

“We are in more interaction with students’ identity than with their physique”: L2 Teachers’ Understanding of Learner Identity¹

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Abstract

The study of language teacher and learner identity has turned into a vibrant line of research in recent years. Little research, however, has specifically addressed teachers’ understanding of learner identity and the contributions this awareness offers to various aspects of their work. This study explored fifty Iranian EFL teachers’ understanding of learner identity as relative to their practice in different language schools across the country. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and analyzed through content analysis. The teachers viewed learner identity as a multi-layered concept encompassing various sociocultural aspects external to learners as well as individual aspects internal to learners as influencing their identity construction. Regarding the nexus between teacher practice and learner identity, not all the teachers agreed with the goal of raising learners’ awareness of identity issues in practice, yet most of them referred to the substantial behavioral impact of teachers on learners’ identity construction. The study offers implications for systematic incorporation of identity-related issues in teacher education programs in order to further enhance the teachers’ associated awareness.

Resumen

El estudio de la identidad del profesor/aprendiz de idiomas se ha convertido en una línea de investigación vibrante en los últimos años. Sin embargo, pocas investigaciones han abordado específicamente cómo entienden los profesores la identidad del alumno y las contribuciones que esta comprensión ofrece a varios aspectos de su trabajo. Este estudio exploró la percepción que tienen cincuenta profesores iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera de la identidad del alumno en relación con su práctica en diferentes escuelas de idiomas en todo el país. Los datos se recopilaron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y se analizaron mediante análisis de contenido. Los profesores entienden la identidad del alumno como un concepto de múltiples capas que abarca varios aspectos socioculturales externos a los alumnos, así como aspectos individuales internos de los alumnos que influyen en la construcción de su identidad. En cuanto al nexo entre la práctica docente y la identidad del alumno, no todos estuvieron de acuerdo con el objetivo de concienciar a los alumnos sobre las cuestiones de identidad en la práctica, pero la mayoría se refirió al impacto sustancial del comportamiento de los profesores en la construcción de la identidad de los alumnos. El estudio ofrece implicaciones para la incorporación sistemática de cuestiones relacionadas con la identidad en los programas de formación de profesores con el fin de mejorar aún más la comprensión de los profesores en este tema.

Introduction

The study of language teacher identity has turned into a vibrant line of research in recent years. Within this line of thinking and research, identity is assumed to be dynamic, shifting, and tied to various sociocultural exigencies existing within the teaching context (e.g., Varghese et al., 2005; Yazan, 2018). Viewing teacher identity as context-dependent implies seeing the concept “in terms of the unique set of characteristics associated with a particular individual relative to the perceptions and characteristics of others” (Pennington, 2015, p. 16). Pennington and Richards (2016) emphasize the co-construction of teacher identity in tandem with student identity, holding that teacher identity is also “a reflection of the characteristics of the learners and the context of instruction at the level of the classroom, the school, the district, and higher levels of context as these impact on the teacher’s aspirations and daily practice” (p. 3). The importance of reciprocity between teachers and learners including interaction patterns among them and the implications this interactivity offers to negotiating and doing their identity is widely recognized (e.g., Pennington & Richards, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005). However, little research has been done on language teachers’ understanding of this interactivity and the way it shapes their identities.

Literature Review

Conceptualizations of identity in general and language teacher/learner identity in particular have moved away from coherent, single-sided understandings of the concept toward now-established sociocultural and poststructuralist perspectives. The motivation for this line of thinking lies in the proposition that “because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity” (Wenger 1998, p. 215).

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This conceptualization of learning as identity has brought about its associated reorientations in relating identity to diverse aspects of learners' functioning including communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), investment (Norton, 2001), and imagined communities (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019). The associated undergirding principle is the ways learners are influenced by and influence different educational, social, and cultural communities they operate in and construct their identities in light of membership in such communities.

Much of the extant empirical literature has not examined teacher and learner identities vis-à-vis their reciprocity. However, there is research that has addressed teacher identities as relative to students' role. For example, Reeves (2009) utilized positioning theory and the concept of investment to examine the identity of an English teacher over a one-year time span. Collecting data through interviews, observation, and conversations, the researcher found that "the teacher made an investment in [the learners'] identity by positioning them as like any other student" (p. 34). In another study, Avalos-Rivera (2019) examined the identity negotiation of a novice Mexican teacher drawing on positioning theory as the theoretical framework of the study. Data were collected from interviews, reflective journals, classroom observations, and the participant's written autobiography. The results attested to "the fluid nature of discursive positioning in narratives showing how the participant positioned himself as a popular teacher" (p. 1). This line of research, however, has mostly examined how teachers position themselves in relation to the students and concerted efforts to look into the ways teachers view their learners' identities as contributing to their own identities has scarcely been considered.

