Evolving Selves: A Narrative Inquiry Into The Role of Reflective Journaling in Shaping Experienced EFL Teachers' Professional Identity

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving nature of professional identity among experienced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, with a specific focus on the role of reflective journaling. While much of the existing literature has emphasized the identity development of pre-service or novice teachers, this research highlights how identity continues to transform throughout a teacher's career. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the study involved six experienced EFL teachers who responded to open-ended reflective questions. Data were analyzed thematically, drawing from both participant narratives and NVivo-style coding, to identify patterns in reflective practice and professional self-understanding. The findings reveal that reflective journaling, whether formal, informal, or mental, serves as a powerful mediational tool for self-awareness, pedagogical growth, and emotional resilience. Participants reported that reflection helped them navigate institutional pressures, revise teaching philosophies, and reaffirm their commitment to student-centered learning. Themes such as motivation, personal values, emotional tension, and adaptability emerged as central to their reflective narratives. Additionally, teachers offered peer-oriented advice, further reinforcing reflection as a shared and generative practice within the EFL community. This study contributes to the discourse on lifelong teacher development by emphasizing the transformative and sustaining role of reflective practice in shaping teacher identity beyond the early stages of teaching.

Keywords: Reflective Practice; Teacher Identity, Narrative Inquiry; EFL Teachers Professional Development

INTRODUCTION

In the era of sophistication, teachers' identity is not merely as someone who transfers all he or she know to their students. Teaching identity has been investigated in various ways (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). It means they can have different kinds of identities based on the needs of their teaching activity. Gradually, teachers' identity changes due to the influence of a series of aspects both internally, such as emotion (Rodgers & Scott, 2008; van Veen & Sleegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2003), and externally, such as job and life experiences in certain context (Flores & Day, 2006; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Sachs, 2005). More attention has been given to pre-service and novice teachers' identity formation, as in Beauchamp & Thomas (2009). How experienced teachers shape and reshape their professional selves over time is less likely to be discussed. Experienced teachers do not practice their teaching activity in the same way as they first teach their students; instead, they evolve, responding to institutional reforms, changing learners' needs, and also beliefs and values shifts internally (Brookfield, 2017). Consequently, how experienced teachers shaping their personal identities remains crucial.

Experience is not enough for effective teaching, for we do not learn much from experience alone as much as we learn from reflecting on that experience (Farrell, 2018). Teachers who do not bother to reflect on their work become slaves to routine, and their actions are mostly guided by compulsion, tradition, and/or authority rather than by informed decision making (Farrell, 2018). Decision making ought to be based on efficient and conscious reflections, since when it is combined with these reflections can lead to awareness, development, and growth (Dewey, 1933 in Farrell, 2018). When teachers reflect on their teaching, they take time to think thoroughly about what they have done and what they have not done in class, and what they learn from their professional experiences (Farrell, 2018). Teachers have to be open-minded, responsible, and wholehearted to be a reflective individual (Dewey, 1933, in Farrell, 2018). Among various forms of reflective practice, experienced teachers can use their repertoire of teaching routines to experiment in order to solve the dilemma (Farrell, 2018). To sum up, teachers have actions to help their students learn. By doing critical reflection the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of their teaching assumption they will have more information on their actions as teachers (Brookfield, 2017).

While prior research has established the role of reflection in teacher development (Farrell, 2018; Moon, 2007), this study contributes a novel perspective by focusing specifically on experienced EFL teachers and their use of reflective journaling over time. Unlike previous studies that center on novice or pre-service teachers (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), this research investigates how identity continues to evolve during the later stages of a teaching career. Moreover, it highlights both formal and informal forms of reflection such as mental journaling and peer discussions that are often overlooked in structured reflection literature. The study also bridges reflective practice with sociocultural identity theory (Brookfield, 2017; Grootenboer, 2008; Sfard & Prusak, 2015), offering insights into how personal reflection interacts with institutional, emotional, and contextual influences. This makes a significant contribution to the field by emphasizing the dynamic, negotiated, and lifelong nature of teacher identity.

Although reflective journaling has been widely recognized as a valuable tool for professional development in teacher education, previous research has primarily focused on pre-service teachers or has examined reflection in general terms, without a specific emphasis on how experienced EFL teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities through narrative reflection. Few studies have explored the ways in which experienced teachers use reflective journaling not only to recount classroom experiences, but also to make sense of their evolving professional selves. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how experienced EFL teachers engage in reflective journaling to construct, affirm, and transform their professional identities. It examines the personal and professional narratives that emerge through reflective writing, how teachers interpret their past and present experiences, and how these reflections influence their professional beliefs and practices.

