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Saudi Female English Teachers' Professional Identity Construction: A Qualitative Study of the Internal and External Factors

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigates factors that (re)shape the professional identities of Saudi female English language teachers and examines how the length of their teaching experience influences their pedagogical approach. This study used a triangulation approach to collect data from five Saudi female EFL teachers and applied thematic analysis for data analysis. Results indicate that each Saudi female EFL teacher had unique factors that contributed to shaping and developing their professional identities, such as their professional background, learning experience, institutional influence, and professional development opportunities. Additionally, the length of teaching experience played a significant role in constructing their professional identities. Finally, a relationship existed between the micro and macro factors that contributed to the formation of their professional identities and pedagogical approaches. The study's findings contribute to the ongoing local and global dialogue on the role of identity in language teacher education as it expands on Norton's idea that identity construction is a fundamental aspect of professionally becoming a teacher. It offers practical insights for students, educators, administrators, and policymakers in developing the professional identities of English language teachers.

Keywords: EFL teacher professional identity, Professional identity development, Saudi education

1. Introduction

Educational research has recently seen a surge in

interest regarding the exploration of teacher identity and its ramifications within the realms of education, applied linguistics, and teacher development (Bei-

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jaard, 2017; Wong, 2022). Specifically, there's a growing recognition of the link between the quality of education and the identity of educators, as evidenced by numerous scholarly works (Atal, 2019; Ilmiani et al., 2022). The quality of education is directly connected to a teacher's identity, surpassing mere instructional methodologies to encompass the teacher's self-perception and their educational impact (Johnson et al., 2020). Consequently, the significance of teacher identity in positively influencing education and students' learning outcomes has garnered attention in a plethora of published articles (Beijaard, 2004; Maclean, and White, 2007; Beauchamp, and Thomas, 2009; Aubrey, and Coombe, 2010; Coombe, 2014, 2020; Pishghadam et.al., 2019).

A teacher's professional identity, a complex and ever-changing concept, is crucial for an educator's professional success as it directly influences their pedagogical decisions and classroom practices (Pennington, and Richards, 2016; Yazan, 2018; Eslamdoost et al., 2020; Widodo et al., 2020). Understanding a teacher's professional identity is fundamental in comprehending the complexities of professional identity formation as emphasized by Varghese et al. (2005) who argue that to understand language teaching and learning, we must recognize teachers' self-perception and self-concept. As complex as it can get, teachers' professional identity is molded by a combination of internal and external factors (Varghese, 2006; Tsui, 2007; Dornyei, and Ushioda, 2009; Gao, 2010; Liu, and Xu, 2011), with intrinsic factors reflecting personal desires and motivations for work and identity development, and extrinsic forces influenced by external factors such as background and learning experiences (Claeys, 2011; Nazari et al., 2019; Estaji, and Ghiasvand, 2023). Exploring both intrinsic and extrinsic factors in the formation of a teacher's professional identity is essential for understanding the complexities involved and fostering successful educational environments (Alharbi, 2022).

2. Research problem and purpose

Exploring teachers' professional identity becomes

fundamental to comprehending the complexities of professional identity formation and promoting effective educational environments (Varghese et al., 2005; Tsui, 2007; Dornyei, and Ushioda, 2009; Tsui, 2010; Gao, 2010; Xu, 2013). Despite extensive research on teachers' professional identities globally, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning English language teacher professional identity, particularly in Saudi Arabia (Khan, 2011; Ur Rahman, and Al-haisoni, 2013; Elyas, and Badawood, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2017; Hersi, 2018; Almayez, 2019; Aljuhaish, Othman, and Senom, 2020; Othman, and Aljuhaish, 2021). Given the increasing significance of English language instruction in Saudi Arabia (Abahussain, 2016), it is crucial to address this gap and unpack the nuanced factors that shape the professional identity of Saudi female teachers.

Grounded in Norton's (2011) insight, which highlights the intricate relationship between language learning, teaching, and identity, this study seeks to understand how Saudi female English language teachers at a Saudi university (re)shape and (re)develop their professional identities; it also examines the interplay between internal and external factors. The study also adds texture to this layer of investigation by identifying the unique challenges and opportunities faced by female Saudi teachers in maintaining and developing their professional selves. From this perspective, the study is designed to answer the following questions qualitatively:

- 1) How do Saudi female English language teachers at a Saudi university construct and negotiate their professional identities?
- 2) What are the internal and external factors that affect the professional identity of the teachers in this study?
- 3) What are the unique challenges and opportunities encountered by female Saudi teachers in developing and maintaining their professional identity?

3. Literature review

In the field of education, the concept of identity has been the subject of extensive scholarly interest.

Although a definitive definition of identity remains elusive (Castelló et al., 2021), it has been recognized as a dynamic, multifaceted, and complex construct (Akkerman, and Meijer, 2011; Luehmann, 2007). Researchers have investigated identity from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including the sociocultural approach (Luehmann, 2007), the postmodernist (Akkerman, and Meijer, 2011), and the holistic (Johnston, 2012). Each of these approaches illuminated distinct aspects of identity, including social, cultural, gender, and professional identity (Bukor, 2011; Block, 2017). Furthermore, Gee (2000) proposed myriad levels of identity, such as institutional, discourse, and affinity identity as distinct and enacted forms of identity. For this study, Norton's (2000) definition of "identity" is adopted, which refers to an individual's perception of their connection to the world, how this connection evolves over time and in different settings, and their perception of potential future outcomes.

Within the broader landscape of identity research, teacher professional identity has become a critical area of investigation. This stems from the reality that a teacher's professional identity encompasses an individual's self-perception as a teacher, how this perception changes over time and in various contexts, and their beliefs regarding their potential future as an educator (Day et al., 2006; Norton, 2000), respectively. This multifaceted construct is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, such as life experiences, prior knowledge, teaching practices, social and intuitive factors, interactions within the educational context, personal attributes, values, expectations, emotional demands, career motivations, and contextual influences (Beijaard, and Verloop, 2000; Day et al., 2006; Flores, and Day, 2006; Kaplan, and Garner, 2018; Zembylas, 2003). While the existing literature on teacher professional identity provides valuable insights, the review highlights a significant gap in the research on the construction of the professional identity of Arab and Non-Arab English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. This section provides a thorough synthesis of existing research and identification of gaps that this study aims to fill.

