Journal of ELE Praxis
Vol.3, No.1, 2026, pp. 72-89
https://doi.org 10.51474/elepraxis/19815

Women English Language Teachers' Trajectory of Identity Negotiation: Imagination and Investment

Roshani Parajuli*
MPhil Graduate, Kathmandu University School of Education, Nepal
roshaniparajuli1@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explored how women English language teachers construct, negotiate, and reflect on the professional growth. Teaching is not just a 9 am to 4 pm job but a continuous process of reshaping and renovating identity through social and cultural interaction. In the Nepalese context, women English language teachers faced unique challenges because of political and social factors that shape their professional identities and career trajectories. I adopted narrative inquiry as a research method to examine the lived experiences of women English language teachers and conducted in-depth interviews with the participants to understand how their identity evolves through personal stories, professional practices, and interactions within schools. Data were analyzed and interpreted using Saldana's (2013) coding framework, which helped us identify patterns. The findings showed that women English language teachers experienced that identity was a complex and dynamic process that was highly shaped by the socio-cultural context. The participants revealed that feelings of marginalization among less senior women teachers were a result of political favoritism and gender discrimination in accessing senior positions, recognition, and decision-making power. I also observed intra-gender discrimination: discrimination between two women English language teachers due to power and jealousy. This study contributes to the broader discourse on teacher identity, gender, and professional empowerment, emphasizing the need for suitable institutional policies and supportive environments where women teachers thrive and flourish.

Keywords: *identity, construction, Narrative inquiry, socio-cultural environment*

*Corresponding Author
© The Author 2026
ISSN: 3059-9393 (Online)
Journal Website:
https://elepraxis.kusoed.edu.np

Published by Department of Language Education, Kathmandu University School of Education, Hattiban, Lalitpur, Nepal. This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-SA 4.0) license.

Introduction

The professional identity of teachers is an important research area, as it directly links with the overall well-being of teachers. The identity of women English language teachers in Nepal represents a unique challenge and an understudied area of inquiry. Women teachers operate within a highly gendered socio-cultural environment shaped by societal expectations, institutional norms, and political histories. Gee (2000) defines identity as "being recognized as a certain kind of person" (p. 99). In addition, communication skills and strategies, attitude, knowledge, and personal biography also impact teachers' identity (Miller, 2009). To understand language teaching and learning, we need to understand teachers. With this line, I need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 22). Moreover, Barkhuizen (2016) states that identities

Original Article **Received:**25 May 2026; **Accepted:** 30 October 2026; **Published:** 5 November 2026

are shaped through interactions and relationships with others. The individuals identity develops within both local and broader social communities as individuals engage with people who hold diverse beliefs, values, expectations, and perspectives. Such identity construction processes occur through direct interpersonal exchanges, such as storytelling, as well as through digital interactions and narratives shared on social media platforms.

According to Rouhotie-Lyhty (2013), teachers' first year of the career is a widely advised area, the aspects that assist in accepting a 'struggling' in its place so that a particular person engages in teaching and creates their career distinctiveness are yet less considered. This research provides insights for women teachers to look for collaboration and pursue professional development. These writers also believe it as crucial to acknowledge women teachers who struggle in their own ways. Especially, education has built up perceptions from teachers' personal stories of schooling activities (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987; Connelly & Clandinin, 1995), so women's activities need recognition.

Women teachers operate within a highly gendered socio-cultural environment where societal expectations, institutional norms, and political histories matter. While women teachers' careers are often talked about, the hardship they endure is not often given much attention. I could imagine the women's stories to be rich with ups and downs, filled with both seen and hidden barriers. Despite their significant contributions to the academic profession in Nepal, these teachers' experiences remain largely invisible in educational research. This curiosity inspired me to bring the stories of other women English language teachers to light. This study narrows this gap by examining how women English language teachers transform their professional identities in the context of Nepal, with specific attention to imagination, investment, and the experiences that shape their ongoing growth. It can be easily identified that the identity construction of women English language teachers highlights imagination, investment, and accumulated experiences that contribute to their professional growth in the context of Nepal. The idea of identity as dynamic, negotiated, and socially constructed is well established in sociocultural theory. Wenger (1998) argues that identity emerges through participation, meaning making, and negotiation within communities of practice, suggesting that identity is not a fixed trait, but an evolving process shaped by social engagement. Similarly, Norton (2013) conceptualizes identity as a site of struggle, shaped by power relations, investments, and opportunities for participation. In English language teaching, identity is further shaped by linguistic ideologies, pedagogical practices, and teachers' imagination for future professional development. Most of the research is conducted based on the global context, ignoring the local context, as identity construction is highly influenced by the socio-cultural environment. Particularly, very limited research has been conducted regarding English language teaching. I have found that none of the studies have examined how women English language teachers negotiate their identities using both Wenger's (1998) communities of practice and Norton's (2013) investment theory, particularly in the Nepalese context.

The present research study explored how women English Language teachers construct, negotiate, and reflect on their professional identities across time and experiences. This exploration is guided by a research question: how do women English language teachers narrate their journey of identity development and growth? This study particularly focused on the lived experiences of women English language teachers at the secondary level in the context of Nepal, ignoring broader gender issues. The research did not cross the boundaries of the personal and professional experiences shared by women English language teachers at the secondary level in the context of Nepal. Employing narrative inquiry as a research method, the study focused only on three

participants, purposefully selected to provide in-depth and context-specific insights rather than general findings. Adopting Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice (CoP) and Norton's (2013) identity theories, it highlighted the personal and professional experiences of women English language teachers in the process of identity construction, practicing at the secondary level in Nepal. Thus, this study focuses on the lived experiences of women English language teachers at the secondary level, which offers a deeper understanding of the personal, social, and professional challenges they encounter in their professional lives. I begin this paper with a review of important theoretical and empirical studies on teachers' identity construction. Then, narrative inquiry as a research method is presented, highlighting the significance of choosing this research methodological approach. I drew four key themes from the stories of participants' lived experiences. In the final section, the paper concludes by presenting the implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Review of Policy

