

Research Article

Unpacking the Perceived Personal and Contextual Conditions Shaping English Language Teachers' Professional Identity Formation in Secondary Schools

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It is crucial for teachers to become aware of and understand their professional identity as this has implications for their day-to-day professional practices. Teachers who are more aware of their professional identities are more willing to endure thwarting contextual conditions by adjusting their identities. However, presently most teachers seem to overlook their professional identity while they often tend to associate the poor quality education with a lack of external resources alone. The aim of this study was thus to create this awareness in teachers by unveiling how the perceived personal and contextual conditions constitute the professional identities of experienced EFL teachers working in secondary schools. In this study, teacher professional identity is conceptualized and understood within the theory of symbolic interactionism. Data were generated through a one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interview with two EFL teachers (Fazi and Tare). Thematic analysis was used across participants within a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological frame. The findings revealed that the participating teachers' professional identity is a multi-dimensional and dynamic reality shaped by personal agency and daunting contextual conditions that were represented through two pertinent themes: challenges and teacher emotions. Challenges and emotions that the participating teachers have experienced are found to be the constituents that come into play in the formation of their professional identity. The findings also revealed that the experienced teachers' professional identity is both a coconstructed and negotiated process, which unveils itself not only by compliance to external pressures (e.g., tolerating student misbehaviors) but also by repelling and adapting the external demands that are made available to them (e.g., politics-oriented assignment of school principals, inappropriate curriculum contents). This article thus suggests that more attention should be paid to the implicit messages (revealed through challenges) that all stakeholders convey to the teaching personnel.

1. Introduction

Teachers' professional identity formation is one of the most important issues in educational systems around the world due to its significant impact on prospects, beginning, and experienced teachers' performance, and educational quality. It has been the topic of research in the field of education systems around the world since the late 20th century [1–3]. For instance, Beijsaard et al. [2] conducted a systematic and comprehensive literature review on the peer-reviewed articles on teachers' professional identity published from 1988

to 2000. Côté and Schwartz [3] also noted the marked increase in interest in identity-related matters since the 1980s. Yet, what is more important than the timeframe of its emergence is asking the question “what contributions were made because of the emergence of such a category of research?”

The rise of teacher identity research has made important contributions to cultural changes in the study of teachers' work and their lives. For instance, the importance of professional identity to teaching practice was underscored by Beijsaard et al. [4], who claim “Teachers' perceptions of their

own professional identity affect their efficacy and professional development” (p. 749). Castañeda [5] highlighted the nature of professional identity to provide an impetus for researchers to investigate teachers’ work from two major sides—invisible and visible. The invisible side constitutes the landscape of the visible aspect, which involves personal attributes such as cognition, beliefs, values, expectations, or emotions. The visible side refers to what teachers do, such as classroom interactions or task implementation. The visible side is generally considered the technical or functional dimension of teaching [5]. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty argues the visible side constitutes only part of teaching by stating that “the visible is pregnant with the invisible, [...] to comprehend fully visible relations. . . one must go unto the relation of the visible with the invisible” [6], (p. 216). Palmer [7] defined the invisible side as the inner landscapes of teachers’ lives, whereas the visible sides were referred to as the creative or artistic selves of teachers, and the various influences on identity formation [8]. While explaining the contributions of teacher identity research, Tateo [9] also emphasized the philosophical shift regarding the nature of teaching; that is, from merely technical rationalist assumptions of teaching to the lived experience of teaching, emphasizing the ethical and emotional nature of teaching. Drawing on these lines of thinking, this study holds the belief that the exploration of teachers’ professional identity could contribute to its readers to make decisions in line with their invisible sides.

2. Problem Statement

The importance of building a high-quality teaching force is now recognized in all countries. The focus is on being innovative and smart in recruiting the best and most talented teachers to classrooms. That is, when the issue of quality education is a concern, quality teachers are at the core [10] of all educational matters, and Ethiopia is no exception. The central roles and responsibilities of teachers in quality education are also acknowledged by the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018–30). The Roadmap shows this by incorporating the quote: “The quality of the education subsystem cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” [11] as the opening statement of the section discussing teachers. This quote views teachers as the central actors in putting quality education into effect. However, despite that attention, the quality of education is still in question, and there seem to be some other aspects of education quality not noticed to date, especially in the context of Ethiopia. For example, the effect of teachers’ professional identity on education quality is an aspect that appears scarcely noticed by both researchers and policymakers. This study is therefore designed with the aim of addressing this aspect.

In the 21st century, it appears that above all self-aware and caring teachers are called for achieving quality education and students’ success. This is an issue that can mainly be addressed when educational research is focused on investigating how teachers develop their identity in relation to their profession. As noted by Hattie [12], the concept of quality teaching came to the front in educational research in the late 20th century with the claim that it is the teacher who

makes the significance difference in students’ schooling. Any initiative to improve educational quality, therefore, seems to depend highly on acquiring teachers who have good understandings of who they are, their lives, their work, and their effects on their students as well as on their society. Palmer [7] calls such teachers as “good teachers.” Besides, there seems a general belief that Palmer’s good teachers are created mainly by the impacts the research studies on the identities of teachers have. For instance, Beauchamp and Thomas [13] acknowledge the importance of considering teacher professional identity as a frame or analytical lens through which the various aspects of teaching are examined.

Similarly, Smit and Fritz [14] examined the issues that shape teachers’ professional identity against the pressures of policy change by using ethnographic narratives of two teachers from different racial backgrounds working in separate locations and concluded that “Education will not improve with financial efforts or the provision of workshops addressing policies, teaching practice, and management unless teachers’ identity receives prominence” (p.100). In the same vein, Titu [15] believes that.

Teachers who struggle to understand their role and place in the classroom are more likely to burn out and leave, whereas teachers who are more successful in understanding and adjusting their identities as teachers might be more willing to persevere (p.20).