3.1 Related non-Saudi EFL teachers' professional identity empirical studies

Numerous studies have investigated the professional identity of EFL teachers worldwide, but limited research exists within the Arab context (Othman, and Aljuhaish, 2021). Non-Arab EFL teacher professional identity studies fall into two categories: those that investigate the complex and dynamic nature of teacher identity formation and those that highlight the unique challenges faced by Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs).

Studies in the first category, such as Caihong (2011) and Tran and Sánchez (2016), emphasize the ongoing process of identity construction, which is influenced by both personal and contextual factors. Caihong (2011) interviewed and observed nine Chinese university professors to examine EFL teachers' professional identity. Due to their social and professional experiences, teachers' professional identities are multifaceted and constantly changing, according to the study. Responsible for student learning, committed to lifelong learning and professional development, and taking pride in teaching were key traits. Meanwhile, Tran, and Sánchez (2016) examined language teacher identity formation in a qualitative case study with in-depth interviews and reflective journals with a Vietnamese language instructor. They found that personal and professional experiences shape teacher identity over time and are influenced by many factors. In accordance with these insights, Nazari, Nafissi, Estaji, and Marandi (2019) conducted research on the dynamics of teacher assessment identity among Iranian EFL teachers. The study employed web-based audio diaries to reveal the distinctive and constantly changing nature of the professional identities of the teachers, which are influenced by their professional backgrounds, learning experiences, and reflective practice. Additionally, Estaji and Ghiasvand (2023) employed a mixed-methods approach to examine differences in novice and experienced EFL teachers perceived Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) and its implications for their professional development. The results showed that both experienced and novice Ira-

nian EFL teachers' professional identities changed over time due to factors such as their educational background, work experience, and the use of audio diaries (Estaji, and Ghiasvand, 2023). Rooted in the ideology of non-native speakers, both Fan and de Jong's (2019) study in the US and Nigar and Kostogriz's (2019) study in Australia on NNESTs make it evident that NNESTs face numerous challenges in their profession. These challenges include language proficiency and cultural differences. However, the studies also highlight the resilience of these teachers and how they leverage their diverse backgrounds to improve their teaching methods.

Contrary to most of the existing global literature that mainly provides descriptive accounts, the study conducted by Nazari et al. (2019) fills a crucial research gap by examining the professional identity of non-Arab EFL teachers. Through the utilization of a triangulation approach to data collection, which encompasses audio diaries and semi-structured interviews, along with content and thematic analysis, this study offers comprehensive insights into the distinct obstacles and possibilities encountered by Iranian EFL teachers as they strive to cultivate and uphold their assessment identity. It represents a significant advancement in the field and sets the stage for further research to deepen our understanding of the nuanced and context-dependent nature of EFL teacher professional identity. It advances the field and opens the door to more research on the nuanced and context-dependent nature of EFL teachers' professional identity. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the complex and context-specific factors shaping Saudi Arab female EFL teachers' professional identities, as well as the influence of teaching experience. We hope to offer important insights that extend and complement the existing global literature.

3.2 Related Saudi EFL teachers' professional identity empirical studies

While research on EFL teachers' professional identities is abundant globally, only a limited number of studies have been conducted concerning the professional identities of EFL teachers in Saudi

Arabia (Ahmad et al., 2017; Hersi, 2018; Almayez, 2019; Aljuhaish et al., 2020; Othman, and Aljuhaish, 2021). For instance, Ahmad et al. (2017) conducted a case study on NNEST instructors in a Saudi Arabian university, finding that language proficiency, cultural differences, teaching experience, and institutional support significantly influence (Professional Identity) PI formation. Moreover, Hersi's (2018) study on professional identity formation among non-native English speakers in Saudi Arabia found that these teachers face challenges like language proficiency, cultural differences, and limited professional development opportunities. They maintain their identities through fostering a sense of belonging, seeking support from colleagues and mentors, and engaging in reflective practice.

Focusing on nonlocal teachers in Saudi Arabia, Almayez (2019) focused on non-local NNESTs and identified strategies and coping mechanisms such as embracing their non-native status, seeking supportive colleagues, and developing professional skills utilized by teachers that facilitated the construction of their professional identities.

Furthermore, Aljuhaish, Othman, and Senom (2020) conducted a study on the identity formation of EFL teachers in Saudi institutions, identifying cultural and religious values, English language proficiency, training programs, and collaborative relationships as influential factors. They emphasize the complexity of identity formation in this context and underscore the importance of support and resources for EFL teachers in navigating this dynamic process. In the same vein, Othman and Aljuhaish (2021) conducted a similar study on Saudi EFL teachers in Malaysian institutions, highlighting factors such as cultural and linguistic background, professional development, a supportive work environment, and the challenges of balancing identities. Both studies underscore the intricate nature of identity formation among non-native EFL teachers and the importance of providing them with adequate support and resources.

In summary, the literature on EFL teacher identities in Saudi Arabia and globally highlights challeng-

es faced by NESTs and NNESTs, the role of personal experiences and professional development, and the influence of cultural norms and values.

Therefore, based on a critical review of the local Saudi literature, three notable gaps emerge. First, there is a need to bridge the gap between the limited research conducted in Saudi Arabia and the extensive global literature to enhance our understanding of professional identity formation among EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. Secondly, there is a need for further empirical studies within the Arab region to explore the internal and external factors influencing the professional identities of Saudi EFL teachers, including their years of teaching experience. Finally, it is imperative to recognize and prioritize the significance of continuous professional development and identity enhancement for EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, this study contributes to the ongoing

discourse on teacher identities in the MENA region, with a specific focus on Saudi English teachers.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

This study examines the professional identities of five Saudi EFL female English language teachers at a Saudi university. The selection criteria included varied teaching experience and qualifications, as well as both Saudi Arabian nationality and female gender (**Table 1**). The study aimed to be rigorous and relevant to a broad range of stakeholders, focusing on the (PI) of Saudi EFL female teachers. This is because the understanding of identities is complex and multilayered (Pennington, and Richards, 2016; Yazan, 2018) as it represents a specific single cultural group, gender, and lengthy teaching experiences.