A policy review often examines how policies are described and practiced in a certain field and context. Conducting a policy review is crucial in educational research as it connects the study to current educational reforms and highlights the need for change based on emerging necessities. According to Bell and Stevenson (2006), policy is increasingly understood as a dynamic and participatory process rather than a fixed product. Likewise, Bell and Stevenson (2006) argue that policy is a process rather than a product as it "is not something that happens exclusively 'up there,' but is something that happens 'down here' too". Similarly, Wiseman (2010) illustrates that evidence-based policymaking has contributed to the product value of education as reflected in global initiatives such as Education for All and the girls' education movement. However, despite these efforts, women English language teachers' identity constructions remain largely unexplored. It is an undeniable truth that women as teachers are highly appreciated because they possess the characteristics of empathy, love, care, and, more importantly, brilliance. It is crucial to understand their unique challenges, which occur due to social, structural, and religious circumstances. To promote inclusivity and equity, it's indispensable to create a better place for them to thrive in the teaching field. This would be possible only if we promote research on women teachers' identity construction.

In Nepal, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2019 is based on the principle that education is the foundation for the nation's overall development, and that quality education shall be made accessible to all citizens (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology [MoEST], 2019). Evidence-based policies uplift educational value. Nepal's National Education Policy focuses on quality education for all. "It is important to analyze policies and budgets that will have different implications and outcomes for men and women because they have different needs and interests" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015, p. 73). To summarize, these ideas suggest that educational policies should be more than a set of rules. They also shape values and influence educational and institutional practices, which play a tremendous role in shaping women English language teachers' identities. Therefore, there is a need to design more inclusive and equitable policies that respond to the teachers' diverse needs based on gender in the context of Nepal.

Review of Previous Studies

Mainali (2021) conducted research on the identity-construction process of women English language teachers in the context of Nepal through a narrative study. She adopted a purposive

sampling technique in a series of in-depth interviews with six women English language teachers. Findings show that teachers are seen as path setters, facilitators, leaders, and ideal scholars, whose professional identity cannot develop without continuous involvement, which ultimately prevents effective teaching. Pokhrel (2022) adopted two theories, Experiential Learning (Dewey, 1938) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), to explore the phenomenon of being a woman and becoming an English language teacher. Pokhrel (2022) stated that transformation occurs through experiential processes that foster teachers' professional development and identity construction. Likewise, Neupane's (2023) study shows that early motivations such as a strong desire for the English language, creative involvement with the language, and inspiration from their own teachers played a crucial role in shaping participants' decisions to become teachers. Their study also highlights that teachers' professional identities develop through a dynamic interplay of personal goals, institutional expectations, and broader structural contexts. In a similar vein, Khadka (2024) has adopted the lenses of transformational leadership theory and liberal feminist theory to understand and explore the stories of Nepali women head teachers in the academic field. By fostering inclusive leadership, women leaders can create environments that support identity development for themselves and others.

Likewise, Bhatta (2023) studied the *Stories of Women English Language Teachers* in the context of the far-western region of Nepal. The main objective of the research was to narrate women teachers' struggle to learn the English language and to examine how English language proficiency develops their empowerment. Narrative inquiry was adopted as a research technique with purposeful sampling. The author learned the struggles and barriers they went through in families, societies, and educational institutions. The studies finally concluded that proficiency in the English language has empowered them and enhanced their ability to find suitable job opportunities. Adhikari (2025) adopted Social Cognitive Career Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory to examine the impact of vocational identity development practice on career choice among adolescents and explore the experiences of adolescents' vocational identity development for class teachers and students. She adopted a mixed-methods research design.

In the same way, Pant (2019) conducted a study that explored the motivational factors of women teachers in teaching English. The objectives of the study were to find out and analyze the motivational factors that influence women teachers' teaching at the basic level and suggest some pedagogical implications. The author used narrative inquiry as a research method. She included four women English teachers as a sample from the Kanchanpur district with a purposive sampling technique. She collected data through face-to-face interviews. The findings demonstrate that different aspects, such as teaching responsibilities, family support, respect for society, and their teaching interest, are the motivating factors for teaching. On the other hand, hindering factors such as inadequate salary, less administrative support, gender discrimination, and lack of training demotivate them. Similarly, Bhandari (2022) conducted research entitled "Becoming an English language teacher in Nepal: An autoethnographic journey," employing transformative and socio-cultural learning theories as theoretical bases. He adopted the autoethnography research method, and the findings suggested that examination grades and rural contexts do not impede students from becoming transformative teachers.

Clarke et al. (2023) focus on women teachers' identity in Tamil Nadu, India. It investigates how women teachers renovate their identity with structural and educational reform. The adoption of purposive sampling in five girls' schools with a large number of women teachers, both private and government-funded, in Tamil Nadu brings relevant results. It also discusses that women

teachers struggle to maintain their significance as part of their growing teachers' identities in comparison to the past. The study by Xing et al. (2024) discusses the problems of women language teachers in the context of China. It suggested implications regarding the issue for the concerned authorities. It concludes that women teachers' identity is influenced by professional and personal factors such as multiple responsibilities as a mom, wife, and daughter-in-law. The internal factors, such as desire, motivation, commitment, and enthusiasm, contribute to women teachers remaining in their jobs. In the same way, Hardy-Witherspoon (2020) reveals the complexities faced by African American women educators, presenting the root of barriers within the teaching field through qualitative research and online surveys. The author interviewed both working teachers and retired teachers. The findings of the study show that women educators experience discrimination, underrepresentation, and financial illiteracy. Likewise, Sun et al. (2022) revealed that burnout is high in Chinese women teachers at the school level due to overwork, family conflict, less support from society, and complexities in classroom management in comparison to college teachers. The authors also identify the protective factors to prevent burnout among women teachers. The research concludes that work engagement is crucial for professional identity; however, it sometimes creates burnout issues among Chinese women teachers.

