

But I am a Ph. D. Student: Professional Identity Construction through Initial Career Experiences of a Novice Language Teacher in an EFL Setting

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Abstract: This reflective self-study captured a novice language teacher's professional identity construction through early career experiences after leaving his teacher educator position at the university. The context of the study was an EFL high school in Ankara. Data collection procedures included reflective journals, student reflections, individual and focus group interviews, and video recording. The data was collected from September 2017 to January 2018. After the data collection, all the data were organized and analyzed with the utilization of MAXQDA software. The findings showed that constructing a professional identity was a complicated process, in which environmental issues, educational philosophy of the teacher, English language teaching practices, teacher role(s) and other critical issues were taken into consideration. Also, professional identity construction is not an end product, but instead it is a cyclic progress that requires constant and continuous (re)adaptations and (re)organizations in one's professional language teacher identity.

Keywords: Self-study, teacher identity, novice teacher, EFL.

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Introduction

After I left my research assistant position at the university due to the unexpected problems, I sought an English language teaching position. When I went to the job interview, my previous teaching experiences were asked, and I replied, “I have no experience in actual teaching but I am a Ph. D. student” (August 18, 2017).

The quote above was stated at the very beginning of my career as a language teacher in a high school in Turkey. Being a Ph. D. student and a former teacher educator were thought to offer necessary professional skills and expertise to teach as a language teacher. Accordingly, my professional identity was positioned in the graduate education I receive and my previous experiences as a teacher educator, and I considered my professional identity to be stable at the beginning of my initial career as a language teacher. However, working as a language teacher for a month changed the ideas about language teaching profession that I took for granted. Thus, I thought that mastery of the theoretical knowledge in second language teaching, what is called by Richards (2008) as ‘*knowledge about*’ can easily be turned into practical knowledge –*knowledge how*—and it was the unquestioned assumption for me due to the lack of experience I possessed. The quote below shows my disappointment and need to start to question my professional identity as a language teacher.

“I knew that there are several discrepancies between theory and practice, yet still I am frustrated to realize that actual teaching is a lot different than I thought. Knowing theory is not enough and I have struggles in constructing my professional identity in teaching (September 29, 2017)”.

As suggested in the literature, novice teachers’ professional identity formation and their initial concerns considerably vary based on the context they are working (Sinclair, 2008) and professional identity formation is a component of negotiating one’s position and identity in a given context, which require ongoing changes, challenges, and interactions (Pennington & Richards, 2015). In addition, making sense of one’s own practices requires closely examining one’s thoughts, practices, and considerations (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017; Tok & Dolapçioğlu, 2013) since continuous changes and improvements are common in constructing one’s professional identity as a novice teacher, and these changes provide understanding of one’s own self, the students, and the teaching

context. During these changes, a teacher’s perceptions, beliefs, assumptions, and challenges about teaching reside in professional, educational, and personal experiences, which in turn shape teacher professional identity construction (Safari, 2017; Bukor, 2011).

In order to understand and examine the changes in their professional identity, novice teachers can conduct reflective self-studies, which become a critical and useful way of examining their teaching practices to simultaneously generate knowledge in, and through, teaching (Loughran & Russell, 2006). With the self-study, the teacher looks for connections between puzzling cases, beliefs, dilemmas, tensions, concerns and practices with a desire to make positive and meaningful changes in the learning environment (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2007). In this reflective self-study, I explore my beliefs, tensions, concerns, and experiences as a novice teacher, how I am learning to teach English in EFL context and to identify myself as a professional language teacher.

Literature Review

Identity has become a tempting concept to be explored by many researchers in the field of language teaching in relation to sociocultural context, language learning and teaching (Miller, 2009). However, being a highly dynamic and transformational concept in the poststructuralist era, the concept of identity has been defined in various ways. The Table 1 below offers comprehensive definitions of identity.