Table 1. Selection criteria of EFL teachers

NO.	Context	Case Name (Pseudonym)	Qualification	Teaching Experience	Nationality
1	EFL at Saudi University	<i>Amal</i>	B.A M.A. (Ongoing)	6 years	Saudi
2		<i>Jumanah</i>	B.A M.A. (Ongoing)	9 years	Saudi
3		<i>Danah</i>	M.A.	15 years	Saudi
4		<i>Nada</i>	Ph.D	17 years	Saudi
5		<i>Maha</i>	Ph.D	25 years	Saudi

4.2 Instrument

A triangulation approach was applied to collect the study’s data through two online semi-structured interviews and the *Tree of Life* self-reflection tool (Merryfield, 1993). This study aimed to comprehensively understand the internal and external factors contributing to the shaping of the professional identity of Saudi female teachers. The data analysis followed the six steps for applying thematic analysis to qualitative data proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifying themes and patterns that addressed the research question. The analysis was conducted within each case and across the cases, uti-

lizing Yazan’s (2018) analytical framework for understanding language teacher identity, which encompasses teacher learning, teacher cognition, teachers’ participation in communities of practice, contextual factors, teacher biographies, and teacher emotions.

To ensure the validity and reliability of this qualitative study, various strategies recommended by Creswell and Miller (2000) were employed. These strategies included triangulation, disconfirming evidence, researcher reflexivity, member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, collaboration in the audit trail, rich description, and peer debriefing. Triangulation involved the use of multiple data sources and methods, including semi-structured interviews and

the Tree of Life tool (Merryfield, 1993). Peer review and debriefing were conducted by another researcher who is an expert in the field.

4.3 Study context

In research, understanding the context is essential, and the case method allows us to consider influential factors (Yin, 2003). For this study, conducted at a public college located in the middle of Saudi Arabia, the setting and contextual information are of utmost importance (Creswell, 2013). The study institution comprises nine colleges across five different towns, serving over 7,000 students on ten campuses. Recognized for its contributions to scientific and cultural progress, the study institution is dedicated to offering high-quality educational programs, supporting research projects, promoting social initiatives for sustainable development, prioritizing faculty development, a positive work environment, competitive compensation, and benefits.

4.4 Data collection

A case study approach was employed to collect in-depth data about the investigated subject (Cohen,

2007). The primary data source consisted of two semi-structured online interviews, following Yin’s recommendation (2003) that interviews are valuable for eliciting participants’ perspectives and views about a situation. Each interview lasted 50 minutes and aimed to understand the participants’ educational and professional backgrounds, motivations for pursuing a teaching career, and views on language teaching (**Figure 1**). The interview questions were adapted from a relevant study (Kaçakolu, 2022) and aligned with the internal and external constructs of Yazan’s (2018) conceptual and analytical framework, including teacher learning, cognition, biographies, emotions, community of practice, and contextual factors. Additionally, the second interview utilized the *Tree of Life* self-reflection tool (Merryfield,1993). This tool allowed participants to reflect on their professional experiences, process their beliefs and conceptualizations of teaching, and visually represent their personal and professional growth through a graphic representation of their stories. The study aimed to create a secure and non-intimidating environment for participants to explore their professional identities, encourage self-reflection and contemplation, delve into complex topics, and identify shared themes and patterns.

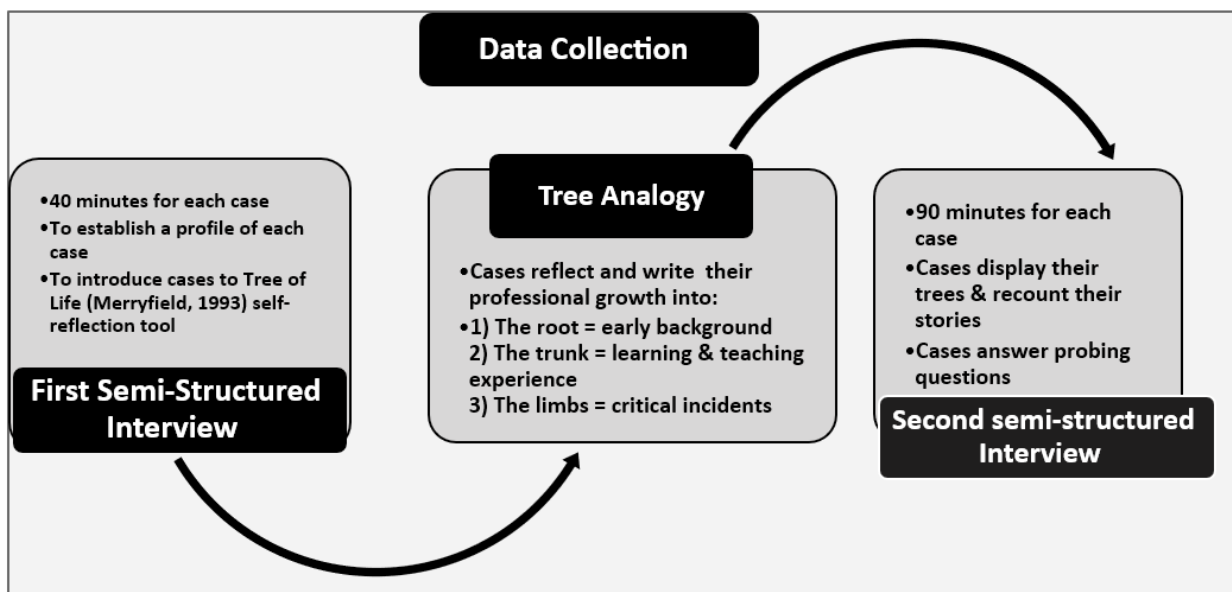


Figure 1. Data collection

4.5 Data analysis

This qualitative case study followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six proposed steps to gain a thorough understanding of the participants as individual teachers. The steps included familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report (**Figure 2**). Interviews were verbatim transcribed and narrated to construct a professional life story for

each case. The stories were shared with the participants before being coded using a Word Processor and categorized into themes. The generated themes align with Yazan’s (2018) analytical framework for understanding language teacher identity. Cross-case analysis and dialogic inquiry were used to further conceptualize commonalities and distinctions among the cases. This method provided a comprehensive view of the cases, addressing the research questions stated in the study.