Understanding these reflective processes is important because identity plays a central role in shaping how teachers teach, learn, and grow. By situating this inquiry within narrative and sociocultural frameworks of identity, the study offers deeper insights into in-service teacher development and provides implications for designing more sustainable, identity-sensitive professional development programs tailored to experienced educators. Guided by this focus, the study addresses the following questions: 1) How do experienced EFL teachers use reflective journaling to express and construct their professional identities? 2) What themes or tensions arise in their reflective narratives? 3) How does the act of journaling contribute to identity affirmation, transformation, or negotiation?.

Traditionally, identity has been viewed as an abstract concept tied to one's character and inherent nature. However, today it is also understood as deeply rooted in personal attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews (Marschall, 2022). Within education, teacher identity is increasingly

recognized as multifaceted, varying according to the demands and contexts of teaching (Rawlings Smith & Rushton, 2023). Rather than being static, professional identity is now framed as a dynamic and evolving process (Shi et al., 2025). Teacher identity is increasingly conceptualized as multiple, dialogical, and shaped by different roles, relationships, and social contexts (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

Moreover, Identity is shaped through collective discourse. It emerges in the tension between individual narratives and community-level conversations, reflecting both personal meaning-making and participation in shared social contexts (Sfard & Prusak, 2015). Sachs' (2005) conception of teacher professional identity "how to be," "how to act," and "how to understand" one's role is especially relevant in capturing the situated and negotiated nature of identity construction in teaching careers (Uras & Atay, 2025)

Reflective teaching in EFL is generally understood in two dimensions: one focused on classroom practice, and another that takes into account broader institutional and sociocultural elements (Habtamu & Belay, 2023). Reflection happens when teachers revisit classroom events and explore the interplay of actions, emotions, and outcomes (Marschall, 2022). Critical reflection, where teachers interrogate their roles within power structures, cultural norms, and educational systems, encourages them to see themselves as active agents of change (Lubis, 2018). Reflecting on these broader forces pushes teachers to re-examine their practice and purpose (Nurfaidah, 2018).

Following Farrell's (2020) adaptation of Schön's model, reflective teaching is characterized by three interlinked processes: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. Reflection-in-action occurs during the teaching moment, when teachers adjust their methods in response to real-time classroom dilemmas, such as noticing student confusion and tailoring explanations on the spot (Russell, 2022). Reflection-on-action happens after class; teachers analyze their choices, questioning what worked and why (Myllykoski-Laine et al., 2022). Reflection-for-action, meanwhile, involves deliberate planning informed by past and present reflections to guide future instruction (Kayapinar, 2018). Reflective practitioners integrate all three processes, developing a deeper understanding of their beliefs and experimenting with new approaches to foster more intentional and adaptive teaching (Russell, 2022).

Reflective journaling stands out as a powerful practice that intertwines professional development with personal insight (Moon, 2007). Writing helps educators surface hidden assumptions, emotions, and attitudes, closely linking self-awareness with pedagogical growth (Chen, 2022). Brookfield (2017) recent reinterpretation of critical reflection suggests journaling enables teachers to examine classroom power dynamics and longstanding cultural norms. In unfolding their inner voices, teachers articulate values, practices, and identities that shape their professional trajectories (Alosaimi, 2023). By consistently interrogating their assumptions through lenses such as student perspectives, peer feedback, personal history, and theory, educators challenge hegemonic norms and align their practice with their beliefs (Farrell, 2018). Teacher quality depends on both individual capabilities and the support structures around them (Kraft & Papay, 2014). The trend toward performance-driven education has intensified, often elevating compliance and quantifiable outputs above critical, value-driven teaching (McCarthy et al., 2025). Such pressures frequently spark identity tensions for experienced teachers, whose long-held values may clash with newer institutional expectations (Eryılmaz & Dikilitaş, 2023). Reflective journaling offers a route to reclaim agency, redefine professional roles, and balance policy demands with personal integrity (Barham, 2023). Despite its importance, mid- and late-career teachers are often overlooked in PD programs that focus mainly on novices (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Addressing this gap by incorporating identity-aware, reflective structures into PD can support experienced teachers in navigating ongoing career challenges.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, well-suited for exploring personal experiences and identity formation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Narrative inquiry captures the stories teachers tell about themselves and how they make meaning from their teaching lives. In this study, there are six experienced EFL teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience in several senior high schools in Bandung who were selected using purposive sampling. They varied in teaching backgrounds, institutional context, and professional development exposure. The researchers collected the data by inviting teachers to keep weekly reflective journals over eight weeks. Journal prompts included open-ended questions about their teaching beliefs, emotional experiences, and institutional challenges. After the journaling period, each participant was given a questionnaire to explore their narratives further. Then, the data were analyzed using thematic and narrative analysis. Journals and questionnaires were coded iteratively to identify emerging identity themes. Thematic coding followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, while narrative arcs were constructed to trace identity development over time. To ensure credibility, the researchers employed member checking, triangulated journal and questionnaire data, and maintained a reflexive journal. Thick description and direct quotations were used to enhance authenticity. All participants provided informed consent. Names were anonymized, and ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research board.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section explores the emerging themes from the narrative accounts of six experienced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, derived from their reflective journaling practices. Drawing from a qualitative narrative inquiry framework, responses were thematically coded and analyzed, focusing on the evolving professional identity of the teachers and how reflective journaling served as a mediational tool in this process. The discussion interweaves existing literature to enrich the interpretation of these themes.