“how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how that person understands possibilities for the future”	(Norton, 2008, p.5)
“a constant ongoing negotiation of how we relate to the world”	(Pennycook, 2001, p.149)
relational, constructed and altered by how I see others and how they see me in our shared experiences and negotiated interactions”	(Johnson, 2003, p. 788)
Transformational, transformative, context-bound and constructed, maintained and negotiated via language and discourse	(Vargese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005, p. 21)
Being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person’; identity is connected not to internal states but to performance in society. It is also ‘an important analytical tool for understanding schools and society’”	(Gee, 2001, p. 99)

Table 1: Definitions of Identity

From the definitions, it is realized that identity is “socially constructed, self-conscious, on-going narratives that individuals perform, interpret, and project in dress, bodily movements, actions and language” (Block, 2010 p. 27). In similar lines, it is proposed that identity is a dynamic interaction between how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. In the field of language teaching, it is important for novice teachers develop a professional identity, which is a subcategory of the concept of identity because teacher identity is “their sense of self as well as their knowledge and beliefs, dispositions, interests, and orientation towards work and change” (Jansen, 2001, p. 242). Thus, teacher identity can be defined as multiple social and cultural roles that teachers embrace (Burns & Richards, 2009) for the betterment of their practices. (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000, p. 109) define that

“teacher identity is an understanding and acknowledgement of what it feels like to be a teacher in today’s schools, where many things changing rapidly, and how teachers cope with these changes. It also involves the personal part of the teacher’s professional identity because teacher identity is a profoundly individual and psychological matter; it concerns the self-image and other image of particular teachers.”

It is evident that teacher identity is socially constructed phenomena and it undergoes constant changes and improvements. Thus, it is suggested that novice teachers challenge and examine their position as a language teaching professional in order to understand the relationship between teaching, learning, and the self while constructing a professional teacher identity. In order to critically reflect one’s own self and practices, it is suggested that novice teachers should self-study through keeping reflective journal and analyzing their own assumptions, practices and considerations in a certain context (Attard, 2017; Dinkelman, 2003).

Empirical research in the field of self-study and identity construction through critical reflective thinking shows that novice teachers can focus on different areas of their practices and professional identity. Levin, Hammer, and Coffey (2009) found that novice teachers can attend students’ performance in class, yet the things they can notice depend on how they frame their professional identity. When asked novice teachers to pay attention to curricular activities, it is unsurprising that they need additional attention to notice their students’ actual performance. It was

also realized that novice teachers highly benefitted from using lesson rehearsal to study their own self. By watching their teaching practices, novice teachers problematized their own assumptions about teaching and as a result developed professionally (Lampert et al., 2013).

In other studies, emotional aspects of teaching and its relation to professional identity construction were explored and the results showed that teaching goes beyond the implementation of technical knowledge and certain methods, which is heavily influenced by emotional aspects of professional teacher identity (Akinbode, 2013). It is suggested that reflective self-studies can shed light on personal experiences, thoughts and emotions and lead one to learn from these experiences and relate them to the relevant literature for further opportunities to develop professionally (Attard, 2017).

In similar lines, Pennington & Richards (2015) suggests that raising novice teachers' awareness about his/her professional development can be enhanced through reflective activities on the self because teachers are not perceived as a merely technician who follows a curriculum, but rather as a thinking, interacting and social being. Focusing on professional identity through self-study helps novice teachers to examine their practices, implement changes and improvements (Pennington, 2015). In doing so, novice teachers can form a constantly evolving professional identity and develop their knowledge on language teaching and it is important to understand

'language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are; the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them' (Varghese et al., 2005: 22).

Given these, this self-study aims to answer following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of a novice teacher in the early stages of his career in terms of language teaching practices, teacher role(s), and environmental considerations?

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2. How does the language teacher professional identity emerge through initial career experiences?

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore a novice teacher's professional identity construction experiences in a high school in an EFL context through a reflective self-study approach within the domain of qualitative research because 'qualitative research methodologies have become increasingly important modes of inquiry for social sciences and applied fields' (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, p.1) and it is used to understand the meanings expressed by participants in a specific activity or context (Wolcott, 2009). Self-study approach is recent phenomenon that is used when investigating one's own experiences through a systematic and rigorous process, and it is designed and organized to explore and inform a teacher's own practices within a specific setting (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Accordingly, self-study is explained as active endeavor with "outcomes more often represented as *teacher knowing* (where one's practice is always in a state of evolution) rather than *teacher knowledge* (where one's practice is viewed as relatively fixed and static)" (Clarke & Erikson, 2004, p. 201). In addition, self-study is a reflective transformation, which examines a teacher's professional identity construction processes and challenges through a teacher's own teaching practices. It can be concluded that self-study is a cornerstone to professional development and it is the dynamics of teaching and learning. Also, the practitioners, especially novice teachers, can involve in continuous quest to seek possible responses and appropriate (re)actions to the questions of through reflective self-studies: what to do, how to do it, with whom, and at what pace (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009).