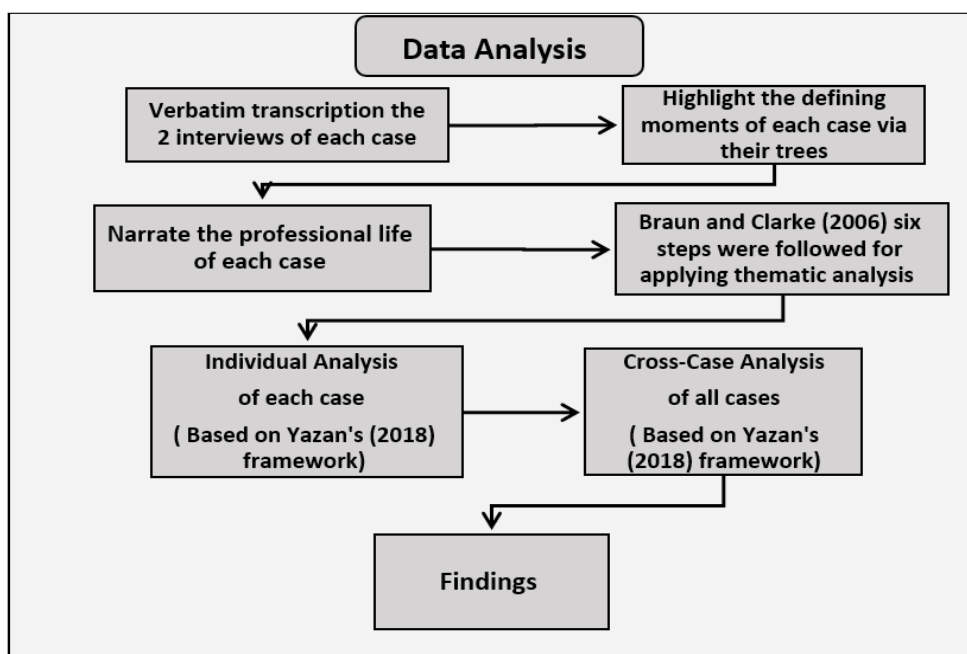


Figure 2. Data analysis

4.6 Trustworthiness

To ensure the validity and reliability of this qualitative study, various strategies recommended by Creswell and Miller (2000) were employed. These strategies included triangulation, disconfirming evidence, researcher reflexivity, member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, collaboration in the audit trail, rich description, and peer debriefing. Triangulation involved the use of multiple data sources and methods, including semi-structured interviews and the Tree of Life tool (Merryfield, 1993). Peer review and debriefing were conducted by an experienced identity researcher. High-quality tape was used for recording and transcribing, and intercoder agreement

was used to finalize the codes and themes discovered in the study.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Higher Education Ethics Committee. Participants were informed about the study’s content, purpose, and procedures, and consent emails were received from those willing to participate. Verbal consent was obtained at the start of each interview, with reminders of voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used, private information was concealed, and the research setting was kept confidential to ensure confidentiality.

5. Findings

This study explored how Saudi female teachers (re)shape their professional identity and examined the internal and external factors contributing to this process. The research findings uncovered that these teachers embark on a lifelong professional journey, spanning from childhood to the present. Throughout this journey, their professional identities evolve across three distinct stages: early background, learning experiences, and critical incidents and future aspirations. At each stage, the development of their professional identities is influenced by a complex interplay of internal and external factors (**Figure 3**).

To capture these transformative moments, the study utilized narrations and employed the Tree of Life tool (Merryfield, 1993) tool. The findings are revealed first through a lifelong narration and then drawn as a summary addressing the research questions. The narration is organized into three thematic sections, symbolized by different parts of the tree, to illustrate the (re)shaping of teachers' PI: the root (early background stage), trunk (learning experiences stage), and limbs/branches (critical incidents and future aspirations stage). Each section explores a range of internal and external factors outlined in Yazan's framework (2015) that shape the teachers' professional identity. Participant quotes and explanations support the findings, highlighting the dynamic interaction between internal factors (teacher biography, emotion, cognition, and learning) and external factors (community of practice and contextual influences) as described in Yazan's framework (2015). The three thematic sections of the lifelong professional journey answer the study's three questions. Due to the dynamic nature of teacher identity, it is impossible to conceptualize a teacher's identity by isolating all or some of the factors that may contribute to its formation (Olsen, 2008). Therefore, the summarized findings are drawn to answer the questions at the end of this section.

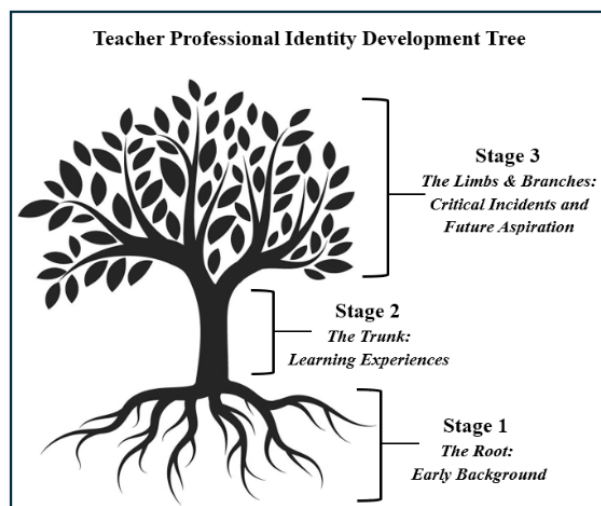


Figure 3. Teacher professional identity development tree

Lifelong professional journey narration

1. The roots: early background stage and professional identity construction

This study collected data on participants' early backgrounds, including their educational history, personal beliefs, childhood memories, and upbringing. By exploring these factors, the study sought to establish correlations between participants' early backgrounds and the development of their professional identity. Furthermore, delving into the biographies of these teachers was deemed essential to gain insight into their beliefs and self-perceptions as educators. Thus, teacher identity (re)construction can be thoroughly investigated (Yazan, 2018). The findings indicated a significant impact of participants' early backgrounds on their professional identities.