Similarly, Sincar et al. (2020) investigated Turkish women school administrators' views on the concept of self-development and the techniques they used in their self-development process. The researchers adopted a phenomenological study with a snowball sampling of ten women teachers. A semi-structured interview was a tool to collect data. The findings of the study show that the roles given by society to women school administrators are the main hindrance to developing themselves professionally sound. In the same way, I went through a study undertaken by Jones (2017) with women headteachers in UK primary schools and found many influential ideas regarding women headteachers' identity. This study also explores some common beliefs about leadership being more masculine, women's domestic responsibilities, and women as enablers rather than leaders, which have a tremendous impact on women teachers' career development and on the way they stand in the workplace. It concludes that there are strong discourses that constrain or facilitate how women act, which affects their leadership work and their careers as headteachers. Simon-Maeda (2004) conducted research in the Japanese context, adopting a narrative inquiry research technique using a post-modern feminist lens, and found that the professional identities of women teachers develop through the interplay of broader sociocultural forces and the ongoing personal and social interactions they engage in, both within their classrooms and the wider community.

All these studies discuss women teachers' struggles in their professional identities. They faced challenges like gender discrimination, inequality, social exclusion, stress, and burnout. However, they did not specifically address the process of identity negotiation of women English language teachers, how they imagined to be an English language teacher and invest for perfection, dignity, and empowerment, and harvest their skills learning, and growing with students. Addressing the identified gaps, our research paper presents women English language teachers' negotiation process for their identity constructions through imagination, investing, and harvesting.

Theoretical Referents

The concept of communities of practice (CoP) is a key social learning theory for understanding how professional learning and identity develop. Wenger et al. (2002) describe communities of practice as groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an

ongoing basis. Similarly, Eckert (2006) defines communities of practice as groups engaged in a shared activity over time. According to Wenger (2011), CoPs are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better through regular interaction (p. 1). In essence, communities of practice act as dynamic, evolving learning environments (Wenger, 2011), where teachers and learners continuously interact, exchange experiences, and develop professionally while shaping their professional identities.

Due to the emergence of the latest technologies, the world has become more complicated. Basically, the internet and social media have expanded the locations of communities of practice beyond geographical boundaries, unlike traditional societies, and teachers have started communicating with people and resources in different locations, which has expanded the scope of communities of practice (Wenger, 2010). The paper followed on Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) and Identity and Investment theory (Darvin & Norton, 2018) to understand women English language teachers' trajectories of identity negotiation. These theoretical perspectives view identity as dynamic, socially constructed, and continuously shaped through participation in social practices. Within this framework, identity negotiation is understood as a process that unfolds through imagination, investment, and harvesting over time.

Imagination is conceptualized in this study based on Wenger's (1998) notion within communities of practice. According to Wenger, imagination refers to the ability of individuals to create images of themselves and their possible futures beyond their immediate participation in a given context. Through imagination, individuals connect their present experiences to wider possibilities, aspirations, and further identities. In professional contexts, imagination allows teachers to envision who they are and who they want to become in the future. For women English language teachers, imagination has a key role in shaping professional identity.

English language teachers often begin their career imagining their future identities, such as becoming a well-spoken English teacher, a respected dignitary, financially independent, and a social changemaker. These imaginations of themselves influence how teachers interpret their experiences and how they position themselves within their professional communities. Identity is not fixed but is continuously negotiated as teachers imagine, re-imagine, and sometimes revise their professional aspirations in response to social and institutional realities (Norton & Toohey, 2011). In fact, imagination is particularly important for women English language teachers whose professional identity may be shaped or limited by gender roles, institutional expectations, political power, and social norms. Therefore, imagination becomes the starting point of Identity negotiation, which enables teachers to envision alternative professional trajectories even when their current participation is limited or challenging.

The concept of investment introduced by Norton (1995) explains why individuals choose to persist or resist participation in language learning and teaching practices. Investment is a sociological concept that highlights the relationship between identity, power, and access to resources. Darvin and Norton (2018) define investments as a commitment to learning practices and identities that are continuously negotiated within social relationships and power structures. According to Bourdieu's (1990, 1991) notion of capital, investment can be understood as teachers' efforts to gain linguistic, cultural, social, and symbolic resources that enhance their professional standing. For women English language teachers' investment is closely linked to how they are positioned within their communities of practice. Even when teachers are highly motivated, they may reduce participation if they experience marginalization, lack of recognition, or unequal power relations (Darvin & Norton, 2016). Harvesting refers to the outcomes or returns that teachers

receive from sustained imagination and investment over time. According to Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice, identity develops along a trajectory as individuals move from peripheral participation toward more central and legitimate roles. As women English language teachers start their work, they have confidence, experience, and recognition, and they start to harvest the outcomes of their participation. The results may include leadership roles, administrative roles, academic enhancement, agency and a stronger sense of belonging within the community of practice. However, harvesting is not always linear and guaranteed; uneven power relations such as institutional barriers, social barriers and political barriers may limit the extent to which teachers can fully benefit from their investments.

Offering imagination, investment, and harvest within communities of practice as a theoretical lens together helps to understand women English language teachers' identity negotiation as a dynamic and ongoing process.