The present study aims to explore L2 teachers' understanding of learner identity as a sociocultural and dynamic process that influences the identity of both teachers and learners. The motivations to conduct this study were thus threefold. First, despite the surge of empirical attention to language teacher and learner identity, the scope of research on teacher identity and its relation to student identity is limited in the literature on teacher education (van der Want et al., 2018), and more so within the literature on language teacher education. Interpersonal relations between teachers and learners have been documented to be significant factors influencing teacher quality and well-being (Dicke et al., 2015), and as a process shaping the identity of both (for a discussion see Pennington & Richards, 2016). Additionally, the classroom context is now viewed as a socio-psychological context highly influencing teachers' (Borg, 2015), as well as learners' identities. Despite the significance of interpersonal relations in the classroom and as an important element in studying language teacher identity (Varghese et al., 2005), empirical research focusing on teacher-student relationship and how it influences their identities is scarce.

Second, teacher identity is assumed to be inextricably interwoven with various macro-level, societal and micro-level, pedagogical factors (e.g., Varghese et al., 2005). Current conceptualizations of language teacher education also emphasize the situatedness of teachers' cognitions, highly linked to the contextual contingencies of such contexts (e.g., Freeman, 2018). In this vein, a number of studies have examined the determining role of contextual factors influencing language teachers' identity (construction), particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where teachers are faced with various sociocultural issues contributing to their identity construction (e.g., Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). Considering the now-established significance of context in shaping teachers' cognitions, it is important to move a step forward and explore how EFL teachers view their learners' identity and whether/how this understanding comes to mediate their role relationships in light of the localities of such contexts.

Third, it has been stated that teachers' identity influences their practices (e.g., Zhao & Zhang, 2017) and the ecology between teacher and learner identities inasmuch as "identity negotiation between teachers and students emerges as a strong influence on academic achievement" (Cummins, 2011, p. 190). However, little is known about how teachers' understanding of learner identity influences their practices, especially considering the significant role of teachers in initiating and maintaining communication patterns in the classroom. It is true that teacher identity has always existed dialogically or dialectically by virtue of a student identity as a function of classroom realities, yet teachers' understandings of this aspect of teacher-learner relational identity has received little empirical attention. Based on the above discussions and considering the lack of empirical attention to L2 teachers' understanding of learner identity, exploring the ways they conceive of learner identities and their associated influences is significant, a point this study aims to investigate. Thus, the question guiding this study was:

How do L2 teachers understand the concept of learner identity?

This question was then broken down into two questions:

1. *How is this understanding related to the teachers' own identity?*
2. *How is this understanding related to their practice?*

Method

Context and participants

The context for the present study was the English language schools of Iran.

The participants of this study were 50 teachers selected via a combination of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling methods. Table 1 indicates the profile of the teachers.

Age	23-36
Experience	5-10
Degree	MA, PhD
Education	TEFL, Translation
Gender	Male (30), female (20)
Proficiency level of teaching	Intermediate, advanced

Table 1. Participating teachers' profile

Researcher positionality

The researchers held various individual and joint roles during different stages of the study. The first author designed the study including finalizing the interview protocol questions. The second author collected most of the data and transcribed the whole data. Several interviews were conducted by the first author to both gain both insider knowledge and serve as a model for the second author. The authors also engaged in joint conversations to finalize the themes emerging from the data.

Data collection

To collect the data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers in Persian (L1) (on average forty min. per teacher). In this regard, an extensive literature review was done on themes that are central in (language) teacher identity and primary interview questions were then formulated (Appendix A). The questions included two parts. The first set of questions involved teachers' conceptualization of learner identity including identity of the learners, identity features influencing teachers' understanding, their attention to learners' identity, and the nexus between teacher and learner identities. The second set of questions included identity as related to practice involving the importance of learner identity in practice and the connection between learner identity and teachers' practice. In designing the questions, two experts' (university instructors) opinions were initially obtained and after discussing, the current questions were agreed upon. To ensure the content validity of the questions (Cohen et al., 2007), they were piloted on five teachers to dispel the possible ambiguities, which resulted in merging two questions. The data were collected from the fifty teachers across different districts of the country to obtain a detailed understanding of how Iranian L2 teachers across a spectrum of contexts view learner identity. In the present study, teacher understanding is operationally defined as the teachers' perceptions of their learners' identity and its connection with their own identity as also related to their practice.