To begin with, Maha's interest in teaching originated from her early childhood experiences. As the eldest of three siblings, she took on the responsibility of caring for and protecting her younger brothers due to her father's frequent business trips and her mother's frequent hospitalizations. Sometimes, Maha's father would call to inform her about her mother's hospitalization and their absence from home at night. Maha explained further,

That's challenging for a kid, but I was responsible from a young age. I think it's somehow related to teaching and having a sense of respon-

sibility in teaching. Because one of my responsibilities was to teach my siblings. My father would always say: Maha, you're an excellent student. There is no need for you to study; teach your brothers instead of studying.

Maha's upbringing, which involved taking care of her younger siblings, instilled a strong sense of responsibility that she now connects with her career in education. Her father recognized her teaching abilities and encouraged her to teach her brothers, shaping her perception of teaching as a valuable role. Early teaching experiences provided Maha with exposure to real-world educational situations, fueling her passion for education and establishing the groundwork for her future as a teacher.

Interestingly, for Nada, her father had a significant impact on her professional teacher identity by instilling in her the values of determination, responsibility, and the importance of education. Despite being illiterate himself, he encouraged her to pursue higher education and believed in the power of education for success. He was strict but also taught her to take responsibility for her actions, shaping her into a dedicated and motivated teacher. She said,

I have had a special relationship with my father since I was young. He always wanted me to be the head of my class, and he always told me that I could do it, but at the same time, he's a very strict person. If you fail to do something, the only person who's going to be blamed is you, but no one else. So, he doesn't fabricate excuses or come up with excuses for whatever you do.

Nada's competitive learning skills have been influenced by her father's emphasis on values such as determination, hard work, and personal accountability. These values were instilled in her during her upbringing and have continued to shape her academic pursuits and PI.

On the contrary, Amal and Danah were both raised by parents who were educators, which had a significant impact on their professional lives. Coming from similar backgrounds, they grew up in a community that highly valued teaching as a career, with a long line of family members who had over

two decades of experience in the field. Danah, in particular, was raised in a family that prioritized education, with both her parents being educators. From an early age, she was instilled with the values of hard work, dedication, and a passion for learning. These principles played a crucial role in shaping her PI as an EFL teacher. Her educated parents inspired Danah, as she stated in the first interview,

Actually, my mom was a teacher, and my dad was an educator; both are educated. Since I was young, I always had that feeling that I wanted to take that kind of route and follow their lead. That's why my parents really inspired me.

Danah's IP has been significantly influenced by her upbringing in a family that highly values education and her parents' careers as educators. Similarly, Amal's professional life has been shaped by her mother's unwavering dedication to both the teaching profession and familial responsibilities. Amal's mother, a devoted chemistry teacher for over 25 years, has had a profound impact on her daughter's professional journey. A vivid childhood memory for Amal is seeing her mother, tired after a long day at school and still in her abaya, immediately heading to the kitchen to prepare lunch for the family upon returning home. Amal was overwhelmed when she described how her mother set a great example as a teacher for her in the first interview:

She is a mother who had a strong appreciation for the value of education from an early age and worked tirelessly to ensure that her children were doing great in life and school. I still remember how she would spend hours marking her students' exams and assignments and be there for them whenever they needed help, taking care of them as she does with her kids (us).

Amal's mother's strong appreciation for the value of education and family were symbolic models that crafted Amal's ideational stance toward the love for teaching. Witnessing her mother's remarkable ability to balance her roles as both a teacher and caretaker inspired Amal and shaped her aspirations in the field of education. The impact of familial experiences and upbringing on a teacher's professional identity are

evident in the cases of Amal and Danah. In contrast, despite being surrounded by a family of educators, including her sisters and cousins, Jumanh never envisioned herself as a teacher due to her apprehension about effectively explaining concepts to others, which hindered her pursuit of a teaching career. She explained how teaching was previously frightening for her in the first interview,

Back in my school days, my classmates used to ask me about things related to the lesson; I did not know how to explain things to them, so I always told them that when I grew up, I would never become a teacher, and here I am (a teacher).

Initially hesitant due to her fear of explaining things, Jumanah's professional identity resisted being shaped as a teacher. However, her passion for teaching emerged through her learning experiences, leading to the evolution of her PI independent of her early background. In general, the study underscored the profound impact of teachers' upbringing on their professional development and identity. Irrespective of the challenges they encountered, childhood experiences significantly shaped teaching and identity formation. Various factors, including schools, teacher education programs, family, religious groups, and political parties, contribute to the construction of teachers' professional identities. The influence of early background experiences on language teacher identities is intricate and diverse, influenced by both internal and external factors. Teacher identity construction involves reflecting on past experiences, shaping beliefs, and envisioning future aspirations (Beijaard et al., 2000; Gee, 2000; Barkhuizen, 2017).

II. The trunk: learning experiences stage and professional identity negotiation

The trunk represents how teachers' educational experiences shaped their professional identities. Their PIs were greatly influenced by reconciling conflicting social and intellectual educational settings (Beijaard, and Verloop, 2000). It was noted that in all five cases, their professional identities were impacted by their educational experiences as students, and it influenced how they presently teach their students. The cases had varied prior learning experiences, with

some positive and others negative. Amal, Danah, and Nada were inspired by positive experiences as students, leading them to pursue teaching and emulate their role model teachers. On the contrary, Jumanah and Maha transformed their challenging learning experiences into positive ones for their students. The cases were asked in the second interview to describe their experience as students with their teachers. The first three quotes of Amal, Danah, and Nada are of cases who had a positive learning experience as students.

Amal said,

I studied in the same school from elementary to high school, and I was taught by the same teachers. They were professional, kind, and role models to each student in the school, and they knew that we were shadowing them in everything they were doing, like the way they talked and dressed. I think it was because they were very close to us and willing to hear us.

Danah reflected,

They were really good. I had excellent teachers, and you know, at that time, it was something different to have a teacher who was willing to teach. In such a magnificent way, it's not the traditional way of teaching, like using L1 mostly and not L2 in the classroom. So, that was something that changed my perspective about learning the language. I found myself passionate about getting better.