Nevertheless, it is apparent that many of the current educational policy statements of professional standards give little attention to teachers’ identities and instead portray teaching and teachers’ work as a technical activity alone. Palmer’s [7] “good teachers” are hence missing in the present day education system, especially starting from the secondary school level in Ethiopia. This study, thus, will help its readers to be aware of the aspect that results in the absence of these good teachers and in the dominance of technical-only teachers. Like Palmer [7], I believe that being a teacher is a calling from the heart rather than being a means to livelihood. When a teacher knows that he or she is a called person to teach, this self-understanding then becomes the engine of his or her day-to-day professional practice. Thus, this study assumes that knowing whether an individual is a called person to teach or not begins with self-understanding; therefore, this study is a project that can make a contribution to self-understanding efforts.

On the other hand, despite the flourishing of research on teacher identity in general, there is little shared understanding of what constitutes teachers’ professional identities across contexts. Besides, the literature reviewed affirms that few studies have been carried out in the Ethiopian context [16]. In addition, studies on teacher professional identity seem to concentrate on teacher prospects and beginning teachers [13]. This represents a kind of trend that has created a gap in establishing teacher identity research across all forms of teaching experience. Accordingly, there appears to be scant attention with regard to the case of experienced EFL teachers, which this study attempts to address. Given these reasons, this study specifically seeks to understand how the personal and different dynamics linked to the EFL teaching contexts shape the formation of professional identity by two

EFL teachers having teaching experience beyond the first five years in secondary schools. Hence, this study specifically aims at answering the research question “What perceived personal and contextual conditions significantly affect experienced EFL teachers’ professional identity formation?”.

3. Conceptualizations of Identity: Insight from Literature

In the discourse of modernism, identity was perceived as a term used to describe an essential, fixed, consistent, and stable self [1]. However, this study on EFL teachers’ professional identity is basically focused on the social nature of identity; it therefore aligns with Gergen’s [17] postmodern approach, which understands identity as being multiple, dynamically evolving, continuously constructed, negotiated, and fragmented along with the multiple social contexts that people engage in [1]. For postmodernists, identities are “always under construction in contexts that are characterized by indeterminacy, partiality, and complexity” [18] (p.28). In literature, the benefits of professional identity for teachers are highlighted in a number of studies, as are how identities inform teachers’ beliefs and practices [19]. However, despite this, identity has been defined in a number of ways and is clearly “an extremely complex construct and simple definitions of what the term refers to are difficult to find as there is no neutral way to characterize it” [20] (p. 15). In this regard, Sung [21] contends that identity is a complex construct with multiple, pluralistic, and contested dimensions; thus, open to shifting for various contexts, such as social norms, sets of beliefs and values, personal experiences, and ideologies. There is no neutral way to define identity, and there will always be perspectives as to which approach to identity is taken.

Thus, this study understands teacher professional identity within the theory of symbolic interactionist framing [24]. According to symbolic interactionism, humans act towards things on the basis of the meaning things have for them, and these meanings are a product of social interactions and experiences in society and are modified overtime through an interpretive process by each individual in dealing with things encountered [23]. Within symbolic interactionism, identities are viewed as arising from social interactions and personal symbolic constructions of meaning. Following this theoretical frame, this study views the participants as active agents in constructing their professional identities in the interactive process as well as in allowing change and stability of identity formation.

In this study, as experienced EFL teachers go through their professional development and their classroom teaching experiences, they are assumed to be engaged in the making of their professional identity. Jenkins [24] views identity as an identification process and defines it as “a process; something that we do,” much of the time taken for granted by many of us (p.5). This study, therefore, considers the formation of the EFL teachers’ professional identity as an evolving process of representing themselves and something that they actually do in their vocation, with or without noticing it. Therefore, this study aims at helping teachers in

general to notice that what they actually do on a daily basis is the manifest of their professional identity. If teachers are aware of that what they actually do is something that signifies who they are as professionals, they strive to reconcile their actions with their beliefs, values, and expectations. In this sense, the importance of this study fits with Barkhuizen’s [25] argument that “it is important for teachers, through reflective practice or teacher research, to become aware of and understand their professional identity because doing so has implications for their practice” (p.1).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design. This study employed the qualitative research design [26], making use of the hermeneutic phenomenological approach within social constructivism. The study generated data from two research participants (named “Fazi” and “Tare” here) working in Gedeo zone, Ethiopia, who were selected based on the theoretical sampling approach [27].

4.2. Data Collection. Drawing on Malone [28], I believe that teachers’ professional identities are maintained in the worlds created by the stories that the participants narrated. Therefore, I conducted in-depth one-time individual interview conversations with each participant using the semi-structured interview guide prepared in advance [32].

4.3. Ethical Considerations. In order to obtain informed consent from the participants, the first thing done in this study was an overview presentation of the research project to the potentially participant teachers. In this presentation, they were provided with the required information about the research. Meanwhile, it was made very clear that their participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. With this, the informed consent on which their signature was put included such facts as the purpose of the research, the uses of the gathered data, how the data will be gathered, how their anonymity will be protected, starting from assigning pseudonyms to them to keeping the gathered data on a password-protected personal computer, the questions to be asked, and the benefits and risks for the participants to be involved.

4.4. Data Analysis. Based on the principles of hermeneutics, which are essentially focused on finding meaning [33] in texts (expressions of events), [31] in Ref. [26], interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used here to interpret the interview data. Given that the focus of the phenomenological approach adopted here is on the content of the discourse rather than on a verbatim account of the discourse that includes “ums” and “ahas,” the analysis was carried out on the contents of the excerpt texts produced in the interview.

Following Smith’s (1997) IPA, the process of data analysis involved four stages [26]. The first stage involved the reading and rereading of the text (hermeneutic circle). The

second stage involved identifying and labeling emergent themes, here termed as “initial codes” that characterize each section of the text. The third stage involved introducing structure into the analysis. At this stage, I listed the themes identified in stage 2 and identified a number of ways of looking for connections between emergent themes, which can help me construct meaningful clusters that can be characterized by hierarchical relationships with one another. Then, clusters of themes were given labels that capture their essence. This was done in “in vivo” codes, brief quotations, or “descriptive labels” [26] (p. 264). The fourth stage involved the production of a summary table of the structured themes, together with sample excerpts that reveal each theme. At this stage, I included only the cluster labels together with their subordinate themes and brief sample excerpts.