Setting

This self-study is conducted in a high school in Ankara, Turkey. The main objective of the school is to prepare its students to the nationwide standardized test and all curricular activities are planned accordingly. The school has approximately 200 students and one main building, which was built for domestic purposes, but it was turned into a school building later on. The limited space of the school causes infrastructural difficulties and the technological equipment of the school is

really limited as there is only one projector and one smart board, which are mainly used for extracurricular activities. There are 14 students in each class on average.

In addition to infrastructural issues, the number of the teachers at the school is 30 and there are only two English language teachers, one of whom is the researcher of this reflective self-study. The teaching workload is 30 hours in a week per teacher and the school implements practice exam for the standardized test each week and the teachers proctor these exams when they have no class to teach. As mentioned above, the nationwide standardized test has utmost importance in curricular activities and the students are required to answer the questions in mathematics, science, history, geography and religion tests. Although English language courses are compulsory, its importance is downgraded due to the standardized test. Thus, the students are continuously questioning the relevance of English language courses and express their reluctance in English language courses.

Participants

In this reflective self-study, the author of this paper explored his early career experiences in a high school. I completed ELT undergraduate program in Turkey and started working as a research assistant at the same university after the graduation. I first worked as teacher educator in an ELT department. There, the workload was not intense, and I could allocate time to read theoretical and scholarly works. In 2014, I started an MA program in a top-ranked university in Turkey and completed the program in 2016. In the same year, I had to leave university due to personal reasons and started to work as a freelancer. In 2017, I began to work as a language teacher in a high school, where this reflective self-study is conducted.

In addition to the focal participant of this reflective self-study, 55 students took part reflection sessions. Three students participated in individual interviews and eight students participated in focus group interviews, and reflection sessions.

Data Collection and Analysis

For the purposes of this reflective self-study, the data were collected through individual and focus group interviews, reflective journals, and video recording from September 2017 to January 2018. Each progress of data collection is explained below with more detail.

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- *Interviews:* Four focus group interview were conducted with the students from 9th and 10th grades to understand the teacher's own practices from the perspectives of the students. Also, there were three individual interviews to discuss important issues mentioned earlier in the group discussions and reflection sessions.
- *Video recording:* As it is more convenient for the purposes of this self-study, the researcher recorded 3 sessions of his teaching and then analyze the recordings. The recordings can offer 'a first-hand account of the situation under study' (Merriam, 1998, p. 111).
- *Reflective Journals:* The researcher wrote his bi-weekly reflections throughout data collection and analysis phases. In addition to these reflective journals, 55 students wrote two reflective entries about their language classes and their teacher. The first reflective entry was collected in the middle of semester and the second one at the end of the semester, and there were 110 reflective entries in total that were provided by the students. The reflective journals help the researcher explain his thoughts about the self, the teaching practices and the self-study and relate the events mentioned by the participants during the interviews, video recording sessions, and in the reflective entries in order to question, challenge and as a result to improve one's existing beliefs, assumptions and practices through critical reflective thinking (Larrivee, 2000). In this study, reflection is used as 'the process of making sense of one's experiences by deliberately and actively examining one's thoughts and actions to arrive at new ways of understanding' (Freese, 1999, p. 898).