Nada also stated,

The love and appreciation I had for my teachers made my English class the funniest and most delightful class period in school, despite all the complaining and frustration I frequently heard from my other classmates. I can still recall the enjoyable competitions and games we played to practice using language. While they were kind and friendly, my teachers were stern about the work that they assigned. So, I always aimed to be one step ahead of my classmates to keep my teachers' respect.

On the contrary, the second two quotes of Jumanah and Maha are the cases who had a negative

learning experience as students.

Jumanah retrospectively said,

I had a horrible experience when I was a student. My teachers were very strict and a source of threat to us; they only stuffed our minds and left the class. They weren't willing to listen to us speak or share our thoughts with them. When I became a teacher, I tried my best not to repeat history with my students.

Maha said,

They were very scary. They would scream at us for no reason and force us to answer the lesson's questions. Sometimes, I wanted to be sure about a point of what the teacher just explained, but I was really afraid that she would scream at me or punish me by sending me to the front of the class to stand for the entire class time. When I became a teacher, I do not remember having to scream at one of my students or silence them.

In general, the professional development and identity of cases are significantly influenced by their past experiences as students. Factors such as life experiences, prior knowledge, and teaching practices shaped their personal and professional identity development (Day et al., 2006; Zembylas, 2003). The way they were taught as students plays a crucial role in their current teaching practices, providing opportunities for adjustment and growth (Akkerman, and Meijer, 2011). The teacher's ideological practices to include more than one linguistic code as a form of teaching, the incorporation of sympathy and love as emotional elements, and the perpetuation of a teacher-dominant approach, were all driving factors influencing the study participants' process of constructing their identities.

III. The limbs and branches: critical incidents and future aspirations stage and professional identity cultivation

The limbs represent impactful incidents that shape teachers' professional identity, including challenges, successes, and transformative moments. The branches symbolize their aspirations, career goals, and ongoing professional development. It was revealed that all five cases encountered challenges

that influenced their professional development and identities, motivating them to pursue further growth. Factors like professional identity, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, commitment, and motivation shape teachers' professional selves (Canrinus et al., 2012). Contextual, biographical, and cultural influences also play a significant role in developing a teacher's professional identity.

Danah's mother passed away when she was still a young child, leaving a lasting impression on her. In the aftermath of her mother's passing, she struggled with feelings of vulnerability and self-doubt, worried that she would not be able to achieve the same level of success as her peers, who had the benefit of both parents.

You know when you lose your mom at an early stage of your life, and people think that you'll not be as successful as those who have both parents? So, I always had this in my head. I have a dream, and I'm going to make it through one day, proving to people that I can be successful even without a mother to take care of me. It is a dream to become someone who can be distinguished, helpful, and contributive to society.

The loss of her mother and societal pressure has shaped Danah's PI, inspiring her to make a positive impact in the world through teaching. This desire fuels her commitment to creating a supportive and nurturing learning environment for her students. Enrolling in a TESOL M.A. program in the USA has further influenced Danah's PI. She described how this experience has changed her personally and professionally in the second interview,

I would say I started like someone and then ended up like someone else. I honestly feel like I have truly evolved as a teacher because I have gained so much insight into the field of teaching language, the best practices, and teaching methods. I benefited so much, both personally and professionally.

Danah's statement suggests that the M.A. program has significantly impacted her personal growth and development, resulting in a transformation of her PI. The program enabled her to enhance her knowl-

edge and skills in TESOL, including theoretical and practical aspects.

During her doctoral studies in applied linguistics in the USA, Nada's PI was greatly influenced by her professors. These professors served as role models, embodying the highest standards of academia. Nada expressed deep gratitude for their exceptional commitment and the pivotal role they played in shaping her educational journey. Nada, in the second interview, explained further,

My M.A. professors were strict and tough, but they were good. This probably influenced me when I started teaching, suggesting that this job has to be done in a specific way. But when I met my Ph.D. professors, they were more like friends than teachers. That changed not only my teaching perspective but, most importantly, myself. It showed me that being a good teacher isn't just about being strict.

Nada's PI was shaped by her experiences during her M.A. and Ph.D. studies. Initially, she encountered strict and demanding teaching styles, which influenced her belief that teaching should be conducted in a specific manner. However, her encounter with Ph.D. professors who treated students as peers challenged her prior conviction. This introduced a more nurturing and cooperative pedagogical approach that emphasized positive connections with students and fostered a sense of camaraderie within the classroom.

In Amal's case, a variety of external factors—including her family's expectations, cultural values, and financial incentives—shaped her PI at first. As the years passed, her perspective on teaching evolved, and her PI was reshaped intrinsically. She started to genuinely enjoy teaching and changed from relying solely on external factors to having an authentic passion for the subject. Amal described this shift in the second interview,

Once I started teaching, I was thinking about changing my career any minute. I find another good job in any field with good pay. But somehow, the more time I spend in the classroom with my students, the more I see myself as having become a new person with a new aim who can't

wait to be in class again.

Amal's thoughtful consideration of her professional journey underscored the significance of teacher growth and the positive influence that teaching can have on enhancing a teacher's PI and ability to connect with others over time.

In the same vein, Jumanah's initial motivation for pursuing a career in education was exclusively rooted in her father's wish. Despite her aspirations not aligning with the profession, she chose to honor her late father's wishes. Thus, after completing her studies in the English department, she ventured into the field of education and embarked on a teaching career. This decision marked the beginning of a new journey, which ultimately revealed her true calling in life.

Actually, I did it for my dad in the first place [to be an English teacher]. But honestly, it was the students where I discovered where my rightful place was; it was with them in the class. So, I felt like my students weren't only my students, but they were like my friends and daughters; I learned from them how to deal with problems, to be patient and a good listener.

Transformative experiences play a significant role in shaping the PI of teachers. As educators encounter new challenges and accumulate experience, their perspectives, convictions, and pedagogical approaches undergo shifts. These transformations have a profound impact on their teaching methodology, philosophy, and career goals. Amal and Jumanah initially had reservations about teaching and lacked a defined PI despite being part of a teacher community. However, through their discoveries and growing enthusiasm for teaching, they embarked on transformative journeys that influenced their paths to becoming educators. Such experiences are instrumental in shaping a teacher's PI and fostering their growth and development in the field.