Having produced the interview transcript texts, I identified the essential themes from these texts following van Manen’s [33] approach called “the selective or highlighting approach.” The emerged themes are the interpretations of the participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences as understood by the researcher. Therefore, this study used the participants’ own narratives as phenomenological text descriptions of their lived experiences and presented just one interpretation of these texts. In other words, the themes revealed here will not exhaust all possibilities of other complementary, or even potentially richer or deeper themes within these texts [33]. At this point, it is important to note that a participant’s narrative produced during the interview does not have to be a true story; it simply (and importantly) has to be true to the narrator’s experience. According to McAdams [32], the participants’ stories are “less about facts and more about making meaning” (p. 28). Thus, in the thematic analysis, “what” and “how” of the experiences are at the core; that is, “what is being said” and “how it is being said” in the narrative text.

5. Findings

As indicated in section one, teachers’ professional identities are the beings and actions teachers perform and experience both inside and outside their classrooms in order to meet the internalized role expectations and external suggestions. Coldron and Smith [33] believe that “teachers’ professional identities are evident in their classroom practices” (p.716). This study also envisages teacher professional identity is being constructed in the process of meeting the participant’s internalized role expectations and the social suggestions of significant others in their particular settings. From the symbolic interactionist view, a teacher’s decision is dependent upon a classified world in which he/she holds role expectations of themselves and of those with whom they interact. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, this study also views the teachers’ professional identities as their own specified values that dictate what should be done at specific times and spaces. In this sense, the issue of professional identity is all about how teachers deal with authentic teaching in their own contexts. Authentic teaching requires a teacher’s self-sacrifice not only in the length of the school

day but also in the intensity of school activities. Being an authentic teacher thus requires a considerable degree of energy and discipline to maintain a routine without showing fatigue and lassitude.

The purpose of this study is to unveil how the perceived personal and contextual (micro, meso, and macro) conditions shape the EFL teachers’ professional identity. The findings of the interview data are presented by pertinent themes representing shared meanings as revealed through the interpretations of the participants’ narratives (Richardson, 1990b) as cited in Ref. [34]. Therefore, the researcher’s descriptions of the participants’ narratives of their historical events are first presented to manifest the participants’ lived experiences, and then, a presentation of the emerging themes of the lived experiences is made using the IPA procedure.

5.1. Description of an Individual Case’s Narrative. Participants’ narratives are an important key to representing the lifeworld they describe. These narratives allow the reader to identify and connect with their lived experience. Similar to setting a foundation, the narratives establish the “what” and “how” of the research questions in a general sense. What follows is Fazi’s description of her lived experience.

5.1.1. Fazi. Fazi was a secondary school EFL teacher in her early 40s on the day we met for the interview in September 2020. Fazi has a bachelor’s degree in English language and more than sixteen years of experience in teaching English to students in elementary and secondary schools in Ethiopia. Fazi indicated that it was not her dream to be a teacher as a child; she had rather imagined being a successful businesswoman. However, because of her father’s influence, who was a teacher himself, and the influence of her secondary school’s esteemed English teachers, her childhood dream was unmet and she ended up being a teacher. She says, “I my father was so influential. Of course, my main interest was to be a businesswoman. . . I expected to be successful in the business world; but because of the influence he has on me, my family, my teachers, especially my English teachers I respect most, [. . .] I joined the profession.”

As to her work context, Fazi began her description by comparing the present school context with that of her first assigned rural schools. In her comparison, she tended to be focused on the aspects that she perceived as problems and constraints that constitute the difficulties and challenges in her teaching context. In so doing, she considered the things she perceived as problems in the schools where she was first assigned as less serious than the problems in the school where she presently works. While describing her current school, the perceived problems articulated included low English language proficiency levels, students’ poor language background, lack of interest in learning, student disruptiveness, overcrowded classes, shortage of resources, uncomfortable school administration, unsuitable curriculum, uncooperative colleagues, lack of short-term training opportunities, lack of social respect for the profession, and lack of attention or recognition for teachers. As she noted, Of

course, the problem is now more serious than ever before. Now, students' interest in education is nil. It is a time of no motivation, no interest. . . disobedience, not doing their homework, not arriving on time, wanting to go out, whispering. . .standing at the door recurrently. . . Sometimes. . .there are learners who cannot spell their names correctly. A crowded classroom is the major challenge I want to talk about. In this case, class assignments are difficult. . .their low motivation for education is putting pressure on our work. This problem worsens with language classes. There are problems with not bringing textbooks.

No plasma distribution: it is just standing in front of students, not functioning. It is the question that all students ask. Another inconvenience is the "peda center." I can't say it is so organized because I think a student can understand more if the peda center works along with academics.

Regarding colleagues, that time, even we really had a better love for one another. There were experienced teachers who were happy to share and work with beginning teachers. But, there are many problems right now. What I mean is that there is primarily a lack of cooperation. Their desire to share their skills or experience is greatly low. It was better for us to have something to share each other. The desire to be supportive and to be able to work together is no longer available. They all run individually. This is something we see not only in teachers but also in management. Management holds specific teams; it is only those to be involved in training and other benefiting activities.

