

Negotiating Teacher Professional Identity Across Contexts During Doctoral Study Abroad: Narrative Accounts of Saudi EFL Educators

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Abstract:

This study explores how Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators negotiate and reconstruct their teacher professional identities during doctoral study abroad in the United Kingdom. While previous research has often examined teacher identity after completing international study, less attention has been paid to how identity transformation unfolds during the doctoral journey itself, particularly as educators repeatedly move between academic, cultural, and professional contexts. Drawing on narrative inquiry, this study examines the lived experiences of seven Saudi EFL educators pursuing PhDs in the UK while maintaining professional and institutional ties with Saudi Arabia.

The study is theoretically informed by Teacher Agency Theory, Dialogical Self Theory, and Transformative Learning Theory. Together, these frameworks are used to examine how participants negotiate competing expectations, internal dialogues, institutional constraints, and evolving professional aspirations across different stages of their journeys. Data were generated through in-depth narrative interviews conducted before and after participants' research data collection periods in Saudi Arabia. The narratives were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns of identity negotiation, epistemic repositioning, and emerging agency.

Findings indicate that participants experienced significant shifts in their understandings of teaching, knowledge, authority, and professional selfhood. Exposure to dialogic and research-oriented academic environments abroad often disrupted previously inherited assumptions shaped by transmission-oriented educational experiences. However, participants' attempts to enact newly developed pedagogical orientations were frequently constrained by institutional expectations, assessment structures, and cultural norms upon returning to Saudi educational contexts. These tensions generated complex processes of negotiation through which participants re-evaluated their professional identities and developed more agentic and reflective positions toward teaching and research.

The study contributes to current discussions on teacher identity, international doctoral mobility, and professional development by foregrounding the dynamic and ongoing nature of identity transformation during study abroad rather than treating transformation as a completed outcome.

Keywords: teacher professional identity, teacher agency, narrative inquiry, study abroad, Saudi EFL educators