Data analysis

To content analyze the data, the guidelines proposed by Cohen et al. (2007) were employed. In this regard, the transcripts obtained from the interview protocol were initially screened to look for the themes emerging from the responses mixed with a code-recode strategy (Ary et al., 2014). The themes were then rechecked cross-comparatively to arrive at a more thorough inductive understanding of the data. The data were finally cross-checked by an experienced researcher in qualitative data analysis (a PhD in TEFL) and a researcher working on (teacher) identity to ensure the accuracy of the themes, with the areas of disagreement being resolved through discussion.

Findings

Learner identity as a multi-layered, dialogic concept

The teachers underscored the multiplicity of learner identity in light of its dynamicity as embedded within the peculiarities of context. The teachers' conceptualization mainly involved characterizing identity as kaleidoscopic. This conceptualization revolved around a complex, layered web of identity composed of a personal-cognitive understanding of self, mediated by diverse sociocultural functioning and behavior of individuals, national heritage, membership in communities of practice, and personality traits differentiating individuals.

The teachers' understanding of learner identity and its connection with their own identity was multidimensional. Three of the teachers pointed out that learner identity is unimportant as they cling to their own personalized understanding of teaching. However, most of the teachers made reference to the point that learner identity is an important educational consideration as it influences and is influenced by their own identity. The teachers' responses involved a three-pronged conceptualization including types of identities of the learners, purposes of thinking about learner identity, and the reciprocity of identity construction. Regarding the types of identity, the teachers held that various aspects of learner identity influence their understanding of who the learner is *especially where they have come from and which part of the city they belong to*. These aspects ranged from social, cultural, linguistic, personality, behavioral aspects, to their clothing:

In order to have a successful interaction and mutual understanding, we should think about the set of characteristics defining our students. The more we understand their identity, the more our interaction will be successful. These characteristics include gender, face, clothing, city, educational background, etc. that define our [learners'] identity.

In the above extract, the teacher views learner identity as a function of various aspects defining students and a precursor to successful communication. In other words, the teacher situates classroom progression within gaining awareness about learner characteristics. Another teacher also pointed to similar features of learners as important in the way classroom interaction proceeds: *I think that the point that I know who the person is, what class of society they belong to, etc. help me very much in having a more effective class.*

A number of the teachers referred to the differential identities of the learners as a function of their community membership. The teachers believed that their awareness of the learners' background mediates their classroom approach and behaviors. For example, in the extract below the teacher holds that his behavior is different across different learners. He openly acknowledges his approach and attributes it to the regional differences among the learners:

To be honest, when my learner is from a higher social class, I treat and behave toward them differently as I know that they are culturally and socially different. I try to keep this vision in my classes with students of other classes, but I accept it that I treat differently.

The purposes of thinking about and attempting to understand learners' identity was focused on learner differences, being at the service of establishing better communication patterns, improving learning outcomes, and particularly establishing rapport with the learners in the initial sessions of the class. The teachers noted that this understanding is essential to breaking the ice in the beginning sessions, to decreasing and mitigating the possible problematic situations occurring during the class, and to better engaging the learners and gearing the instruction to their wants and needs for differentiating the instruction:

When I enter the class, especially in the first session, I start with knowing the students more. That is, I ask them about their favorites, what they have done in the past week, or even I ask them about their life condition, etc. I try to know the people around me [the students] better. Psychologically speaking, in order to understand each other better, I should know each person well and then teach.

In the above extract, the teacher emphasizes the importance of familiarity with learner identity and characteristics in establishing a better communication with learners. This importance is both psychologically significant and interactionally productive in the way instruction is enacted. Additionally, becoming aware of learner identities is important in the teacher's ability to tailor teaching to individual learners' potentials, as one of the teachers put it: *For example, one of them is introvert and another one is active. I think that my understanding of these features is important in the way I can guide each of them.*

As to the reciprocity of identity construction, the teachers emphasized that they conceive of learner identity as a function of classroom particularities and those of the other learners as well as the multiplicity of their

own identities relative to each class. Indeed, this understanding consists of three elements including first, not being monolithic across various classes and proficiency levels, second, being influential on their agency macroscopically in order to act constructively and purposefully, and third, mediating the consonances/dissonances they encounter in their relationship with the learners and the possible restructurings in their perceptions about the learners:

I think whatever that adds something to your knowledge can influence you. I have frequently seen interesting behaviors from my students that have influenced me profoundly. I can say that I have learned from them and this has changed the way I see a matter and overall has brought about changes in my identity.