Although teaching was not her childhood dream, by now, it is the most respected profession for Fazi, which makes key contributions to the family and the country by producing new and important generations. For her, teaching gives light to individuals; makes individuals knowledgeable; paves the way for life; opens closed doors; and makes individuals live not only for themselves but also for others. Specifically, teaching as a job has enabled her to accomplish meaningful tasks, be honest with herself, and have peaceful sleep. She also found teaching an important job for her as it gives her free time for family and personal satisfaction, which often comes from seeing her successful students and helping students as well as significant others. These values mostly made her decide to remain being a teacher not only in the past but also until her retirement comes, despite the difficulties and challenges she has faced in her career. She noted, *"Not only in the past but in the future I have decided to stay in this profession. (Laughter). First of all, I love the profession. Teaching has meaning. . . light for others, . . . paves the way, opens the closed road, lives for others, [. . .] produces new generations, benefits the country and family. . . . I am free. . . I can work properly, rest, and sleep peacefully."*

5.1.2. Tare. Tare was a secondary school EFL teacher in his mid-40s on the day we met for the interview in August 2020. Tare has a bachelor's degree in English language and more than eleven years of experience in teaching English to students in both elementary and secondary schools in Ethiopia. Regarding his schooling experience, he was doing well in his learning until he completed his elementary school

(8th grade). However, he expressed himself as a weak student in his secondary schooling because of peer influence; as a result, he could not score a grade point, allowing him to join a university. When Tare could not join a university, he spent some years doing a small business in trading with a small amount of money that his mother gave him. Unfortunately, a few years later, his small business encountered a failure and he became jobless. As a way out, he joined the Teachers Training Institution (TTI) at the certificate level by taking a private school leaving certificate examination. Thus, it was because of unemployment that Tare chose to become a teacher. As he noted, *"What made me come to be a teacher is unemployment."* After holding his TTI certificate, he was assigned as a teacher of Gedeofa language (one of the Ethiopian languages) in elementary school in 1996. Tare shifted from being a Gedeofa teacher and became a 9th grade EFL teacher since 2011, which was a year after graduating with his bachelor's degree in English language and literature.

As to his work context, at the time when he made the shift from teaching Gedeofa to teaching English, he had encountered difficulties in teaching English in a secondary school. Three factors—his poor academic performance in his secondary schooling and his university training, which resulted in a lack of subject matter knowledge, and the influence of his long years of Gedeofa language teaching experience—were attributed to this. Tare believes that his direct shift without any short-term training on how to teach English made him experience a sense of fear. Consequently, it was a time of stress and struggle for him to survive and go along with the students by being carefully prepared before class. He articulates, *"As I told you, I attended school well when I was in elementary school. The second was that I had been in Gedeofa for many years, so those things made me enter the class by being so prepared and careful about the things I would teach in the class . . . I was not much good at communication at the time; there was no experience. It was a direct shift to this. That had an influence. Due to that, there was the practice of getting into fear, the struggle to get into the better thing."*

In addition, Tare describes the circumstances he has experienced since he became a secondary school teacher. Like Fazi, Tare also tended to be focused on the issues that he conceived as uncomfortable and challenging conditions. The circumstances that he perceived as central challenges to his teaching job included unqualified school leaders, training opportunities denied, students poor educational background, student disruptiveness, students' disrespect for teachers, crowded classrooms, resource constraints, excluded teachers, inappropriate curriculum, teachers' insufficient income and poor living conditions, and society's low regard to the profession and teachers. He noted, *"now, the problems I raise are in the area of school administration; what I say is that school management is not focused on educational work. It focuses on political issues, structural issues, and so on. [. . .]. It is said that teachers compete; but the priority is for the natives. [. . .]. [In a crowded classroom], it is hard to check whether they are doing their class activities. . . ; when you want to keep an eye on a student, you will not be able to check another. Sometimes, you may not be*

able to reach all groups because there are so many students. . .not everyone gets a book . . .it is even difficult for me to monitor student behaviour. . . Students who come to secondary schools are usually weak. . .when you check their level, you will not find them at the level expected in the textbook. [. . .]. They cannot express themselves; they cannot introduce themselves.”

Although Tare didn't intend to be a teacher during his schooling days, now he considers teaching as a profession he loves the utmost. Teaching is a profession that matters to him more than any other profession now. He expressed his motives when he said, *“Yes, I told you before; I didn't intend to be a teacher. However, it is a profession that I love and enjoy to the utmost while I live it. Teaching is my lifestyle. Teaching is my schooling; it is my way of improvement; I entered without having much. However, when I live it, I am constantly changing and improving myself. It is a profession I love to the utmost.”*

5.2. Emerged Themes. A teacher's identity is “partly given and partly achieved” through participation in a classroom, which is a social space by its very nature. A classroom as a social space, as indicated by Coldron and Smith [33], includes the context and all possibilities for relationships a teacher can have with others. These relationships are to some extent determined by existing social structures (micro-, meso-, and macrolevels) and the history of the school's culture. Thus, a teacher's professional identity formation depends, to a great extent, on all the possibilities available both inside and outside the classroom. In this sense, Sung [35] also argues for the importance of considering the inside and outside of the classroom circumstances to attain a holistic understanding of individuals' identity constructions.

The results from the interview data are presented in themes, which are seen as clusters of shared experiences and beliefs of the participants. As van Manen [33] states, “phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience” (p. 79). These structures can be seen as simplifications and a type of abstract aspect to the mass of data. Themes help me gather and reveal information that may be too difficult for the reader to do so otherwise. The presented emerging themes in this article have connections to the research question “What perceived personal and contextual conditions significantly affect experienced EFL teachers' professional identity formation?” stated in the introduction section. These themes include challenges and emotions. These themes were derived from the researcher's interpretative and the in vivo codes [33]. Presented first is the theme “challenges,” and this is followed by a presentation of the theme “teacher emotions.”

5.2.1. Theme 1 Challenges. As to their work context, the participants were given opportunities to talk over the issues they perceived around their work. The participants then tended to focus on a range of problems in the sense of posing challenges to their job and enacting their professional identity. Various challenges as their crucial concerns were revealed through all of their descriptions. The theme

“challenges” was denoted by these concerns and the things perceived as problems. The participants' descriptions signified a complex set of influences constituting challenges to their teaching practices. These interpretive codes include language proficiency, school administration, student behavior, teacher resources, and social status (Table 1).

5.2.2. English Language Proficiency. One pattern revealed in the participants' lived experience was the low level of English language proficiency in EFL teachers. This is implied not only in the EFL teachers but also in their students when Fazi articulates, “not only the students but also the teachers do not have the courage to speak the language as much as possible. The inability to speak boldly without fear is seen in our frequent use of Amharic. . . We use Amharic for at least 2 minutes every 40 minutes. . . because we think that [students] will not understand us either.”