Methodology

Understanding teachers' identities requires an approach that captures the in-depth complexity and context of their lived experiences. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that explores and interprets one's lived experiences through their stories, identifying that these lived experiences are shaped by social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry offers such a research lens that enables researchers to shed light on teachers' lives in a holistic and situated manner, acknowledging the environments in which their identities are shaped (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Grounded in an interpretive paradigm, this approach takes storying and re-storying as a collaborative process, co-constructed through ongoing interaction between the participants and the researcher. It is much more than telling stories. It is about making meaning of life experiences in the process of telling stories (Barkhuizen, 2011). Stories assist humans to make life experiences meaningful, stories preserve our memories, prompt our reflections, connect us with our past and present, and assist us to envision our future. Webster and Mertova (2007) remark that narratives allow teachers and researchers to present experiences holistically with their complex situatedness.

In language education, the use of narratives, as well as narrative inquiries as a whole, began to gain wide traction around the turn of the century and has become more common in recent times (Barkhuizen, 2013). The nature of research demands in-depth stories based on participants' lived experiences. Therefore, I believed this method would be the best choice to find out what I wanted to add new knowledge to academia. In addition, to understand the participants' present stories, it's very important to gain in-depth knowledge about their past experiences. Narrative inquiry would allow us to dive into our participants' life histories.

In the context of this research, women teachers' lived experiences were collected and examined in depth to make meaning. I collected the stories from the participants through interviews and casual discussions, which enabled us to analyze the narratives. Meanings were derived by examining the narratives. The participants were encouraged to share their experiences progressively from the onset of challenges to the present. I believe that this study enabled me to gain new insights, beliefs, and links between the participants' past, present, and future, through which their experiences were redefined.

Participants

Three women English language teachers were purposively selected from different regions of Nepal, representing diverse ethnic backgrounds, working at the secondary level in both private and public schools. The selection of participants from different regions helped us to include a range of sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds in this study. To my knowledge, contextual factors greatly influence the identity negotiation of women English language teachers. Pseudonyms: Sahabhagita, Samlangnata, and Pahichanta were given to them to maintain their safety, privacy, and confidentiality, and details were hidden that could reveal their identity. I chose research participants who met certain criteria regarding age, social background, and geographical region. Sahabagita represents the western hill region, while Samlanganta reflects a Madhesh background, even though she belongs to a hill community. Pahichanta comes from the eastern hill region. Our two research participants, Sahabhagita and Pahichanta, are bilingual, whereas Samlanganta is multilingual. Women English language teachers at the secondary level had at least five years of teaching experience. However, I had a brief casual talk with 6 research participants before I decided to include them as our research participants. I selected only three research participants who met our criteria. I purposefully selected research participants with long teaching experience to ensure the collection of redundant data, which contributed to reliable and insightful findings. As our research topic is identity construction, it was essential to include participants who went through multiple circumstances, with stories of success and failure throughout their professional journey. Before the data collection, I obtained written consent from the participants and informed them about the objective of the study and assured them that their participation was voluntary.

Data Collection

I employed in-depth interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) along with informal conversations, which are among the most common methods for collecting storied life in language teaching and learning research (Barkhuizen et al., 2014), to construct the life narratives of our participants. At first, I collected the participants' narratives through an hour-long informal conversation with each participant. Each interview lasted about 1 hour, and I used a voice recorder to record their voice and also took written notes of important incidents with their permission. After receiving the data in Nepali language, I translated it into English. When I asked about their language preference, the participants replied that they preferred using their first language, i.e., Nepali, as they felt comfortable expressing their emotions and experiences more effectively. Therefore, the medium of interaction was Nepali. After that, I asked open-ended questions that had already been developed based on the research purpose to collect in-depth stories. I also adopted follow-up questions based on specific incidents to get more detailed information about the participants' experiences. While talking with them, I did not interrupt or disturb the natural flow of their storytelling. In this way, the participants and I worked together to build their life stories, focusing on their experiences as English language teachers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I noticed that some of the important details were missing from the participants' stories. To gather richer data, I conducted a second round of interviews after one month. Furthermore, I had a few brief informal talks with the participants, which also contributed to deeper and more meaningful data collection. I also let them check their stories to ensure the collected data was true and honest.

Interpretation and Meaning Making

Coding helped us organize and group into categories of similar characters and patterns (Saldana, 2015). To analyze the data, I adopted Saldana's (2015) framework, using both first-cycle

and second-cycle coding strategies. In the first cycle of the coding process, I thoroughly read and re-read the transcripts, which I had already transcribed, to find key ideas. Anecdotes that were appropriate to the research questions were highlighted during the coding process. Then, initial codes and highlighted anecdotes were organized in different categories and thematized in the second cycle of the coding process. These emerging themes were connected with findings in light of existing literature and theoretical concepts.

Participants' Narratives

I Grew… By Learning and Sharing

A thorough analysis of the three participants' narratives: Sahabhagita, Samlangnata and Pahichanta revealed that the socio-cultural environment plays a crucial role in influencing the identity construction of women English language teachers in countries like Nepal, where social factors are dominant in every aspect of life. This theme captures how the participants developed their professional identities through active participation and negotiation of belonging within their school communities. Their identity construction as English language teachers was not an individual process, but one deeply intertwined in daily interactions, collaboration, and persistence in encountering institutional and political challenges. In Wenger's (1998) terms, these women developed professional recognition within communities of practice where meaning and belonging were constantly negotiated. Their growth does not involve themselves but learning from colleagues, seniors, and interacting with students. For instance, Sahabhagita was only 18 years old when she entered the teaching field; she was quite unsure about the future of her career. She argued that, entering the classroom at a young age, she did not have any clear vision of what kind of teacher she would become. Yet she gradually learned by teaching, observing senior colleagues, and engaging with students in classroom learning. She further added that over time, her vision expanded. She began to see herself not just as someone who advocates for equity in the community school. Her narrative reflects Wenger's notion that identity evolves through active engagement in shared practice. Participating in different professional development programs, such as conferences, workshops, and Teacher training, she transformed herself from a novice into a self-defined professional who sees herself beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