Table 1. Summary of Key Themes in Teacher Reflections

Theme	Description	Number of Teachers (N=6)
Varied form of Reflection	Reflective journaling styles (written, digital, mental)	6
Shifting Teaching Beliefs	Evolution from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches	6
Balancing Beliefs with Institutional Demands	Navigating conflicts between personal values and school expectations	4
Learning from Peers and Practice	Influence of communities, workshops, and feedback	5
Motivation and Teaching Purpose	Intrinsic motivations, emotional commitment, and teaching as service	6

Offering Advice Through Reflection	Mentorship through journaling, sharing with others	5

Table 1 presents the six dominant themes that emerged from participants' narratives, highlighting the recurring elements in how they engage with reflective practice. Each theme is accompanied by a description and the number of participants who addressed it. This overview reveals that while all six teachers practiced reflection in some form and shifted their teaching beliefs, they varied in how they dealt with institutional challenges or used reflection to mentor others.

This thematic summary underscores how experienced teachers actively engage with multiple layers of their professional identity through reflective journaling. While all participants demonstrated evolution in their teaching beliefs shifting toward more student-centered approaches their reflections reveal nuanced variations in motivation and purpose. For example, some used reflection as a tool for personal healing or emotional regulation, while others saw it as a means to cultivate leadership and mentor others. The uneven distribution in addressing institutional demands highlights that structural factors still mediate the extent to which teachers can act upon their reflections. This finding aligns with studies emphasizing that teacher identity formation is both an internal and contextually mediated process (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Farrell, 2018). Furthermore, the high frequency of themes related to emotional commitment and peer learning suggests that reflective journaling supports not only cognitive shifts but also relational and affective growth within professional practice.
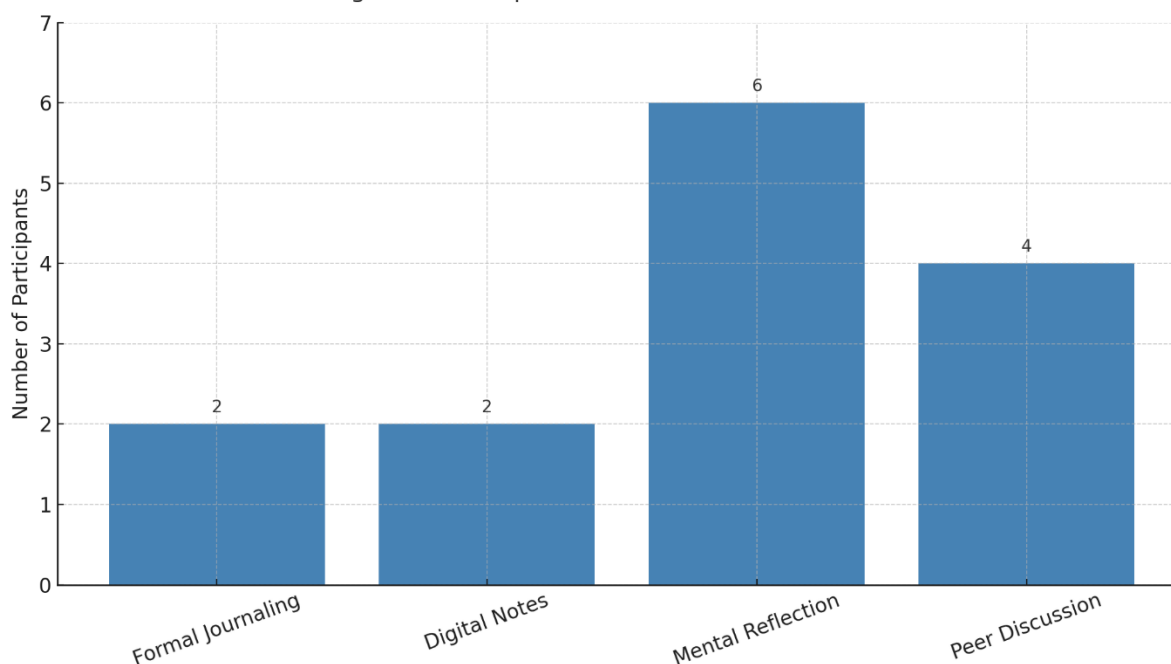