Regarding his English language proficiency, Tare also explicitly expressed that he had faced difficulty in teaching English, especially when he shifted from being a Gedeofa teacher to being an English teacher. He attributed this to two factors: (1) his poor academic performance in his secondary school learning and in his college training as a student teacher, which resulted in a lack of subject matter knowledge; and (2) the influence of his long years of being a Gedeofa language teacher. The interpretive codes that revealed “Teacher English language proficiency” include low level of English language proficiency, teacher-centered methods, and overuse of L1.

5.2.3. School Administration. The participants perceived their own school administration as a discouraging environment and an ineffective one in accomplishing the responsibilities expected of it. Both participants reflected unfavorably upon their own school administration practices. They described them as those whose approach to leadership is mostly centered more on control than on cooperativeness. Moreover, they have deep concerns and stress over the school administration's actions, which have the potential to divide the staff in a way that negatively affects teachers' skills and teaching morals. Fazi denotes this when she says, *“Management holds specific teams; it's only those to be involved in training and other beneficial activities.”* Tare expressed this in terms of the political intervention in the assignment of school leaders, which is often accomplished based on nepotism and political affiliations rather than qualification and competence. Tare considers this a threat that has a significant negative effect on many aspects of the school, including classroom instruction. This is denoted when he states, *“Perhaps in my view, the heart of the school is the school administration. It is the school administration that either beautifies or destroys the school. To your surprise, its effect is very high even in the classroom. [. . .]. Nepotism and unfair bureaucracy must be halted.”*

Tare also showed his deep concern about the assignment of unqualified individuals as school leaders. He noted, *“When they come, they come because they are appointed, not because of their educational background. It is said that*

TABLE 1: Perceived challenges to the development of professional identity.

Main theme	Subordinate themes	Initial codes	Sample excerpt (s)
Challenges	English language proficiency	Low level of English proficiency	Not only the students but also the teachers do not have the courage to speak the language as much as possible. The inability to speak boldly without fear is seen in our frequent use of Amharic. (Fazi)
		Teacher-centered methods Overuse of L1 Favoritism	
	School administration	Unsupportiveness Lack of recognition Unprofessionalism	Management holds specific teams. Eh... it's only those people to be involved in trainings and other benefiting activities. (Fazi) ...school management is not focused on educational work. It focuses on political issues... (Tare)
		Lack of ownership sense Disruptive behaviors	
	Student behavior	Poor language skills Lack of motivation for learning	Even there are students who cannot spell their own names correctly. Students who come to secondary schools are usually weak. (Tare)
		Large class size	
	Teacher resources	Lack of language labs Inadequate teaching materials	The current number of students is difficult to create that. How can a teacher in a 40-minute class manage 80 and 90 students' performance... besides, not enough textbooks? (Fazi)
		Teachers' insufficient income	
Social status	Declining respect for teachers	The society's place to the teacher depends on the teacher's living conditions. At present, the society does not pay much attention to the teacher. The society respects those who have fortune. (Tare)	
	Declining social respect for teaching		

teachers compete; but the priority is for the natives." He also suggested the need to correct this situation by assigning professional leaders if we want to improve school performance in ways that would bring about a generation long benefit. "A situation in which professional administrators could be assigned as directors must be created."

A lack of a sense of school ownership is also evident when both participants discuss how little attention their respective school administrations pay to fulfilling their responsibilities. This is manifest when Fazi articulates, "There is little done to help students, but just to report what you have on paper. This is something we see [...] in management." Tare describes this in terms of the political attention given by school leaders. He says, "... school management is not focused on educational work. It focuses on political and structural issues. When Fazi was given the opportunity to talk about her school management, she also tended to focus on a lack of support from the school administration, and this is expressed in 'The desire to share a profession, to be supportive, to be tolerant, to be able to work together is no longer available'. They all run individually." Tare describes this in terms of not bothering about accessing the teaching materials needed. He expressed, "... they often do not pay attention to the accessing of the material resources needed for the teaching learning processes." The participants also viewed the culture of the school, relationships with colleagues, the situation of working together, and the attitude of the administrators as discouraging. According to these participants, teachers, perceived as those who do not belong either to the local ethnic group or to the governing political party, do not receive much recognition both as *teachers and for their good work*. Overall, the interpretive codes that revealed

"School administration" included favouritism, unsupportiveness, lack of recognition, unprofessionalism, and lack of ownership sense.

5.2.4. Student Behavior. In this study, student behavior was conceived as a set of inappropriate behaviors permeating their classroom teaching and then reflected as constituting challenges. The types of student misbehavior emphasized by Fazi included "talking without permission; arriving late for class; using a mobile phone during class; disturbing other students; showing no interest in learning; not participating in learning activities; and not showing respect to the teacher." These are the issues mentioned throughout the interview conversations by both participants. Tare also explicitly expressed the disruptive behaviors created by his students as serious problems that could pose challenges to his job.

Regarding the reasons behind students' misbehavior, Fazi tended to link them to the inappropriate curriculum. She says, "Probably the curriculum is responsible for students' weaknesses in their academic background, in my opinion. The curriculum itself has a problem." This quote also signifies that student misbehaviors have something to do with students' academic weaknesses. This may imply that if students had strong academic backgrounds, they would not have displayed such behavior. However, there were differences between the perceptions of Fazi and Tare, particularly in the reasons behind student misbehavior. According to Tare, student misbehavior is linked to a lack of a teacher's love and practices of ill-treatment. In this sense, he noted, "In fact, if you approach them affectionately and advise them, they will stop disturbing you in the classroom." Overall, interpretive

codes that revealed “student behaviour” included disruptive behavior, students’ poor language skills, and a lack of motivation for learning.