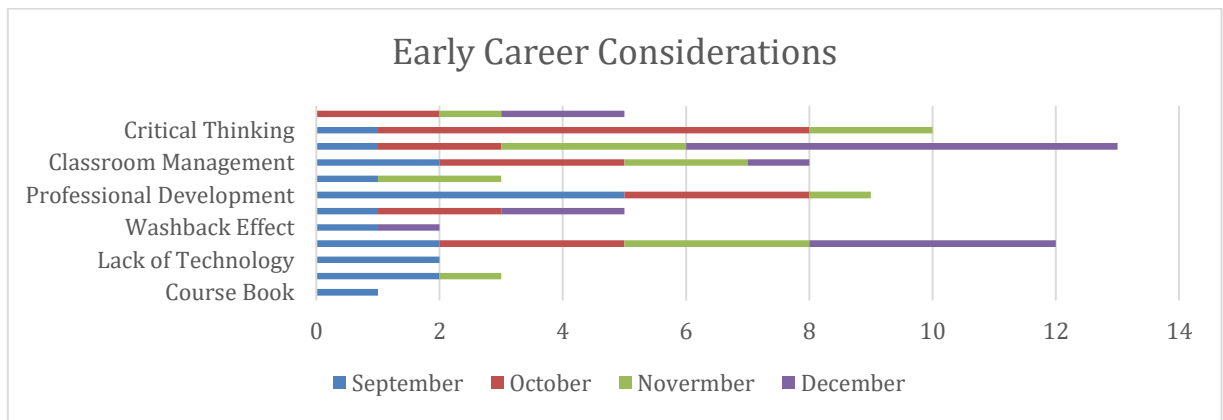
In terms of data analysis, MAXQDA software is utilized in order to organize, analyze and code the collected data. First, the video recordings are watched and divided into different parts based on their importance, and then the selected parts are transcribed verbatim. Transcribed recordings are organized into a Word document. The process of transcribing the video recordings allows the researcher to become acquainted with the data and start thinking about themes that may emerge (Riessman, 1993). Then, the field notes, reflective journals the researcher kept throughout the semester and reflective entries the students in this study provided are imported into MAXQDA for coding and analysis.

After importing all the documents into the software, coding procedures, which is a method that connects data, issues, and interpretations, begin (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). During the first

reading and memoing of the data collected, the initial codes are created. Subsequent to coming up with preliminary codes, the data is coded by using “descriptive codes” which “assigns basic labels to data to provide an inventory of their topics” (Saldana, 2009, p.66). In the second cycle of the data analysis, the themes and categories are created and then these categories are associated with the research questions and theoretical framework of this reflective self-study.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, the findings that emerged from the reflective journals of the teacher are presented and discussed first. Then, the reflections the students provided are integrated with the teacher’s early career considerations. Following graphic shows the number of mentions about certain issues in four months of teaching. It can be seen that there are various issues a novice teacher should take into account, manage and resolve in order to teach English language at the school. At the initial stages of being a language teacher, the teacher in this reflective self-study dealt with environmental considerations, course book selection, and understanding the needs of the students.



Graphic 1: The Number of Mentions about Early Career Considerations

Environmental Considerations

Environmental considerations in this reflective self-study mean the lack of technology and course book selection. The teacher in this study had to use a course book, which is prepared in line

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with the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) because the students have to pay for the course book and the school selected the course book beforehand without consulting the language teachers. Although the book is published by a well-known publisher, the problem with the book was that it was culturally insensitive and prepared from native speaker stance, which can cause several disadvantages for the non-native learners of English. Even though the relevant literature suggests that language learning materials need to provide culturally rich and welcoming concepts and such materials can enrich and enhance language learning opportunities through the local and target culture (Alptekin, 1993; Gist, 2014; Jester & Fickel, 2013; Krulatz, Steen-Olsen, & Torgersen, 2017; McKay, 2000; Muschell & Roberts, 2011; Oranje & Smith, 2017; Prater & Devereaux, 2009; Santoro & Major, 2012; Snodin, 2016), it was found that some students showed resistance to learn the local cultural concepts in English classes because it is not in the book.

When we were studying Christmas related vocabulary and traditions, I also offered Turkish versions of the festivals we have in Turkey such as Kurban Bayrami. Thus, I provided vocabulary items accordingly. One student Yiğit asked me that why are we learning these? I replied that the book we are using is prepared from the native perspective of culture. In the world, there are many other festivals and sacred days. And I wanted to show you examples from our own culture (Reflective Journal Entry, October 2017).