Similarly, Samlangnata expressed similar awareness. She explained that she learned to keep contributing meaningfully without letting politics weaken her dedication. Despite being in a leadership position as vice principal and an English teacher as well, she felt ignored in the major decision-making process regarding the enhancement of the educational institution. However, she supported her colleagues and juniors in making lesson plans and preparing classroom materials, which she learned from her experiences. Through these acts of participation, she gained both competence and more confidence. As Wenger notes, participation is simultaneously a social and personal experience. Each engagement changes how individuals see themselves in relation to the community. My third research participant also has a similar voice. She was a fresh teacher at first; she was even unaware of classroom management skills, had little confidence, and was always scared of making mistakes. She argued that working as a high school teacher was her dream and most revered profession, too. She quoted, *"Mistakes are the root of growth, so don't be overwhelmed if you make them. And always remember the quotation by A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Love your profession but not the organization*."

She loved to be surrounded by young minds as they were optimistic, enthusiastic, and energetic. She grew as a professional not only through self-learning but also from the students.

She further added that our students are two steps further than us as they are updated with new technology and scientific innovations. In such circumstances, it has become very hard for teachers like her to sustain in this profession. Therefore, she always tried to be technology-friendly through autonomous learning and engaging with students. To utilize her knowledge and skills, she practiced the latest technological knowledge, making classroom teaching and learning effective.

The participants' stories collectively highlight that teacher identity in Nepali schools is a process of learning, sharing, and standing firm. Participation is both the means and the outcome of identity construction through engagement; they learn who they are, and through persistence, they assert who they wish to become. As members of their professional communities, they transform everyday teaching into acts of resilience and self-definition. Their experiences exemplify Wenger's (1998) view that identity is "a lived experience of belonging" and demonstrate how, even within constrained contexts, women teachers craft spaces of agency by investing in collaboration, care, and courage.

I Have Poured my Heart, Time, and Energy into Teaching-It's my Life

This theme captures the depth of emotional, temporal, and personal investment that the participants have made in their profession. For my research participants, teaching was not just a job and a source of income but a way of life -a space where their identities as women, professionals, and human beings intertwined. Their narratives reveal a powerful sense of dedication that crossed the educational institution's boundaries, reflecting what Norton (2000) calls investment: the commitment of emotional and material resources in pursuit of returns such as respect, belonging, and purpose. Through Wenger's (1998) lens, their narrative also provides that the identities of women English language teachers are formed through participation, mutual engagement in the community of teaching, and they receive recognition as empowered women teachers. For Sahabagita, teaching represented an act of devotion; her voice carried both pride and fatigue as she recounted her daily routine. She further added:

> *Teaching has never been a nine-to-four job for me. Even at home, I keep thinking about my lessons, about my students. I invested in teaching physically, mentally, financially, and emotionally because it's not just work, but it's my identity. My priority has always been teaching.*

Her words echo Norton's (2013) argument that investment reflects the desire to claim a meaningful identity within social work. Shahabagita's investment was not motivated by external rewards but by the emotional satisfaction of shaping young minds and earning self-respect through service. She often equated her dedication to spiritual practice, describing teaching as social work. In her narrative, professional identity and personal morality were inseparable. She argued, "*There are many challenges, but I feel teaching is my way of giving back to society. When I teach well, I sleep peacefully*."

Likewise, my second participant, Shahabhagita, also presented the same thought regarding the teaching profession. She felt that she had invested her whole life in teaching. Time was the biggest resource she had been given. Spending countless nights in preparation for lessons, planning, grading piles of notebooks, and preparing exam papers long after her family went to bed showed her huge investment of time, effort, and energy into the teaching field. She narrated*, "I still have more to do. I have also invested money in buying books, subscribing to journals, and paying for training workshops, often without any extra payment from the school where I work."*

After the narratives of two participants, it is proven that teaching is not just a job, it's a relationship with dozens of young lives every year. Teachers carry their hopes, struggles, and the disappointments of students. Shahabhagita further clarified *that when her students failed in exams, she felt she had failed. When they succeeded, her joy doubled.* Definitely, this emotional labor can be exhausting, but it is also what makes teaching meaningful. She further added*, sometimes, my family also pays a part of this price too. Whenever my family saw me stressed, distracted, and tired, they supported me.* I can connect these ideas with Norton's (1995) concepts of investment, which emphasize that an individual invests their time and effort in work because of power relations and hope for future possibilities. For Pahichanta, the phrase, *"I have poured my heart and energy into teaching,"* suggests both deep emotional commitment and professional dedication as she sees a good future in the English language, which carries great prestige in society. She explained*, "I have given my youth to this profession, but sometimes it feels like people don't see how much I give. Still, I can't stop teaching because teaching is who I am today."*

Furthermore, her story revealed the tension between investment and recognition. Even though she spent more than a decade in the teaching field, she felt unvalued and unappreciated by school authorities and male colleagues. She said*, " You do everything sincerely, but appreciation rarely comes*. When her students greet her happily or succeed in an exam, that means a lot to her more than an award. She further said that sometimes she felt that teaching had taken everything her time, her youth, and her energy. But when she saw her students doing well, she felt she had achieved something that no salary can give her.

Across the narratives of Sahabhagita, Samlangnata, and Pahichanta, teaching emerges as deeply emotional, relational, and more experienced. Each woman's narrative portrays a huge investment in teaching mentally, physically, emotionally, and financially. They did more than simply teaching as a job. In fact, they live with their profession and show a strong sense of moral responsibility and commitment. I can connect it to Norton's notion of investment, which suggests that people engage in their work imagining the identities that they want to become in the future through their professional engagement. For these women, their desire to be respected, empowered, and recognized motivates them to engage in their work even if they feel low.