5.2.5. Teacher Resources. Here, these represent the perceived resource constraints that constitute challenges to their teaching task. Participants in this study perceived these as difficulties that challenged their effectiveness in their jobs. Both participants expressed their complaints about the difficulties created by the crowded classrooms and a shortage of textbooks. The crowded classroom doesn’t allow time to help and control every student during classroom teaching. Concerning this, the participants drew attention to the fact that language learning highly requires interaction in the classroom. Yet, with the existing large class size, they express the greatest difficulty in implementing their lesson plans. They also highlighted a shortage of textbooks and other teaching materials as constraining environments. Actually, both participants have a converging perception on this issue. Overall, the interpretive codes that revealed “teacher resources” include overcrowded classrooms, a lack of language laboratories, and inadequate textbooks.

5.2.6. Social Status. Participants in this study showed their strong concern about the lower status teaching as a job has in society. Teaching, which was once highly respected, is now perceived as a profession for people who have failed to achieve success elsewhere. The participants feel that such eroded social status has a negative effect on their attitude towards their career. They feel that this deteriorating status contributes to the belittling of teachers and thwarts teaching from being recognized as a profession. Tare denotes this when he says, “*You can see society giving great respect to those ordinary people who have money.*” Regarding students’ respect for teachers, Tare divides students into two categories: those who are respectful of their teachers and those who are not. He says, “*The situation found among students varies from student to student. . . there is a student who gives you respect and who does not.*” Fazi also implied the lower status of teaching in the eyes of all stakeholders when she says, “. . . you can see times when parents push their children to other professions rather than to teaching. . . These factors have a negative impact on the teacher’s personality, economy; health . . . the respect given to the teacher is very low. . . from all three stakeholders.” Overall, interpretive codes that revealed “social status” included teachers’ insufficient income, declining respect for teachers, and declining social respect for teaching.

5.3. Theme 2: Teacher Emotions. Emotions are linked to the objective of this study as they constitute personal factors such as the participants’ intentions, attitudes, expectations, values, or personalities shaping their personal agency towards teacher identity formation. Participants in this study denoted how personal and contextual factors impact their emotions during teaching. For example, how participants felt about relationships between school administration and

students is a factor that defines teaching as an emotional practice [36]. Thus, the challenges discussed as “Theme 1” do not just affect their subject matter knowledge and teaching capacity. They also affect a whole web of significant and meaningful relationships that make up their work. Yet, the emotions that the participants in this study revealed are not just matters triggered by their social relations, discussed as “Theme 1,” but they are also matters of their psychological derives, attitudes, personalities, and systems of values held about their teaching practices and school situations. Since it is impossible to analyze every account of emotion in the space available here, I have chosen to focus briefly on the five emotional feelings that emerged as the most dominant ones in the participants’ narratives, serving as descriptions to unveil the theme “teacher emotions.” Thus, the interpretive codes that revealed “teacher emotions” include sense of pride, self-blame, anger, fear, and sadness (Table 2).

5.3.1. Sense of Pride. A sense of pride was revealed by the participants when they talked about their individual goals and values they have as a teacher. These participants talk about the teaching profession as being the origin of all professions, despite its low social status. For example, Tare denoted this when he expressed, “*I told you before; I didn’t intend to be a teacher. . . In the past, I was really unhappy about it, but now I consider it the king of all other jobs.*” They feel that teaching is the father of all professions, with the central goal of producing all types of professionals and responsible citizens. This provides them with personal fulfillments that are related to self-esteem, morals, and life goals, which are indeed greater than the satisfactions that other professions might provide them with. Conversely, what the participants revealed were not only experiences of pride and fulfillment, but they also revealed experiences of self-blame, shame, anger, anxiety, boredom, sadness, and guilt when they try to enhance their self-esteem and issues of morality. The in vivo codes that revealed “sense of pride” include king of all other jobs; feeling of greatness; and our glory.

5.3.2. Self-Blame. Fazi revealed feelings of guilt and self-blame when she talked about teachers’ low level of English language proficiency in relation to students’ ability to attend their classroom learning in the target language. She tells that her students cannot understand classroom instruction if done using the TL (English here); hence, students ask their teachers to teach them in L1 (Amharic or Gedeofa in this case). Fazi also revealed blame shift in justifying her overuse of L1 in the classroom. Limited language proficiency, teacher ill-treatment, inadequate preparation, and pedagogical skills are the interpretive codes -revealed the feeling of “self-blame.”

5.3.3. Anger. Anger was found to be triggered when the participants talked mainly about the school administration and students’ disruptive behavior, along with a lack of responsibility for their own learning. When both participants

TABLE 2: Social spaces and personal values engendering teacher emotional experiences.

Main theme	Subordinate themes	Initial codes	Sample excerpt (s)
Teacher emotions	Sense of pride	King of all other jobs	I told you before; I didn't intend to be a teacher. But it is a profession that I love and enjoy most while I live it. Teaching is my living style. (Tare). In the past, I was really unhappy about it; but now I consider it the king of all other jobs. (Tare)
		Feeling of greatness	
		Our glory	
	Self-blame	Limited language proficiency	... If you approach affectionately and discuss with them, they will stop disturbing in the classroom. They will be interested in learning. The other factor is your lesson delivery itself. Students will be more likely to attend if the teacher is well prepared is able to deliver well. (Tare)
		Teacher ill-treatment	
		Poor pedagogical skills	
	Anger	Unfair priority	It is said that teachers compete; but the priority is for the natives (ethnic group). (Tare)
		Discrimination Nepotism	
	Fear	Feelings of personal inadequacy in speaking skills	The inability to speak boldly without fear is seen in our frequent use of Amharic in the classroom. (Fazi) ... second, for myself, it is a security for me. (Fazi)
		Feeling unsafe	
Sensitivity towards carefulness			
Sadness	Powerlessness	If you go down and see it closely, you notice something unappealing. You can see the society giving great respect for those ordinary people who have money. (Tare)	
	Low pay conditions Feeling insignificance		

talk about their school administration, they are oftentimes less comfortable with the relationships they have with. Tare denotes this when talking about the ethnic and ideological-based assignments of school principals. He signified this when he articulates, *"It is said that teachers compete; but the priority is for the 'natives' [ethnic group]; after that, they are also classified according to whether or not the party believes in him/her."* The participants also denote anger when they talk specifically about students' tardiness and door knocks by those students. Both the interpretive and the in vivo codes revealed the feeling of "anger," and these include unfair priority (or discrimination) and nepotism, respectively.