In a rapidly changing world, using technology in language classes can radically enhance language learning experiences of students in positive ways (Lai & Li, 2011). Richards (2015) suggests that information communication technologies (ICT) can help language teacher create authentic learning environments inside and outside the classroom, in which the language learners deal with multimodal language learning materials, and authentic learning environments foster language learning opportunities. Also, relevant literature in ICT and English language teaching show that implementing ICT with carefully designed activities can provide learners various opportunities to learn English language, to help them be motivated, and to increase communication opportunities (Bahrani, Tam, & Zuraidah, 2014; Lai & Li, 2011; Li & Ni, 2011; Liu, Lin, Zhang, & Zheng, 2017; Renuga & Ezhilan, 2016).

However, in terms of technological infrastructure, the resources the teacher in this reflective self-study can use were really limited. As mentioned earlier, there was only one projector in the school and it was used mainly for extracurricular activities. In such an environment, the teacher had to teach in traditional ways, which implies course book based teaching without integration any other resources that are visually attractive and engaging. Following quote shows the students dissatisfaction in terms of the lack of technology in the class.

Everything related to the course were okay but explaining vocabulary items with narratives is not enough. I suggest you integrate more visuals. You can draw them on the board, as well. When you bring your computer to show us some pictures, we could not see because it is small. If we had projectors in the class it can be a lot easier. So, it is sometimes difficult for us to understand.

A Novice Teacher's English Language Teaching Practices

In this section, I describe how I determined the needs of the students and taught English accordingly. Starting with the needs analysis is beneficial for the organization and (re)adaptation of teaching materials for the learners in order to efficiently complete the preparation process (Bosuwon & Woodrow, 2009) and it is stated that there is an “increasing importance attached to careful studies of learner needs as a prerequisite for effective course design” (Long, 2005, p.1). In line with the relevant literature, I conducted needs analysis, which is described below.

In the first week of the academic year, I went into the classroom and wanted to learn how much the students knew. So I distributed blank paper and asked them write things they remember about their English courses from last year. I anticipated that there would be minor issues about the course but the results were disastrous because the students could not even recall numbers, days or months in English. (Reflective Journal, September).

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After seeing the results of the needs analysis, I decided to start with basic vocabulary and short drills to familiarize the students with English words and exchanges. In these sessions, I reminded the students of that it is possible and normal to make mistakes because English language is a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2004, 2005) and intelligibility is more important than accuracy at certain levels of language proficiency (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Gooch, Saito, & Lyster, 2016; Levis, 2005; Murphy, 2014).

In terms of teaching listening, majority of the students expressed their reluctance to do listening activities as they could not understand audios from the course book. However, it is important for the non-native language learners to improve their listening skills for both to develop their communicative competence and to improve their intelligibility (Masalimova, Porchesku, & Liakhnovitch, 2016). Thus, in order to improve the students listening skills, I used transcriptions of the audio files. The quote below explains the strategy I used while I was teaching listening skills;

I realized that the students are reluctant to complete listening activities. When I asked, it was stated that the students had comprehension problems as they tried to understand all the words uttered. In order to solve this, I used the transcriptions of the audio files. We read the conversation first and found the main ideas. When the students listened after reading the transcript, they became more engaged.

Regarding the speaking skills, it is a complex task to speak in another language considering the range and types of sub-skills in second language oral production and second language learners of English can have difficulties (Burns & Siegel, 2018; Pawlak & Waniek-klimczak, 2015). Similarly, the majority of the students in this study were reluctant to speak and communicate in English. However, I encountered two critical incidents, in which the students showed their interest to communicate in English. One of these critical incidents were explained below.

I lost my course book and I had to teach the lesson without a course book. It was okay for me but the students realized that I lost my book. In return, I asked them “where is my book?”. And all of a sudden, they spoke and tried to suggest the places where I might

Çınarbaş (2018)

forget my book. When I realized I did not interrupt them, and the students communicated in English for the whole lesson. I was surprised and satisfied with their eagerness to speak.