Being a Woman Means I Must Work Harder to be Seen and Respected

This theme highlights how gender plays a dominant role in shaping the professional identities of women English language teachers in Nepal. The narratives of my three research participants revealed that their commitment and competence alone were not always enough for recognition. Each woman described moments when her authority, participation, or achievement was questioned only because of her gender. Norton (2012) described identity as "socio-culturally constructed, and scholars draw on both institutional and community practices to understand the conditions under which language learners speak, read, and write the target language" (p. 5). Yet all three continued to invest emotionally and intellectually in their work, demonstrating that professional identity was sustained not because of the validation of an educational institution but by inner commitment and passion for teaching. In countries like Nepal, the socio-cultural environment plays a crucial role in identity construction and professional development. Women are regarded as enablers and men as leaders (Jones, 2017). It is believed that leadership positions are preferred for males, not for women. Women teachers are not prioritized as male teachers, and they are rarely heard, even when they hold a leadership position. If you are a young woman teacher, your competence and performance are always questioned. They should work twice to prove to themselves that they are equally capable to their male counterparts. In such conditions, women

teachers are doubly marginalized; however, showing resilience, they continue their profession as a process of self-recognition, raising their voice against gender discrimination. For Sahabhagita, professional growth meant constantly being seen, recognized, or valued by others. She did not just grow because she received training or experience. She grew because she had to fight for recognition in a place where her efforts were often overlooked. She further said that political alliances are active in community schools. If you are not an active member of some political parties, you are ignored. As stated by her:

> *In a community school, sometimes politics plays a huge role in professional inclusion or exclusion. Inclusively, if you are not connected with any politically affiliated teachers' unions, there are practices being seen as a sister wing of different political parties, and you can easily feel sidelined. You feel lonely sometimes. I have experienced exclusion firsthand.*

She learned to keep contributing meaningfully without letting politics weaken her dedication to students. She believes that a teacher's optimum duty is to make the students satisfied. She keeps voicing her opinion regarding inclusion in terms of caste and gender at school. She always spoke for the pupils of the marginalized community. Likewise, Samlagnata's experience as a vice principal exposed how institutional hierarchies and gender norms intersect. She recounted:

> *Even though I was the vice principal, major decisions were made without consulting me. My principal (although she was a woman) expected me to take care of simple matters such as discipline, student welfare, or event decorations, not the powerful decisions regarding policy or finance.*

Her words revealed a division of labor based on hierarchical positions within school leadership, in which the principal's roles were recognized as powerful and vice-principals' as powerless. Even though Samlanganta is in a hierarchical position, she could not enjoy the full rights of making powerful and prominent decisions. She feels suppressed because the majority of the emotional matters are given to her to handle. This connects with Judith Butler's words that gender is not a fixed biological attribute, but a socially constructed performance sustained through repeated acts (Butler, 1990). In Wenger's terms, her trajectory of participation was hindered by structural barriers; the school community defined boundaries of her engagement. She admitted to moments of frustration. Sometimes she felt invisible. She was doing double work but did not receive appreciation. Still, she could not stop teaching because she loved her job and wanted to show that a woman can lead with dignity. Her story portrays agency through persistence.

In the same way, Pahichata struggled for more direct respect. She felt ignored or humiliated many times due to her soft-spoken nature and resilience. She recalled the experience, she had one girl student who frequently failed the exam; she was a low performer in the class due to irregular attendance. She adopted a special method to encourage her so that she could get a good grade. She was overwhelmed when she saw her result. However, the school committee did not appreciate and acknowledge her work. If a male teacher had done this, he would definitely have been praised or awarded for his work. This painful memory illustrates how gender bias affects women English language teachers' professional identity. In Wenger's view, the community did not recognize her competence, which meant that she was not fully granted her membership. Yet the eventual success of her initiatives also shows how she regained recognition through performance. She said, *"I did not argue but worked hard." My students' improvements spoke for me.* Her words are an example

of resistance through investment (Norton, 2013). Instead of being demotivated, she invested her energy into working even harder. She believed that recognition was not granted but achieved.

I am Not the Perfect Teacher I Imagined- I am a Guide Who Grows with my Students

Becoming a teacher is often conceptualized as perfect, confident, knowledgeable, and intelligent. However, the reality of the classroom consists of imperfections and lacks. As a teacher, I learn from my mistakes and grow with my students. Teachers' journeys always begin from fresher to learner, learner to better learner. They gain knowledge by participating in professional development programs. Data collected from the research participants revealed that teachers gradually moved away from the idea of being perfect and started to see themselves as guides who learn and grow with their students. This transformation reflects a greater comprehension of what it means to be a teacher, not an individual who is already competent in everything, but someone who evolves continuously through experience and teacher-students' relationships. Research participant, Samlangata, argued that she imagined herself becoming a perfect English teacher, someone who has a good command of the English language like a native speaker, and she could have respect in society simply through her English language skills. She could be a role model for many students to fall in love with the English language. Her idea of teaching was influenced by the admiration she had for her own English teachers in school, who were so confident and flawless while teaching and speaking English. At the beginning of her career, she had strong expectations about teaching. She wanted to manage the classroom effectively, deliver lessons smoothly, and become a role model for students. Other research participants also have the same voice regarding perfection. Using Wenger's (1998) community of Practice (CoP) Framework, this shift can be understood as a part of a social learning process. Teachers learn not in isolation but through participation in communities with colleagues, students, and institutions. In these communities, knowledge and identity are developed through interaction, dialogue, and shared experiences. As teachers interact with others, they develop new understanding and eventually reconstruct their roles. Therefore, the classroom remains a place of co- learning rather than one-way teaching. Teachers who initially viewed themselves as experts start to perceive teaching as a collaborative activity, where both teachers and students participate in the learning process.