5.3.4. Fear. Fear was implied when the participants talked about a lack of confidence in their own English language speaking skills. It was found out when both participants particularly talked about their inability to perform the teaching of writing activities included in the students' textbooks. Both showed that they often don't give much attention to the writing activities of the textbook. Fear was also indicated when participants described their perceptions of harm, which might be presented by their students due to the ethnic-based political atmosphere. Fazi revealed such a kind of feeling when she articulates, *"Because as I told you, sometimes there are those...who are tempted to strike..."*

On the other hand, fear was, however, found to enhance teachers' development of good virtues like caring behaviors, advising, and tolerance to challenging and uncomfortable environments. Both participants in this study talked about the importance of developing respectful behavior towards students and displaying tolerance, especially in contexts of increased ethnic-based political school climates to avoid a worsening of students' disruptive behaviors. Such fear is evident when Fazi talks about the use of politeness in managing student behavior. She says, *"To avoid these, the*

teacher must be polite. Only polite words should be used. I also do my teaching very politely." However, Fazi's statement does not imply positive emotions here, and without positive emotions, she may not be passionate about, motivated to, and interested in facilitating students' engagement in their learning and moral growth. In this case, it is possible to think that the participant teachers are displaying fake positive characters in front of students just because they want to establish and maintain a positive classroom climate. The participant teachers appear to employ inauthentic emotion regulation strategies as their emotional expressions in their narratives no longer seem to match their true emotional experiences (their real feelings). Fazi's expression, for instance, shows such a discrepancy between her real feelings arising out of students' disruptive behaviors and her expressions when she talked, *"Only polite words should be used. [...]. What if today's student is approached in an aggressive way?"* Fazi preferred to approach her students politely although she feels that the behaviors of these students trigger negative emotions in her. It is the fear of student violent behaviors, which forces her to swallow maybe her anger here as an authentic teacher and then display fake politeness, which is a surface acted coping strategy. The other virtue emerging from fear is exercising tolerance to challenging and uncomfortable environments. Advising was seen as an especially valuable relation established to maintaining tolerance. Here again, Fazi displays tolerance through her fear when she articulated, *"There are at least half a day students; these are students who drive a motorbike in the morning, and come to school in the afternoon. These students are often tardy; then they arrive late and knock. ... What if you say no? He is about to misbehave and leave. I rather slowly ask: Where were you? Why? You won't be said that you don't have to work; you have to work; you have to change yourself. But let yourself give equal value for your education too... Second, there are students who drink, smoke, and use hashish. My*

response to these is also advice.” In this case, again, Fazi’s expressions of her emotional experiences do not seem to match her actual emotional feelings. However, as an authentic teacher, she is expected to feel angry, demoralized, depressed, frustrated, and dissatisfied in such situations as she described in the excerpt above. Thus, frustration, demotivation, and lack of interest for the job were also the aspects of fear that manifests itself in the participants’ lived experiences, especially when they talked about the student misbehaviors and the context of their low salary. Overall, the interpretive codes that revealed the subordinate theme “fear” included feelings of personal inadequacy in speaking skills, feeling unsafe, and sensitivity towards carefulness.

5.3.5. Sadness. Sadness was revealed in this study when the participants expressed their insufficient income and poor living conditions. Although Tare loves teaching as a profession, he was explicit in expressing his will to quit the job if he finds a more financially lucrative profession. However, he still prefers to create parallel jobs to help him and his family meet their basic needs when he says, *“I am married to a housewife and at present, the salary being paid is not enough. I want to create a job for her. My salary is not enough to educate my children and even to make a lower class living.”* Fazi also feels sad for the lack of attention towards teachers when she says, *“It produces generations that are important. [But] from the point of view of attention: It is very small.”* They also denoted sadness when the participants perceive that teachers are no longer respected and given due attention by all stakeholders. The interpretive codes that signified the feeling of “sadness” included powerlessness, low pay conditions, and feeling insignificance.

6. Discussion

Listening to the interviews and leaning into the language, I found out what the interview transcripts say about the world in which the participants are living as teachers and how this is being lived. This has led to the realization of the participants’ professional identities manifested in the form of two pertinent themes, namely, “challenges” and “teacher emotions.” These were particularly revealed by their corresponding subordinate themes through the interpretive codes. Language proficiency, school administration, student behavior, teacher resources, social status, sense of pride, anger, fear, and sadness are the subordinate themes that reveal the two main themes. These themes were found to align with the research question [37] stated in the introduction section. Thus, what follows are discussions of each main theme as revealed by its corresponding subordinate themes.

6.1. Teacher Language Proficiency. Although language proficiency is a person and context-specific issue with multiple dimensions, the definition provided by Richards [38] fits the aim of the current study. Richards [39] defines EFL teachers’ language proficiency as the abilities “that a language teacher needs to teach effectively. These include the ability to provide

good language models, to maintain fluent use of the target language in the classroom, to give correct feedback on the learner language, and to provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty” (p.103). In L2 learning, it is likely that learners tend to be dependent on their teachers as their model in the process of learning and acquiring the target language. Therefore, EFL teachers’ language proficiencies are very crucial for teachers to possess to bring out the contributions to the teaching skills that language proficiency makes. In this study, however, the findings revealed that low English language proficiency levels were held not only in their students but also in EFL teachers. Apart from the contribution to the teaching skills that language proficiency makes, research shows that the level of language proficiency also affects a teacher’s confidence. A teacher who perceives him/herself to be weak in the target language will have a reduced confidence in his/her teaching ability and an inadequate sense of professional legitimacy [40]. In this study, the teachers’ lack of confidence in using English was revealed by Fazi’s statement, *“The inability to speak boldly without fear is seen in our frequent use of Amharic.”* This confirms with a study by Harris [41], which concluded that Ethiopian English language teachers had serious proficiency problems while teaching English.