Figure 1. Participants' Preferred Reflection Modes

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of different reflection modes reported by the six participants in the study. Mental reflection was the most common practice, used by all participants, while peer discussion also played a significant role. Fewer participants engaged in formal journaling or digital note-taking. This visual highlights that reflection takes many forms beyond traditional writing, underscoring the flexible and personal nature of reflective practice among experienced teachers.

Reflection for these teachers did not always come in the form of a neatly bound journal. Some used phones to write down ideas, others spoke with peers, and most engaged in quiet mental reflection, reviewing their day after class. *UT* admitted, "I don't write things down, but I reflect a lot, especially after a challenging lesson." This illustrates how reflection had become second nature.

The diversity in modes echoes Farrell's (2018) view that experienced teachers adopt reflection that suits their routines and personalities. Even when not formally documented, reflection still served as a compass guiding their pedagogy and self-awareness.

A consistent theme was the evolution of instructional values. Teachers shared how they moved from focusing on grammatical accuracy and textbook delivery to promoting communication, student collaboration, and critical thinking. YT reflected, "Before, I talked too much. Now I listen more and let my students explore."

This change signals a shift from a transmissive to a constructivist teaching model and supports Beauchamp and Thomas' (2009) view that identity is dynamic, molded by internal reflection and external classroom realities. Four participants mentioned struggling when their values clashed with institutional practices particularly around discipline or curriculum pacing. Yuni described tension when the school's reward-punishment system contradicted her belief in building intrinsic motivation. "I did what I believed in and then shared my results with colleagues," she said.

Brookfield (2017) argues that reflective teachers often become agents of change by sharing thoughtful practices with others. Journaling helped these teachers hold onto their values without becoming isolated or oppositional. While journaling was personal, learning was often social. Several teachers mentioned how workshops, communities like MGMP, and informal chats with peers shaped their thinking. Rina, for example, said peer observations helped her identify areas she hadn't considered.

This interplay of self and community reinforces Mezirow's (2000) concept of transformative learning, where growth comes from critical dialogue and revisiting assumptions (Fleming, 2018). Beneath the pedagogical shifts was something deeper a growing sense of meaning. UT, who started teaching just for income, said, "Now, I'm doing this because I care about who my students are becoming." Others echoed a sense of teaching as purpose-driven work. Such identity formation aligns with Mansfield et al.'s (2016) notion that emotional and moral investment strengthens professional commitment. Reflection provided a space to rediscover their "why" and build resilience against burnout. Interestingly, participants weren't only writing for themselves. They saw their reflections as legacy tools offering advice to colleagues, mentees, or even their future selves. Yuni wrote, "Don't be too hard on yourself. Every tough class is also a teacher." This aligns with Larrivee's (2000) assertion that reflection enhances professional wisdom and builds a reflective teaching culture.

Table 2. Categorization of Themes by Reflective Dimension

Reflective Dimension	Associated Themes	Purpose/Function
Personal	Varied form of Reflection, motivation, and purpose, emotional strength	Enhancing self-awareness, resilience, and identity
Institutional	Balancing beliefs with institutional demands,	Negotiating systemic expectations and values

	empowerment, and policy navigation	
Pedagogical	Shifting teaching beliefs, learning from peers, and offering advice	Evolving teaching methods and fostering growth

Table 2 categorizes the major reflective themes identified in the study according to three domains: personal, institutional, and pedagogical. This structure helps demonstrate how reflection intersects with the inner self, organizational systems, and instructional practice. The table emphasizes that experienced teachers don't only reflect on their teaching methods but also on who they are, how they fit within their school context, and how they guide others.

