

## Examining the Role of Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) in Shaping the Professional Identity of ESL Teachers

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### Abstract

Formation of teacher identity is a dynamic process that is affected by various factors like teachers' beliefs, classroom practices, and past experiences. One such factor is the choice of pedagogical approach. The present mixed-method study aims to examine the role of the inquiry-based learning approach in forming and transforming ESL teachers' professional identities. A survey questionnaire was administered to 14 teachers teaching in Cambridge and International Baccalaureate (IB) affiliated schools followed by one-on-one interviews. After analyzing the data, the study revealed that teachers' professional identities transformed as they transitioned from the traditional approach to English language teaching to inquiry-based learning (IBL). The participants of the study also reported having developed newer identities like 'Teacher Learner', 'Research Assistant', 'Enabler of Learning', and 'Collaborative Contributor' while practising IBL. The identities formed were also attuned to the classroom practices. The study has implications for ESL teachers.

**Keywords:** Teacher identity, professional identity, inquiry-based learning (IBL), teacher education, inquiry

### Introduction

A teacher is often considered as a catalyst in the process of education, who enables learners to acquire knowledge that they would need for functioning in society. A teacher leaves maximum effect on learners for

their lifetime as they learn how to learn from the teacher. Learners often observe the teachers closely and assume them as role models in many ways. A language teacher is often seen as a role model for language learners which they use in and outside academic setups. Subsequently, teachers' knowledge, skills, and personality have a vital role in learners' development. Teachers' individual experiences and beliefs (Rice, 2010) have a lasting effect on their classroom which makes it important to understand the concept of teacher identity.

Identity, as defined by Danielewicz (2001), is our understanding of who we are and who we think other people are. In particular, the term 'teacher identity' (TI) refers to how teachers seem to understand themselves as teachers. It is considered to be relational, constructed, and altered by how teachers see others and how others see them in their shared experiences and negotiated interactions. Castañeda (2011) identified two domains of TI (internal and external) that help us understand the scope of the research area. The internal (personal) domain refers to the awareness of knowledge, emotions, beliefs, and motivations. While the external domain (the social aspect), is macro in nature; related to teachers' interaction, roles, identities, and professional practices. In this study, we are investigating the aspects of the external domain of teacher identity of English as second language (hereafter ESL) teachers.

Teachers' competence in what to teach (content) and how to teach (pedagogy) leads them to deliver a successful class. While doing so, they perform several actions, such as giving instructions, evaluating responses, giving feedback, etc. These practices often assign varied identities to the teacher. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to understand the notion of teacher identity and the factors that affect it. This aids in comprehending teachers' take on pedagogical practices, choice of resource materials, student agency, and professional development activities. In this paper, the teachers compare the effects of adopting inquiry-based learning with the traditional ways of classroom instruction such as direct method and structural approach on their identities.

### **Inquiry-Based Learning**

Inquiry-based learning (IBL) is defined as an act of acquiring knowledge and skills through the art of questioning (Lee, 2014). In this method, learners are active in making observations, presenting questions,

scrutinizing sources, gathering information, analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing data. The objective is fulfilled when learners are able to apply the findings of their inquiry in real-life situations. This method focuses on enabling learners to critically evaluate situations and share their perspectives on the same. In an IBL classroom, unlike the traditional methods of teaching, the teacher facilitates and scaffolds learning in the process of identifying the facts rather than providing them to the learners readily. This is done to ensure that the learners engage in the different steps of inquiry-based learning. The principles of IBL are compatible with that of communicative language teaching (CLT) as CLT also focuses on communicative proficiency rather than mastery of structures (Lee, 2014). CLT is an umbrella term for various 'active learning' methods of which IBL is one that focuses on investigation and interpretation.

### **Literature Review**

The available literature on teacher identity suggests that it is dynamic in nature and shifts over time under the influence of varied factors. According to Tsui (2007), teachers create their identity through a process of continuous negotiation, debates, and discourse that includes both their personal and professional lives. According to Rodgers & Scott (2008), the context shapes teachers' identity. It comprises personal and professional experiences, choice of pedagogical practice, history and belief of the organization, availability of resources, professional development opportunities, etc. It brings us to understand what teachers' professional identity means and entails.

Further, Cohen (2008) suggests that teachers' professional identities guide their engagement, commitment, and actions in and out of the classroom. Further reading also suggests that past experiences affect teachers' professional identity, which then regulates their pedagogical choices (Rex & Nelson, 2004). Thus, experiences shape teachers' professional identities and in turn teachers' professional identities affect their experiences as their identities affect their instructional practice.