Maha's educational journey also involved a significant transformation. She seamlessly transitioned between the roles of student and teacher, even teaching the English language while pursuing her graduate studies immediately after completing them.

This valuable experience spanned over 20 years and played a crucial role in evolving and shaping her PI. Maha described her journey of shifting roles: “After many transitions over 20 years, now I can say that my way of looking at students is different; I eventually started to understand them and feel them more.”. Maha’s dual experience as a student and teacher enhances her teaching strategies. For her and Danah, lifelong learning and professional development strengthen their effectiveness in the classroom.

The transformative moments experienced by the five teachers were closely tied to their emotions, which played a significant role in reconstructing their PI. According to Yazan (2018), teacher emotions, encompassing feelings and attitudes, have a profound impact on how educators approach their work and shape their professional identities. These emotions influence their future aspirations, career goals, and ongoing professional development. Lasky (2005) describes this as a heightened state of being resulting from reflections on past and future teaching practices, interactions with the teaching context, colleagues, students, and parents. Therefore, language teachers’ understanding of their profession and role stems from their continuous interpretation of professional experiences (Derakhshan, and Nazari, 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2023; Tajeddin, and Adeh, 2016; Yazan, 2020). Positive and negative emotions in response to the classroom environment, actions of administrators and colleagues, and students’ academic progress can influence teachers’ PI.

In summary, the study’s findings addressed its three main research questions drawn from the aforementioned lifelong professional journey narrative. The first question, which focused on how Saudi female EFL teachers at Saudi universities construct and negotiate their professional identities, revealed that each teacher in this study possessed unique factors that shaped and developed their professional identity. These factors included the case’s professional background, learning experiences, and professional development opportunities. Secondly, regarding the internal and external factors that affect teachers’ professional identity, it was found that both internal

and external factors play a significant role in (re) shaping EFL teachers’ professional identities. Teachers’ participation in communities of practice, contextual factors such as family literacy background, role models, and colleagues and students were the external factors. Teacher learning, cognition, emotions, and biographies were the internal factors. Finally, the study addressed the third question about challenges and opportunities, indicating that female Saudi teachers’ professional identities are shaped by the depth of teaching experience. As teachers gain more experience, they encounter new challenges and opportunities that help them understand their roles as educators. These transformative moments, involving their teaching context, colleagues, students, and parents, further enhanced their professional identity.

6. Discussion

The results of this study indicated that Saudi EFL teachers’ professional identities are shaped and developed by unique factors, including their professional background, learning experiences, and professional development. These factors contribute to the fluid, unstable, and multifaceted nature of their professional identities (Rodgers, and Scott, 2008; Flores, and Day, 2006). This aligns with Arab previous research, highlighting the influence of personal experiences, educational background, teaching context, and professional development opportunities on the formation of PIs (Ahmad et al., 2017; Hersi, 2018; Almayez, 2019; Aljuhaish et al., 2020; Othman, and Aljuhaish, 2021). However, this study contributes to going beyond earlier work in the field of Arab EFL teacher PI literature in particular aspects. To illustrate, one contrasting result was found in this study regarding the role of practical experience and the teaching community, which conflicted with the findings of Aljuhaish et al. (2020) and Othman, and Aljuhaish (2021). Their studies concluded that practical experience and the teaching community played a more prominent role in shaping Saudi EFL teachers’ professional identities than their educational background. Meanwhile, this study’s central finding discovered that Saudi EFL teachers attribute

their PI formation to their educational background and learning experience. The possible explanation for the contracting results is that individual experiences, cultural context, and educational policies and practices are just a few of the variables that affect the dynamic, multifaceted process that molded teachers in this study's professional identity. Thus, teacher training education and programs can significantly impact a teacher's PI, while practical experience and the community of practices surrounding those teachers may have more immediate and direct influence.

In addition, this study's findings highlight the dynamic interaction between internal factors such as teacher biography, emotion, cognition, and learning and external factors like a community of practice and contextual factors that (re)shape teachers' PI development as described in Yazan's (2015) framework. Due to the dynamic nature of teacher identity, it is impossible to conceptualize teacher identity by isolating all or some of these factors that may contribute to the formation of teacher identity (Olsen, 2008). However, the existing Arab research literature has only scarcely looked into limited factors that influence the PI development of Saudi EFL teachers. These factors include teachers' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Hersi 2018, Almayez 2019, Othman et al. 2020, 2021), teaching experience (Hersi 2018, Almayez 2019, Ahmad et al. 2017), the influence of institutional and societal expectations (Hersi 2018), and the role of supportive work environments and collegial relationships (Othman et al. 2020, 2021). Meanwhile, this study thoroughly examined all possible factors that could impact the construction of PI of Saudi EFL teachers, from their childhood to the present. To illustrate, the complexity of identity construction and development arising from its multidimensional nature is influenced by unimaginable factors in the teachers' lives such as personal history, experiences, beliefs, and interactions within social and institutional contexts. Therefore, the exploration of all potential factors from childhood to the present would expose a wide range of paths, pivotal moments, and unique characteristics of their professional identity construction. Hence, gaining insight into

these thorough factors can enhance the effectiveness of pre-service teacher training, in-service professional development, and institutional support. This study added to the current body of Arab research literature by offering a thorough comprehension of this significant yet insufficiently studied subject. Furthermore, this study employed Yazan's (2018) analytical framework for understanding language teacher identity, which proved effective in beginning to understand the PI of EFL teachers. The framework captured the various internal and external factors that shape EFL teachers' PI throughout their professional journey, from childhood to the present. Consequently, this study argues for the reliability of Yazan's (2018) framework in exploring future studies on language teacher identity thoroughly.