What stands out from these findings is not only the diversity of reflective practices but their central role in mediating identity transformation. Whether through written journaling, mental review, or collegial conversations, reflection was the bridge between past experiences, present dilemmas, and future goals. In these narratives, reflective practice was not a side task but a core habit, guiding how teachers think, act, and grow. As Meijer et al. (2011) suggest, identity is built in motion, and reflection provides the rhythm.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on how reflection is more than a pedagogical tool it is a deeply personal, emotional, and intellectual act that sustains experienced EFL teachers through the ongoing evolution of their professional identities. These narratives confirm that reflection is not an isolated practice but a deeply embedded process that allows teachers to make sense of their work, especially in times of challenge, change, and growth. Across the data, reflection served multiple roles. It acted as a mirror for personal insight, a compass during institutional tension, and a bridge between intention and classroom reality. Teachers like YT and VT used reflection to deepen their self-understanding and teaching philosophy. These insights align with Avraamidou (2004), who argue that teacher identity is shaped through lived experiences and contextual negotiation. Reflection, therefore, becomes a means of identity work ongoing, unfinished, and deeply contextual.

Importantly, the emotional and ethical dimensions of teaching often neglected in technical models of teacher development came into sharp focus. Participants' reflections helped them process emotional labor, reclaim motivation, and recover their professional purpose. This echoes Flores & Day's (2006) findings that moral purpose and emotional investment are central to sustaining teacher identity, particularly for mid-career professionals navigating burnout or policy pressure. Moreover, teachers did not reflect in isolation. Professional communities and peer feedback were important catalysts for identity growth. As shown in this study, even informal conversations played a role in challenging assumptions and sparking transformation. This supports Taylor's (2007) argument that transformative learning in teacher education is not solely an individual endeavor, but one that flourishes through relational dialogue and shared reflection within professional communities.

Teachers also used reflection as a subtle form of resistance, an act of professional agency. When school policies contradicted their values, participants like UT turned inward through reflection, but then outward through action and advocacy. Brookfield (2017) describes this as the hallmark of critically reflective educators: the courage to question and the capacity to lead with integrity. Overall, this study reinforces the idea that professional identity is not formed at one moment in time but is crafted continually through reflection, interaction, and adaptation. Reflection is not simply about improvement; it is about survival, transformation, and meaning-making in the evolving landscape of education.

CONCLUSION

This narrative inquiry examined how reflective journaling, in its various forms, facilitates the development of professional identity among experienced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. The participants' voices revealed that reflection was not a luxury or an abstract theory, but a lived, breathing process that kept them grounded, curious, and committed. Drawing on a story request approach, the discoveries uncovered that proficient identity among experienced teachers isn't a passive process, but an energetic and advancing process impacted by reflection, feeling, organizational setting, and academic development. The study makes two key contributions. First, it expands the scope of teacher identity research by centering mid- and late-career teachers, groups often overlooked in identity studies. Second, it highlights the value of flexible, authentic reflection practices, whether through journaling, dialogue, or mental processing.

At a time when teachers are navigating rapid educational changes, emotional exhaustion, and institutional constraints, reflection remains a quiet but powerful force. It enables teachers to hold onto their purpose, adapt without losing themselves, and mentor others through shared experience. In addition, the enthusiastic measurement of reflection played a foundational part. Members are familiar that reflection made a difference to them in overcoming sentiments of question, burnout, and professional weariness, affirming the discoveries of Flores & Day (2006) and Kelchtermans & Deketelaere (2016) on the interaction between enthusiastic strength and character supportability. Topics such as inspiration, understudy center, development, and deep-rooted learning reliably showed up in their intelligent stories.

Another key finding was the way experienced teachers externalized their learning by advertising exhortation to others either through modeling intelligent propensities, sharing classroom hones, or supporting reflection in educator communities. As Clandinin and Connelly (2006) contended, instructor personality isn't as it were formed by account but is frequently passed on through story. This peer-oriented reflection cultivates a proficient culture of development and mentoring, especially profitable in EFL settings where teachers regularly confront fast curricular and mechanical changes. In terms of broader suggestions, this think about certifies the significance of integrating intelligent hones into progressing proficient development, not fair during pre-service training. Teachers ought to recognize the control of both formal and informal reflection in teacher learning. Structures such as peer dialog groups, individual learning diaries, or advanced reflection stages may offer assistance in institutionalizing reflection as a deeply rooted, proficient propensity, in line with Avalos' (2011) call for relevantly implanted instructor improvement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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