Among the very few studies discussing how the learner-centric pedagogical approach (similar to IBL) affects teacher identity, Keiler (2018), examined the way teachers thought about themselves as they implemented learner-centred pedagogy, the difficulties they faced as their roles and identities shifted, and the ways they grew or resisted

growth. Some of the teachers found this pedagogical approach consistent with the preexisting identities and embraced it without much hesitation. A few other teachers made a dramatic shift to the new identities in order to implement the programme. The study concluded with a suggestion that drastically changing the learning environment affects teachers' identities and their approaches to teaching. Although there have been several studies that record the positive effects of IBL, very few of them have looked into the effect of IBL practices on teachers' professional identities. Therefore, this study addresses the research gap by answering the following research questions.

1. How do ESL teachers' professional identities transform after adopting IBL?
2. Which new teacher identities have emerged as a result of practising IBL?

### **Methodology**

The present study used a mixed-method research design to analyze the data gathered from two instruments: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Fourteen female non-native English teachers who had experience in teaching in different curricula (CBSE and State Boards) in India and have recently shifted to Cambridge and the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum (both known to implement inquiry-based teaching practice) took part in this study. Teachers' professional identity was the dependent variable, whereas the IBL practice was the independent variable. The data gathered from the questionnaire and semi-structured interview was qualitatively analyzed to identify the themes that indicated the transformation in their identities. The responses from both instruments were compared to triangulate the findings.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

After analyzing the data received from the survey and responses from the interview, the following results were obtained.

### **Prior Knowledge of Inquiry-Based Learning**

As all the participants were teaching the curricula that encourage inquiry-based learning, they mostly had some prior knowledge about what inquiry-based learning is.

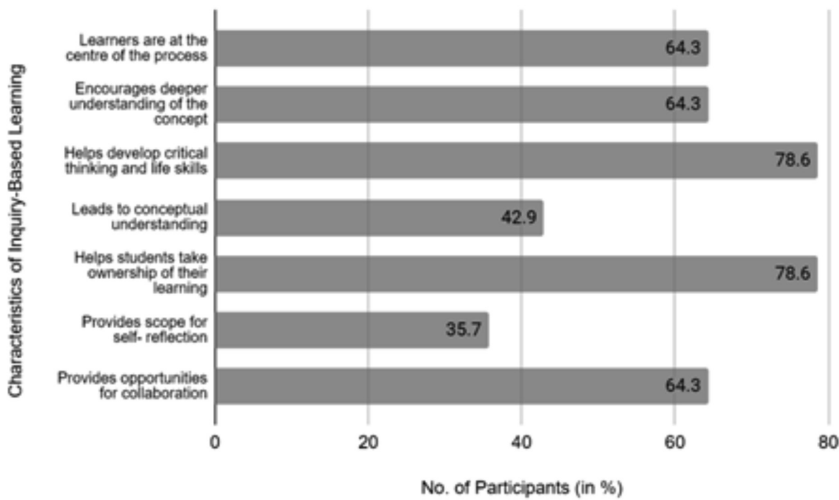
**Figure 1:** *Understanding the IBL Approach*

Figure 1 shows that 78.6 per cent of participants believed that this pedagogical approach allowed students to take ownership of their learning and helped them develop critical thinking skills, while 64.3 per cent of participants thought that learners were at the centre of the process and that this pedagogical approach encouraged a deeper understanding of the concept and provided more opportunities for collaboration. This analysis gives an overview of the participants' schema about the IBL approach. Some of the significant categories in their understanding of IBL emerged were critical thinking skills, collaboration, ownership, learners at the centre of the process, and a deeper understanding of concepts.

Their prior knowledge of inquiry-based learning can also be attributed to the professional development activities that the participants had undertaken. Table 1 indicates that the participants frequently participated in various professional development activities. Apart from the knowledge gained through their classroom practices, participants' IBL-related awareness could be an outcome of their professional development initiatives.