Another teacher added:

Consider two situations in which I know about a learner's characteristics and one in which I don't know or know little about him/her. This makes my attitude and teaching different as when I know the person, I can treat them accordingly or change my practices if they are not effective.

Learner identity as a practice-informing concept

An interesting finding of the relationship between identity and practice was that although most of the teachers viewed the connection as a vivid one, ten teachers believed that identity is not important in their practice. Indeed, while these teachers believed that identity is an important aspect of teaching in the first set of questions, they viewed the concept as of little importance in attempting to incorporate identity issues in practice—being an espoused theory, not a theory in action—or believed that some identity issues should not surface in practice due to their cultural sensitivity:

I have not done anything in practice to make my learners aware of their identity. It might be important but I have not thought about it in practice. You know, I also think that some issues should not be touched [surface] in the class as they can become problematic.

Sometimes when I teach the textbook and we come across a cultural difference such as relationships between boys and girls, I try to skip it fast. I know that making my learners aware of these differences is important, but it may bring about problems for myself.

The teachers' responses to the connection between identity and practice were contingent on the proficiency levels of the students they were teaching. The examples the teachers used to represent the connection were related to the proficiency levels they were teaching, and the analysis showed that these examples were mainly a reflection of these proficiency levels.

I cannot teach the same way in different classes. For example, when they [learners] are in intermediate level, I enact a set of practices that are at their level or we discuss issues that are appropriate for their age. But when I teach in the advanced level the practices become different as they are older and, for example, when we discuss a topic, it is more critical and harder.

Additionally, the importance of identity realization in practice was emancipation- and democratization-oriented in that by developing identity awareness in the learners, they become socially meaningful participants. The teachers generally viewed the classroom context as a site where the learners become prepared for their social roles. This generic mental growth, according to the teachers, could be extended to the learners' educational performance:

A class is a small sample of the society in which we are interacting. Teaching is also part of this interaction. We are in more interaction with the students' identity than with their physique. Without identity nothing remains from people.

With regard to the influence of teachers' practices on learners' identity, the dominant theme emerging from the responses (46 teachers) pertained to the behavioral impact of the teacher on the learners and their learning. Indeed, teacher immediacy (Özmen, 2010) was, in the teachers' view, a stronger predictor of their influence on learners' identity than other instructional practices. In this regard, most of the teachers believed that teachers act as a model for the learners, influencing the identity they develop over time, through their verbal/nonverbal modeling:

The connection between a teacher and students is not limited to teacher-student relationship. We are human beings before being teachers and students. With this in mind, in the class, my identity features even my clothing, my cologne, being on time, the way I ask questions, etc. can influence the learners' identity.

I have seen that in the pass of time my behaviors influence my learners' identity and their perceptions of what identity they should develop. I see that, for example, my learners imitate my behaviors and even my accent.

Discussion

The data reported in this study indicate that the participant teachers viewed learner identity as a multidimensional, layered concept encompassing various social, cultural, political, economic, etc. aspects external to learners and linguistic, personality, and behavioral aspects internal to learners. Figure 1 indicates the factors contributing to the teachers' understanding of learner identity. The figure indicates the multiplicity of factors influencing teachers' understanding of learner identity, ranging from sociocultural, to learner-related, to personal ones.

This finding indicates that the teachers are aware of the influence of identity recognition on their behavioral and instructional decisions in the class. Additionally, it shows the importance of identity in establishing relationships with the learners in that the teachers viewed thinking about learner identity as a purposeful undertaking guiding their instruction, not as a fleeting thought. This recognition of learner identity has been acknowledged as important inasmuch as "what to teach and how to teach it must be informed by the teachers' knowledge of learners including their characteristics, learning needs, motivational fluctuations, social environments, learning culture, and identities" (Van Canh, 2018, p. 3).