Teacher Roles and Critical Thinking

In this reflective self-study, the teacher maintained several roles. The teacher assumed to be a motivator, a novice language teacher, and a reflective practitioner. Due to the washback effect of the standardized tests in Turkey, the students were reluctant to attend language classes, and when they attended, they were not interested in the courses. Thus, I always tried to motivate students because motivation is considered to be a crucial factor effecting success in foreign language learning. Being motivated can radically influence the language learning experiences of a student and the ultimate attainment of targeted language (Ushioda, 2013). In order to motivate my students, I used both integrative and instrumental motivation. While integrative motivation includes individual reasons, such as being able to interact with the valued members of other societies, to learn a foreign language, instrumental motivation refers to the language learning for economic, social, or educational benefits (Gardner, 2007; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004; Papi & Teimouri, 2014; Rehman, Bilal, Sheikh, Bibi, & Nawaz, 2014). Acknowledging that language learners need both types of motivation to improve their language skills and proficiency (Dörnyei, 1994; Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015), I tried to offer my students several reasons to learn English language. In one instance, the students asked me to study for another lesson and they expressed their reluctance to attend their English lessons. I tried to motivate them with the following quote:

The activities in the course book were organized by Atatürk's remarks about education, science and culture. The students completed the activities and they did it reluctantly. Atatürk is extremely important figure in Turkey and around the world. Seeing their motivational problems, I asked what if someone comes and asks you who is this person (pointing Atatürk's picture on the wall) in English, and why are there some many pictures of him? How are you going to explain? What do you need? What are the possible solutions

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for this case? They stopped for a minute and said that we need to know English language to communicate with that person.

In addition to be a teacher who constantly tries to motivate his students, I also challenged my students critical thinking. Heavily influenced by Freire' (1970) philosophy of education, I tried to establish a dialogue, which is 'never an end in itself but a means to develop a better comprehension about the object of knowledge' because 'dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing' (Freire, 1970, pp. 17–18). In this sense, the school has the power of transformation of an individual problem into a social problem (Giroux, 2001). Thus, I sometimes asked about the students' opinions about controversial issues such as gender inequality, use of social media, educational equity, child labor, fast-food, etc. In doing so, I positioned myself to be a language teacher who fosters critical thinking. Also, I challenged the concept of banking education. In this concept of education, the students are regarded as adaptable and manageable beings, and 'the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world' (Freire, 1970, p. 73). If the students accept a passive role that does not require critical thinking, they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is. In the case of this reflective self-study, following quote shows my disappointment with the students demands regarding their critical thinking abilities.

We want to learn what is in the book. Other things [referring to the issues such as gender inequality, social media, etc.] we talk about in the class is not useful for us. Please, show us grammar, test us so that we can learn English. (Student Reflection)

When I tried to encourage critical thinking and dialogic learning, I always encountered difficulties and problems. The students do not want to share their ideas, or what is worse is that they do not have an idea about critical issues. I sometimes feel that post-modernist approach to education does not work. The students favor the banking model of education because of the exams [referring to the standardized tests].

Conclusions

Professional identity construction is a complicated process and consists of various challenges, problems and difficulties (Penso, Shoham, & Shiloah, 2001; Salazar & McCluskey, 2017; Tang et al., 2017). In this reflective self-study, a novice teacher's professional identity construction is captured and environmental considerations, language teaching practices, and teacher roles as transformative intellectual emerged as key issues. While environmental considerations are the infrastructure of the school, school administration, and technological resources, language teaching practices of the novice teacher in this study, which is informed by the educational philosophy the novice teacher holds, are shaped, reshaped and organized according to the environmental considerations. In addition, the novice teacher selects several teacher roles that is suitable for the immediate context he is in, and the roles are subject to change. As shown in the Graphic 2, the novice teacher is always in a circle of adapting, organizing, resolving and selecting process and a change in one process influences others, which provides dynamism of professional identity construction.



Graphic 2: The Cycle of Professional Language Teacher Identity Construction

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In terms of the implications, it is suggested that novice language teachers need to receive an orientation program about the school system they will teach before they begin their career as a professional language teacher. Also, they need to be involved in observing different educational settings to form a repertoire of possible scenarios of actual teaching in their intern periods, and constructing their educational philosophy, language teaching methods and strategies, as well as, being culturally responsive. Lastly, this reflective self-study has some limitations. Conducting this reflective self-study with a teacher educator or more experienced language teacher can possibly yield more in-depth results.

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