6.2. School Administration. The school administration as a direct work environment is the space where teachers are expected to experience appreciation or maybe retraction for their job [42]. Cogaltay et al. [43] argue that teachers’ interactions with the school administration are an important part of the work done at school, and this contributes to teachers’ experiences in a positive or negative way. An OECD [44] commissioned paper also found that teachers who work together with their school leaders in a meaningful and purposeful way have been found to be more likely to remain in the profession because they feel valued and supported in their work. In this study, nevertheless, the school administration, as a significant environment, was experienced as having a limiting impact on the teachers’ identity. The participants recalled several instances where they felt threatened and discouraged by their school administration. The finding further revealed that there is political interference in the selection of school principals and school management decisions. This finding confirms with a very recent study by Elias [45] in Ethiopia.

6.3. Student Behavior. Student behavior is an issue viewed as the influence teachers experience in a classroom environment [46] that can broadly be identified as appropriate or inappropriate to learning. To foster a favorable learning environment, students and teachers must maintain the appropriate one, for example, in terms of having healthy interaction. Student behavior perceived by the participants in this study was expressed as inappropriate, which explains why these teachers do not feel comfortable in their work. This finding is almost consistent with the previous findings of Amogem [47] and Kelemu and Sabancı [48].

6.4. Teacher Resources. Teacher resources here refer to learning materials, which are required for effective teaching [49]. They are tools for engagement in the teaching and learning process [50], and can include traditional teaching and learning materials, such as “textbooks, supplementary reading materials, teacher guides” [49] (p.201) and new technology-mediated resources [51]. A clean, orderly, equipped classroom also sets the tone for a welcoming teaching environment conducive to learning [52]. However, the findings of this study revealed that a lack of resources has plagued the participants’ classrooms and challenged their teaching jobs. These included the crowded classroom, a shortage of teaching materials (textbooks), and a lack of laboratories. This finding is consistent with the previous findings of a large-scale study by Sedel [53], which found a lack of resources, which typically plagues African classrooms. Additionally, it confirms with Tura’s [16] observation of the constraints related to the various resources, which included overcrowded classes and poor provision of resources.

6.5. Social Status. Research studies have established that teachers are motivated by the satisfaction they derive from higher order positions, such as social respect and esteem [54]. For example, Coolahan [55] reports that teaching in Ireland generally enjoys high social status and entrance to all categories of teaching is marked by keen competition. The findings of this study, however, showed that teaching and thereby teachers have a low status in society, and this is linked to teachers’ insufficient income, declining students’ respect for teachers, and low social respect for teaching as a profession, despite the current educational policy rhetoric, which reflects its commitment to offering opportunities to uplift the profession. However, although the status of the profession has suffered and teachers’ work lives have been negatively impacted, both participants showed their love for teaching as a profession and felt proud of their being and doing of a teacher.

6.6. Emotional Experiences. Teaching is generally regarded as a calling and teachers tend to feel a sense of moral purpose connected to their work. This is often manifested in teachers’ values, emotions, and sense of self. Sense of purpose, passion, and self-esteem seem to be the strongest when teachers are able to act in accordance with their values, have a sense of agency within the environment, and are intrinsically motivated, although the presence of demanding external pressures often results in the opposite outcome [36]. As such, teachers experience different emotions during their work [56], which are triggered by multiple factors and their interplay [57]. In this study, the results revealed that emotional experiences were found to be constituents of their teacher identity, and the participants experienced both positive and negative emotions: pride, self-blame, anger, fear, and sadness. These could lead them to feel a mix of satisfaction and frustration when doing their teaching. This is almost similar to the findings by Tura [16], which found that experienced EFL teachers revealed complex emotional responses, both in positive and in negative terms, to challenges and opportunities embedded in their working conditions.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that being and doing authentic teaching was found to be a challenging task because of the various personal and contextual dynamics thwarting their identity as a teacher. The participants faced many challenges in maintaining themselves as teachers in their career. Specifically, their teaching conditions were characterized by English language incompetency, ineffective school administration, student misbehaviors, and students’ negative attitude towards the subject matter, thereby leading to learning difficulties, insufficient teaching resources, and low social status of teaching as a profession, along with low student respect for teachers.

Consequently, the participants seemed more dissatisfied with their being and doing of a teacher. As the participants perceive, student misbehaviors, discouraging school administration, and resources constraints are the prevailing environments that constitute major challenges for them during lesson planning, classroom teaching, and navigating individual student performances. As this study also revealed, teaching was found to be both a technically and emotionally challenging task, especially when they as teachers have low language proficiency levels and felt constrained with teaching resources and students’ poor language background. It was thus found that the participating teachers’ professional identity is a multidimensional and dynamic reality shaped by personal agency and daunting contextual conditions that were represented through two pertinent themes: challenges and teacher emotions. Challenges and emotions that the participating teachers have experienced are found to be the constituents that come into play in the process of coconstruction and negotiation of a professional identity by the two EFL teachers involved in this study.

Although teachers’ emotions seem to be highly linked to their intellectual competence, they appear to act as mediators in the formation of their professional identities. The insecurity issues polluting the work environment were mainly found to be the central factor, which forces the participant teachers to employ inauthentic emotion regulations as a coping strategy to their negative emotional experiences. However, despite those undesirable and daunting conditions prevail in their work contexts, both the participants still revealed their love for their teaching job as a profession and hold a feeling of greatness and pride for their being and doing of a teacher.

Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are included within the article.

Additional Points

Limitations of the Study. In this study, one limitation is that as the research was based on two cases only, it could not be easy to make generalizations. Thus, future research could compare and contrast the findings through involving more

cases in order to see the impact of individual differences in constructing teacher professional identities in the contexts of secondary schools. The other limitation may be related to the researcher's background and experiences in life and educational settings. This by itself might have an impact on the decisions I made while reading and interpreting the interview generated data despite the effort made to maintain its rigor and worthiness through performing a hermeneutic circle. Thus, as I already mentioned it in the data analysis section, the findings revealed in this study could not exhaust all possibilities of other complementary findings, or even potentially richer or deeper patterns of these phenomenological narrative texts [33].

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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