The result also relates to Norton's (1995, 2013) investment theory, which describes how people invest their time, emotion, and efforts in practices that form their identities and future possibilities. Teachers in this study made significant investments in their relationships with students and colleagues. Through these interactions, they developed confidence, a goal, and a sense of belonging. Their investment was not only professional but emotionally caring for students' development and learning made them reflect on their own development as well. This mutual process of learning and development helped them to construct a more balanced and strong teacher identity. The participants' reflections also connect with the post-structural perspective on identity, which takes identity as dynamic, continually shifting, and context-dependent (Barkhuizen, 2017; Varghese et al., 2005). Identity is something that teachers continuously negotiate through their experiences rather than a fixed trait. In this research, when women English language teachers accepted the concept of imperfection, they started to feel more comfortable with uncertainty and difficulty. They began to realize that teaching was a process of becoming, not an act of being (Britzman, 2003). This acceptance of imperfection empowered them to be more realistic, more responsive, and more reflective in their teaching practices.

Women English language teachers also realized that granting co-learning helped them to improve their relationship with students. They began to listen more carefully, modify their teaching

skills, and provide opportunities for students to express themselves. The classroom became a platform of interaction where students grow by sharing their ideas, reflecting together, and learning from each other. The classroom itself became a community where students thrive with their potential. Students shared ideas, reflected together, and learned from one another. The teachers felt that it was a rewarding and empowering experience for them as well, as it made learning more meaningful and effective for both the teachers and students. Being a guide who walks with students is a more important and human way of being professional. It recognizes that good teaching depends not on perfection but on the ability to connect, reflect, and keep learning. In line with Wenger's (1998) and Norton's (2013) ideas, Teacher identity is a continuous process shaped by participation, investment, and reflection. Through this evolving identity, teachers create classrooms that are more democratic, inclusive, and transformative, spaces where both teachers and students join together towards learning and understanding.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explored how women English Language teachers construct, negotiate, and reflect on their professional identities across time and experiences. Drawing on Norton's (1995, 2013) Investment Theory and Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice, the findings show that the teacher identity is not fixed but evolves through continuous negotiation of context, power, and relationships. Teachers' stories revealed a gradual movement from idealizing a perfect teacher image toward understanding teaching as a shared, co- learning process shaped by emotion, reflection, and social connection. At the heart of this shift is the investment that teachers make in their emotional, intellectual, and moral engagement with their work. The investment of the teachers was not only in their teaching but also in the care of students' development, their own learning, and their sense of belonging. In Nepal's less resourced and unequal education system, such investment shows resilience and purpose. Teachers described that success does not mean receiving authority or achieving a hierarchical position but participating and learning within communities of practice.

The study also revealed the gendered nature of Identity formation. My participants disclosed the reality that they must work harder than men to possess dignity, visibility, authority, and leadership positions. Our society often judged their professional worth not only by their competence and professional qualities but also by how well they met social expectations of being women, by their patience, modesty, and moral conduct. Despite these obstacles, women English language teachers showed a great deal of agency and drive, redefining what teaching meant in their classrooms and professional networks. In addition, the study also found that challenges sometimes occur within the same gender as women. The issues of seniority, favors, and jealousy can also influence the identity construction of women English language teachers. In many cases, their difficulties demonstrated how gender and the political systems influence the education and identity of women English language teachers in Nepal. They observed that institutional politics, such as favors, often had a greater influence on promotion and recognition than merit in the private sector. Similarly, national politics and power influence promotion and recognition in the government sector. Moreover, teachers' communities like teacher associations and teacher groups in different forms and names are the sister wings of powerful political parties, which play power politics intra-school and inter-school instead of raising their voices for students' welfare and quality education.

Another major finding suggested the importance of co-learning in shaping teacher identity. Research participants viewed their classrooms as communities where both they and their students grow together, sharing their ideas and learning from each other. As they accepted imperfection

and openness, they found greater authenticity and confidence. Adopting Wenger's (1998) idea of participation, co-learning fosters shared meaning-making and mutual growth. Teachers' understanding of themselves shifted from that of experts who deliver knowledge to facilitators who grow with students, making mistakes, learning from the mistakes, and correcting them. This relational and reflective practice helps them to create a more inclusive and democratic learning environment. Based on the above discussion, the findings indicate that investment, co- learning, gender, and politics play a crucial role in shaping women's English language teachers' identity in the context of Nepal. Teachers' ability for reflection, adaptation, and perseverance demonstrates their proactive role as change agents. Women teachers require more effort for their visibility, respect, and recognition compared to male teachers. However, their resilience, commitment, and engagement demonstrate the transformational power of education. This sustained investment enabled women English language teachers to reach a harvesting stage where they began to be recognized, identified, valued, and respected. These mirrors show that women English language teachers accept the challenges as opportunities leading to progress and establish themselves as women English language teachers. The findings have important implications for the professional growth of women English teachers. Men and women are two different entities of human beings; they have different needs, interests, characteristics, and socially assigned roles, so that policies should be developed addressing these different aspects. However, this study has certain limitations. I conducted this research with three participants by using the notion of narrative inquiry as a research method, which may narrow the generalization of the findings, leaving room for subjective interpretations. This study contributes to the existing literature on the identity negotiation of women English language teachers following the theoretical framework of Imagination, Investment, and Harvest. Further research could be conducted in a large and more diverse group of participants across Nepal to strengthen findings.

The theoretical discussion also concludes that teaching in Nepal today means being a student among students. Someone who makes both intellectual and emotional investments in the common path of development. Teaching is a process of co-construction, reflection, and empowerment rather than an act of being perfect. In order to rethink teacher development and policy in Nepal toward a more inclusive, equitable, and reflective profession, it can be helpful to acknowledge this changing co-learning identity.