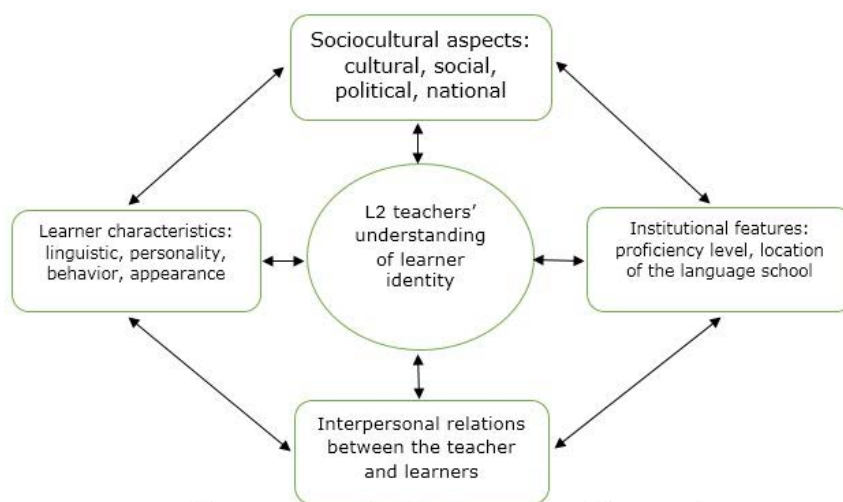


Figure 1: Factors influencing the teachers' understanding of learner identity.

The highly situated nature of identity as reflected in the teachers' responses indicates that they structure their mindset about learners based on individual characteristics of the learners. While this finding is self-evident in terms of the nature of classroom context, the teachers' emphasis on the repercussions of this understanding to the subsequent consonances/dissonances highlights that besides their identity, teachers' understanding of learner identity is also in constant flux. This fluidity seems to have bearings for epistemological and practical aspects of teachers' work. First, it offers implications to the troubled nexus (Borg, 2019) between identity and cognition of teachers. That is, if teachers' cognition (re)structures as a function of their enhanced awareness of learners' identities, their identity then restructures as a function of their increased understanding of the consonances/dissonances they experience in their previously-held cognitions. Second, it shows that teachers' understanding of learner identity is an important component of their "emergent sense-making in action" (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). Indeed, teachers make sense of their interactions with the learners based on their cumulative understanding gleaned from previous communication patterns with the learners. This previous understanding comes to define the way teachers approach the new identity-driven occurrences, which brings about changes in their ongoing understanding to strengthen and/or weaken the previous propositions.

Despite the significance of developing learners' awareness in practice as stated by most of the teachers, the fact that a number of the teachers did not acknowledge identity awareness as a pedagogical undertaking highlights two points. First, there is a growing host of studies attesting to the prominent role of identity recognition in (language) learning (e.g., Early & Norton, 2012; Ushioda, 2011). Thus, teachers need to become (more) aware of the function of identity in the quality of learning and instruction. As the participants of this study were experienced teachers, this awareness-raising may happen in the form of launching professional development initiatives developing the teachers' associated awareness. Second and more importantly, it appears, more than before, that identity (awareness) needs to be incorporated into pre-

service teacher education programs, which can inform “teachers of ways of capitalizing on the learners’ different personal histories, beliefs, identities, emotions, and other personal and affective factors that shape their agency in second language learning” (Van Canh, 2018, p. 7). Developing cognizance of (learner) identity seems important to happen at the beginning of teachers’ professional itinerary. It has been argued that novice teachers employ a default identity as “an institutionally sanctioned and constructed identity of teacher as purveyor of lessons and leader of the class, with the learners in the default role of students” (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 4), which needs consideration in terms of its long-standing bearings at cognitive and practical levels.

Pennington and Richards (2016) argue that “the age and the expectations of the students for appropriate teacher behaviour and teacher-student relationship ... will be important considerations in developing a balance of formal and informal interaction when negotiating an effective teacher identity under different circumstances” (p. 4). It appears that teaching proficiency is also an important consideration in teachers’ understanding of their and their learners’ identity, especially the way teachers leverage their verbal and nonverbal resources to influence the learners’ identity construction. However, this aspect of identity construction needs to be addressed as identity-in-practice (Kanno & Stuart, 2011) to delineate how teachers and learners co-construct their identities in light of their moment-by-moment interactions across various proficiency levels. This could be an agenda for further research on how teacher understanding of learner identity and learner understanding of teachers’ identity influence each other.