Moreover, the present study found a relationship between the factors that contributed to the formation of their PIs and their teaching style (Agee, 2004; Beauchamp, and Thomas, 2009). In other words, how teachers were taught as students, their upbringing, role models, interactions with colleagues and students and other discovered factors in the study influenced the (re)shaping of their PIs and the way they teach (Beauchamp, and Thomas, 2009). Interestingly, this study discovered that all teacher cases were thoroughly unaware of the factors that shaped and developed their professional identities and teaching styles (Varghese et al., 2005). Therefore, the present study emphasizes the significant role of teachers' self-reflection in understanding and developing their PIs and pedagogies. To help teachers better understand these influences, this study suggests promoting self-reflection, offering opportunities for professional growth, performing research, and soliciting input from peers, managers, or students (Varghese et al., 2005). These measures can enhance teachers' reflective practice and help them make more deliberate decisions about their instructional approaches. This study employed the (Tree of Life), a self-reflection instrument developed by Merryfield (1993), to thoroughly explore the participants' professional life experiences, beliefs, and conceptualizations. While previous studies utilized

valuable additional tools like artifacts (Hersi, 2018), document analysis (Almayez, 2019), classroom observations (Othman, and Aljuhaish, 2021), and focus group discussions (Ahmad et al., 2020) alongside in-depth semi-structured interviews primary data collection tool, these methods may not have fully captured the complex dynamics underlying the formation of the participants' professional identities. In other words, the present study's second tool (*Tree of Life*) provided a secure and non-intimidating environment for participants to examine their identity spanning from their childhood to the present, engage in self-reflection, navigate complex topics, and identify common themes and patterns. By utilizing tools like the (*Tree of Life*), in-service teachers can gain a deeper understanding of their identity and the factors shaping its development. Therefore, this study argues that using the self-reflection tool (*Tree of Life*) developed by Merrifield (1993) facilitates teachers' reflection on their personal, educational, and career histories. This is because the prompting questions would guide teachers to visualize and articulate the evolving trajectory of their professional lives, aiding their self-awareness and professional identity development.

Lastly, previous studies (Hersi, 2018; Almayez, 2019; Othman, and Aljuhaish, 2021; Ahmad et al., 2020) included diverse groups of non-native EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia, representing various nationalities and cultural backgrounds. For example, Hersi (2018) included teachers from Somalia, India, and Egypt; Almayez (2019) included teachers from Egypt, Sudan, and the Philippines. Othman and Aljuhaish (2021) included teachers from Saudi Arabia working at a school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Ahmad et al. (2017) included teachers from India, the Philippines, and Yemen. In contrast, this study and Aljuhaish, Othman, and Senom's (2020) study focused specifically on a more in-depth exploration of specific gender-related and cultural factors that play a crucial role in the PI formation of this population. This narrow focus limits generalizability, considering the intersection of nationality, culture, gender, and linguistic background that would provide a more

comprehensive understanding of factors influencing PI formation among Saudi EFL teachers. For instance, due to the shared Saudi nationality of the study cases, their PIs exhibit similarities influenced by internal and external factors. These shared factors, including educational and training backgrounds, cultural and linguistic experiences, and emotional challenges, shape the teachers' cognitive frameworks, perceptions of their roles, and pedagogical practices (Olsen, 2008).

In general, this study, along with the discussed Saudi studies, provides valuable insights into the complex process of constructing professional identity (PI) among EFL teachers. Theoretically, the findings of this study illuminate that the pleasant and unpleasant experiences and life encounters of teachers are affected by factors such as classroom environment, professional community of practice, and student learning outcomes, which pave the way for an English teacher's professional identity (Derakhshan, and Nazari, 2022). They highlight the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, like early background and learning experiences, in supporting teachers' professional growth. These findings align with global studies, emphasizing the ongoing and multifaceted nature of language teacher identity formation (Caihong, 2011; Tran, and Sánchez, 2016; Fan, and de Jong, 2019; Nigar, and Kostogriz, 2019; Widodo et al., 2020; Torres-Rocha, 2023).

7. Conclusions

This study concludes that the formation of professional identities among Saudi female EFL teachers is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors, including teacher learning, cognition, emotions, biographies, community of practice, and contextual factors. These factors are interconnected and interdependent, shaping teachers' perceptions of themselves and their professional roles. Additionally, the factors that shaped and developed the EFL teachers' professional identity influenced their teaching style, and the length of teaching experience played a significant role in strengthening teachers' professional identities. Raising EFL teachers' awareness of

the various factors that influence their professional identities is an important step toward enabling them to become more reflective, adaptive, and effective practitioners. This holistic, identity-focused approach can have a significant impact on their professional development and, by extension, their students' success. Understanding these factors has implications for students, educators, administrators, and policy-makers. The findings contribute to the discourse on teacher identity in the Saudi Arabian context and the global academic community. They shed light on the micro and macro factors impacting EFL teachers' professional identity, informing teacher training and professional development programs. This study was limited by its small-scale case study approach, focusing solely on female teachers. Due to the complex nature of studying identity, this inquiry would have benefited from a comprehensive ethnographic study involving observation and immersion in teachers' professional lives. Replicating the study in different contexts with a larger and more diverse group of institutions would enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Investigating EFL teachers' professional identities has a wide range of implications for educational practice that were revealed after conducting this study. The findings provide valuable insights for teacher education program developers, particularly in the Saudi context. This study suggests that teachers' identities are crucial for understanding language teaching and learning and that a better understanding of these identities is essential. Additionally, Arab and global educational institutions should redesign their curriculum based on these influences and establish an English language teacher learning community. This could enhance Saudi Arabia's existing teacher education program and potentially modify the curriculum to address teacher identity.

It is recommended that future studies should employ ethnography and explore alternative settings within Saudi Arabia to investigate the lived experiences of non-native EFL Arab and non-Arab teachers. Comparative studies can also examine PI formation among different populations, such as NESTs vs.

NNESTs, gender differences, and variations between university and schoolteachers. These studies will offer valuable insights into how teachers navigate and negotiate their identity in an education system that is rapidly becoming neoliberal and inform the development of effective teacher education programs.

Author Contributions

Bothainh Alturki, the paper constitutes the singular author's scholarly contribution. Majed Alharbi, second language writing and writers' agency and voice, discourse analysis, and critical literacy.

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be made available on request respecting the autonomy of the participants.

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Ethics statement

The pursuit of broad applicability for the dataset was underpinned by the meticulous incorporation of ethical considerations pertaining to the participants, accompanied by the requisite obtaining of their informed consent.

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