References

Adhikari, U. (2025). *Vocational identity development and career choice among adolescents: A convergent mixed methods study in private schools of Lalitpur* [Unpublished MPhil dissertation]. Kathmandu University.

Barkhuizen, G. (2011). Narrative knowledging in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly, 45*(3), 391–414. https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2011.261888

Barkhuizen, G. (2013). *Narrative research in applied linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.

Barkhuizen, G. (2016). A short story approach to analyzing teacher (imagined) identities over time. *TESOL Quarterly*, *50*(3), 655–683. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.311

Barkhuizen, G. (2017). Reflections on language teacher identity research. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on language teacher identity research* (pp. 1–11). Routledge.

Barkhuizen, G., Benson, P., & Chik, A. (2014). *Narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research*. Routledge.

Bell, L., & Stevenson, H. (2006). *Education policy: Process, themes and impact*. Routledge.

Bhandari, L. K. (2022). *Becoming an English language teacher in Nepal: An autoethnographic journey* [Unpublished MPhil dissertation]. Kathmandu University.

Bhatta, L. (2023). *Stories of women English language teachers: A narrative inquiry* [Unpublished MPhil dissertation]. Kathmandu University.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.

Britzman, D. P. (2003). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach*. State University of New York Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.

Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1987). *Narrative, experience, and the study of curriculum*. American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research.* Jossey-Bass.

Clarke, M., Atwal, J., Raftery, D., Liddy, M., Ferris, R., Sloan, S., & Regan, E. (2023). Women teacher identity and educational reform: Perspectives from India. *Teacher Developmen*t, *27*(4), 415-430. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2023.2219645

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1995). *Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes*. Teachers College Press.

Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2016). Investment and identity in language learning and teaching. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 36*, 19-36. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190515000191

Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2018). Identity, investment and TESOL. In J. I. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching* (pp. 1–7). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0802

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(4), 227-268.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.

Eckert, P. (2006). Communities of practice. In K. Brown (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (2nd ed., pp. 683–685). Elsevier.

Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education, 25*(1), 99–125. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X025001099

Hardy-Witherspoon, C. (2020). *The obstacles and hardships of African American women educators in K-12* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Alliant International University.

Jones, D. (2017). Constructing identities: Women head teachers' perceptions and experiences in the primary sector. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *45*(6), 907-928. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216653973

Khadka, A. (2024). *Exploring stories of women head teachers in schools: Transformational leadership perspective* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Kathmandu University.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Mainali, S. (2021). *Identity construction of women English language teachers in Nepal: A narrative inquiry* [Unpublished MPhil. dissertation]. Kathmandu University.

Miller, J. (2009). Teacher identity. In A. Burna & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education (*pp. 172-181). Cambridge University Press.

Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST). (2019). *National education policy 2019*. Government of Nepal.

Neupane, B. P. (2023). English language teachers' professional journey and construction of their identity. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education*, *12*(1), 109-130. https://www.ojed.org/jise/article/view/4411

Norton, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly, 29*(1), 9–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587803

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Pearson Education.

Norton, B. (2012). *Identity and second language acquisition*. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of applied linguistics* (2nd ed., pp. 1-8). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0521

Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters.

Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language Teaching, 44*(4), 412–446. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000309

Pant, N. (2019). *Female teachers' motivational factors in teaching English* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Tribhuvan University.

Pokhrel, V. (2022). *Exploring English teachers' journey of change and identity construction: An auto/ethnographic inquiry* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Kathmandu University.

Ruohotie-Lyhty, M. (2013). Struggling for a professional identity: Two newly qualified language teachers' identity narratives during the first years at work. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 30*, 120–129. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.11.002

Saldana, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications

Saldana, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage Publication.

Simon-Maeda, A. (2004). The complex construction of professional identities: Women EFL educators in Japan speak out. *TESOL Quarterly*, *38*, 405–436. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588347

Sincar, M., Önen, Z., & Arar, K. H. (2020). An investigation of Turkish women school administrators' views on the concept of self-development. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 23*(2), 175-198. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1524932

Sun, C., Feng, X., Sun, B., Li, W., & Zhong, C. (2022). Teachers' professional identity and burnout among Chinese women school teachers: Mediating roles of work engagement and psychological capital. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(20). https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192013477

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2015). *Education for all 2000–2015: Achievements and challenges*.

Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., & Johnson, K. A. (2005). Theorizing language teacher identity: Three perspectives and beyond. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, 4*(1), 21–44.

Webster, L., & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: An introduction to using critical event narrative analysis in research on learning and teaching.* Routledge.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E. (2010). Communities of practice and social learning systems: the career of a concept. In C. Blackmore (Ed.), *Social learning systems and communities of practice* (pp. 179-198). Springer.

Wenger, E. (2011). *Communities of practice: A brief introduction*. Wenger-Trayner.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Wenger-Trayner.

Wiseman, A. W. (2010). The uses of evidence for educational policymaking: Global contexts and international trends. *Review of Research in Education, 34*(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X09350472

Xing, H., Liu, L., Jiang, A. L., & Hunt, N. (2024). Unpacking a female language teacher's identity transformations: A perspective of multiple I-positions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1291940

The Author

Roshani Parajuli is a lecturer at Sunshine College, Bhaktapur, Nepal. She holds an MPhil in English language from Kathmandu University. Her academic interests include women English language teachers' identity construction, teacher professional development, and the integration of Yoga into English language teaching. She is also a teacher trainer and researcher interested in exploring teachers' professional experiences, identity development, and wellbeing through qualitative research.

AI Declaration

The author used ChatGPT (open AI) to receive ideas regarding language refinement.

Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the support and encouragement received from family, supervisor, mentors, and research participants.