazan, 2018) but also teachers' identities effect the way they make sense of the experiences they have (Buchanan, 2015; Noonan, 2019). Therefore, it is important to consider teachers' professional identities before the sojourn both to be able to guide them better during the sojourn and to be able to make sense of their identity development during the sojourn. Promoting a growth mindset and incorporating reflecting opportunities into teaching abroad programs can enable sojourners to embrace a mindset of exploration to enhance their professional identity development.

Overall, we believe that guiding and facilitating the transformation of the sojourn experience into professional identity practice for sojourner teachers is essential. Such a sense of self-awareness is necessary for identity formation, which points to several implications for the design and implementation of sojourn programs for teachers. Processes pertaining to identity exploration should be explicitly supported during the sojourn to help teachers become aware of their growing professional identities.

For future research, longitudinal studies could be conducted to see how sojourners' professional identity evolves over time, also cross-cultural studies could be implemented to investigate the role of culture on teacher identity development. Additionally, conducting case studies on teaching abroad programs that specifically incorporate some of the recommendations about facilitating the teaching abroad process could provide more conclusive insights into their effects on teachers' identity development. Further research is warranted to identify more effective ways to promote and support teacher identity development. In particular, the DSMRI framework offers a valuable approach for scaffolding teachers' identity formation during their teaching abroad experience (Vedder-Weiss et al., 2018).

This study is limited to English language teachers and their identity development during teaching abroad program. It is important to acknowledge that the teachers interviewed in this research were highly qualified, eager to learn teachers, which should be considered when interpreting the role of teaching abroad on teacher identity development.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Participants' demographic information and SA teaching experience

ID	Age	Experience (years)	Degree	Educational Background	Role during SA	Responsibilities during SA
ST 1	27	5	MA	Foreign Language Education Department	Assistant teacher	Material development, copying materials, substitute the main teacher when necessary
ST 2	32	10	MA	Foreign Language Education Department	Assistant teacher	Preparing syllabus, Material development, Teaching, assessment and evaluation
ST 3	29	4	MA	Department of Translation & Interpretation Studies	Main Teacher	Preparing syllabus, Material development, Teaching, assessment and evaluation
ST4	33	10	MA	Foreign Language Education Department	Assistant teacher/main teacher	Material development, copying materials, substitute the main teacher when necessary
ST5	28	3	MA-Student	Foreign Language Education Department	Assistant teacher/main teacher	Material development, copying materials, substitute the main teacher when necessary
ST 6	30	12	MA	Foreign Language Education Department	Assistant teacher/main teacher	Material development, copying materials, substitute the main teacher when necessary, offer office hour speaking exercises
ST 7	32	9	PhD-student	Foreign Language Education Department	Main Teacher	Preparing syllabus, Material development, Teaching, assessment and evaluation
ST 8	41	18	MA	Foreign Language Education Department	Main Teacher	Preparing syllabus, Material development, Teaching, assessment and evaluation
ST 9	33	8	MA	Foreign Language Education Department	Main teacher	Preparing syllabus, Material development, Teaching

Appendix 2. Interview Questions

Part 1

1. What is your name?

2. How old are you?

3. What is your current occupation? Where do you work? (Level of students?)

4. How long have you been teaching?

5. What is your educational background?

6. Can you briefly describe your experience of teaching abroad? (Where, how long, why, and what were your duties and responsibilities?)

Part 2

1. What memorable experiences do you have from your teaching abroad experience?

2. How would you describe a typical school day? What activities did you generally engage in during a class? (information related to lesson delivery)

3. What do you remember about the working environment, your colleagues, and your relationship with your students? What would you say about the working environment, your colleagues, your teaching and your relationships with the students?

4. How did you acquire necessary information about the institution and environment when you first arrived? Were there significant differences in the working environment compared to your home country? How would you describe the experience of being a teacher there compared to here? (In-service training? Examples?)

5. How would you describe the values and attitudes of teachers and students regarding foreign language teaching and learning at the institution where you worked? (Can you provide examples?)

6. Did you face any challenges and issues in general? Did you receive any support, and from whom?

7. Who did you interact with the most during your stay there (and why)? Can you recall any conversations (related to your profession) that had an impact on you?

8. How would you overall characterize your experience abroad?

9. What are your impressions of the people and their lifestyles in the country you visited?

Part 3

1. How do you define yourself as a teacher? What can you say about your teaching abroad experience and your self-perception as a teacher?

2. How do you feel when teaching something to others? Did your teaching abroad experience contribute to this feeling? If so, how?

3. According to you, what qualities should teachers possess? Did your teaching abroad experience influence your views? If so how?

4. How should a teacher behave in society?

    a. In your opinion, what are the duties and responsibilities of a teacher?

    b. What should they do or avoid doing?

    c. Did your teaching abroad experience affect your views? Do you have any examples in mind?

5. How would you describe your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher? Can you share insights about your teaching abroad experience and how you perceive these qualities?

6. What can you say about your language proficiency, communicative competence, and your Teaching Abroad experience?

7. Considering the impact of different environments on teaching and learning, what can you say about your role as a teacher in Teaching Abroad and in your home country?

    a. Do you have a specific moment during your teaching abroad experience that you can say significantly influenced you as a teacher?

    b. What is the most significant change you observed in yourself as a teacher after your teaching abroad experience?