Implications for Instructional Practice

The results of this study offer a number of implications. First, van der Want, et al. (2018) hold that teachers “need to cope with and give meaning to their relationships with students, which does an appeal on their professional identity” (p. 355). Professional development initiatives could develop teachers’ awareness of the importance of identity in constraining their professional practices at a microscopic, classroom level and their professional pathway more macroscopically. Such an awareness is particularly important to be developed in Iranian EFL teachers as teaching English in this context “is likely to provide substantial challenges to some EFL teachers and to present them with both political and personal conflicts” (Eslamdoost et al., 2019, p. 4). Such concerns require policymakers to take the initiative and deal with identity dilemmas that may constantly emerge from various personal, institutional, and collegial impetuses. The repercussions of these challenges are by and large extended to the classroom level and the ways teachers position themselves in relation to the students, the ways they contribute to student learning, and the extent to which they contribute to institutional effectiveness.

Second, teacher identity is currently considered “as a frame or an analytic lens through which to examine aspects of teaching” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 175). As noted earlier, learning constitutes a great share of identity sense-making to the extent that “teacher learning, therefore, can and should be conceptualised as teacher identity learning” (Beijaard, 2019, p. 1). However, this learning should not be (and is not) limited to external dimensions influencing teachers’ professional practices as most of teachers’ engagement in practice happens at the level of classroom. Thus, pre-service teacher education programs and in-service professional development initiatives should pay more attention to the function of identity in teacher-student relationships. This could materialize in the form of including specific modules in the materials enacted in such courses regarding this relationship or using identity as an analytic component of observation schemes by documenting critical moments that may bear substantial consequences to teachers’ and learners’ real-time identities.

Third, identity and agency are inextricably intertwined (Buchanan, 2015) to the extent that teachers’ identity greatly influences their sense of agency and their “actions (and how the actions are perceived by others) then feed back into the ongoing identity construction process” (p. 704). Teachers who see little advantage in heeding learner identity may display actions that are oriented toward dominant teacher-fronted, decontextualized practices not properly anchored in learners’ present socio-affective statuses and needs. This condition brings about two pedagogical hurdles. First, teachers may gradually position themselves as distinct from the learners and develop maladaptive immunity (Hiver & Dornyei, 2015) which “reduces teaching effectiveness and hinders teacher reflection and development” (p. 10). Second, teachers may lose the opportunity to develop effective rapport as grounded in awareness about learners’ idiosyncrasies. Teachers can leverage their immediacy behaviors to establish successful communication patterns with their students (Rugen, 2018) and take advantage of the bulk of “discourses of emotions [that] happen every day between teachers and students in a classroom” (Zembylas, 2005, p. 223) in order to render their teaching

effective and effectively assist with constructing learners' identities. This could in turn greatly contribute to the amount of investment learners put to work to navigate their interlanguage development successfully.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore learner identity from the perspective of teachers. The results of the study indicated that teachers view learner identity as a multifaceted, layered concept. Moreover, teachers regarded learner identity as relative to various sociocultural considerations internal and external to learners. Overall, these findings shed light on capturing a better understanding of the significance of identity in the ways in which teachers come to understand their learners and how identity recognition guides classroom occurrences. Indeed, given the current surge of attention to the substantial role of identity in various layers of educational contexts, it can be argued that teachers' understandings of learner identity influence all dimensions of their own and their learners' life, from the micro-level of classroom interactions, to the meso-level of institutional undertaking and to the macro-level functioning of individuals as socially meaningful participants. However, one limitation of this study is that it did not address learners' understanding and take-up of teacher identity and the extent to which teachers' understanding aligns with learners' understanding of their comparative identities. In the same vein, further research may explore how teachers and learners contribute to their interlocutor's identity construction as occurring in the real-time interactions among them. Additionally, this study was limited to experienced teachers' understanding. Further comparative research with novice teachers provides a clearer picture of the possible differential understandings of these teachers.

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Appendix A

Interview questions

Conceptualization:

What is your definition of identity generally? Please explain.

Have you ever thought about the identities your students have? If yes, what has made you think about it?

If no, what has been the reason?

In your opinion, what identity or identities do your students have? What is it?

What features of students could influence your understanding of their identity?

Could your students' identity influence your own identity? If yes, how?

Practice:

How much has student identity been your concern in your teaching? Why?

What have you done to raise your learners' awareness of their identity? Is it important?

Could understanding your students' identity have any effect on your teaching? How?

What effect could your teaching have on the students' identity?