**Table 1:** Engagement in Professional Development Related to Inquiry-Based Learning

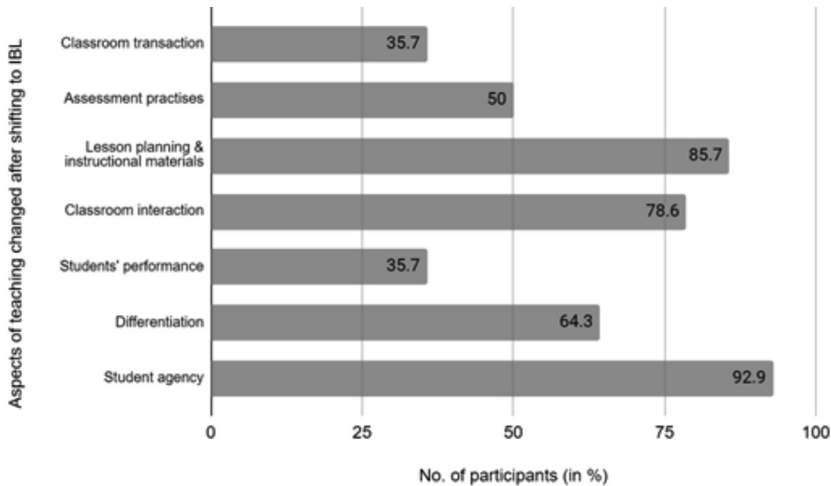
Regularly (at least once a year)	50%
Occasionally (every few years)	42.9%
Rarely or never	7.1%

N= 14

### Transition from the Traditional Approaches to Inquiry-Based Learning and Transformation of Identities (RQ 1)

The participants identified the major areas of their pedagogical practices that they believed changed after they shifted to the IBL approach.

**Figure 2:** Aspects of Teaching Changed After Shifting to IBL



As presented in Figure 2, almost all the respondents of the study (92 per cent) were of the opinion that 'student agency' is an aspect that is one of the biggest differences between these two pedagogical approaches. Student agency is a delicate combination of students having a voice and being able to play an active part in decision-making in terms of the learning experience. This is very different from the traditional approach to language teaching where learners are passive and only considered to be receivers of information.

In their responses to the questions in the semi-structured interview, participants expressed the following ideas.

**Excerpt 1:** “As compared to the traditional way of teaching English, IBL allows learners to decide what they want to learn, how they want to learn it and the way they want to get tested on the concepts. It provides learners the chance to question and conduct research independently.” (P 6)

**Excerpt 2:** “Learners are given the agency to learn at their pace, there is flexibility, and it caters to their interests, therefore there is differentiation as well.” (P 8)

According to the respondents, student agency is demonstrated through the ability to learn at their pace and being able to decide what to learn and how to be assessed. This suggests that all the teachers have a consensus about student agency being the biggest differentiator between the two approaches. Categories like collaboration, meaningful negotiation, learner autonomy, and flexibility in learning are of great significance in IBL-adopted classrooms. These categories in participants’ responses suggest a constructive change in their pedagogical practices.

Further, lesson planning and selection/designing instructional materials also witnessed a drastic shift as 85.7 per cent of the participants agreed with this. The respondents believe that inquiry-based learning yields better outcomes as compared to the traditional approaches to English language teaching. A few of them also felt that sometimes it requires more time to plan a lesson as tasks need to be challenging enough for the learners.

**Excerpt 3:** “It all begins with Lesson Planning and Materials Design, where we are now more conscious and aware of the differences in the learning styles and strategies of our learners. The various differentiations will cater to different types of learners, ensuring inclusivity. Naturally, they will also be assessed using the mode that suits them best and is commonly efficient. This will, in turn, lead to better performances from learners.” (P 7)

**Excerpt 4:** “More thought and effort are put into lesson planning. More research is required, and hence is more challenging and engaging for the designers.” (P 4)

The participants reflected on certain important considerations like learning styles, inclusivity, accessibility, and research during lesson planning and materials designing. As part of the IBL ideology, teachers are strongly motivated to have these considerations in mind while teaching in the classroom.

Through these responses, it can be ascertained that respondents were aware that planning an inquiry-based language class can be challenging. However, the possibility of differentiation is higher, thus ensuring inclusivity. This is in contrast with the traditional classroom which believes in homogeneity and does not cater much to different learning styles and interests.

78.6 per cent of respondents believed that as compared to the traditional approach, classroom interaction drastically changes in IBL. Classroom interaction is more between the learners and they interact with their peers for meaning-making and negotiations. Teachers' interaction with their students is just to provide them with instructions and help them with their problems during the inquiry process. Some of the responses below capture similar thoughts.

**Excerpt 5:** "In IBL, classroom interaction is more learner initiated. Learners interact with their peers and teachers whenever they find it necessary. In this kind of interaction, the teacher's role is that of a moderator." (P 1)

**Excerpt 6:** "Learners are able to come up with their own questions, and more freedom is given to them." (P 12)

Responses suggest that teachers encourage learner-learner interaction and intervene whenever required. Conversations are more learner-initiated and the focus of the interaction is on meaning-making. One of the respondents also felt that the teacher's role here becomes that of a 'moderator'. Instead of the teacher leading the conversation, he/she moderates the conversation among the learners.

On the basis of their understanding of how inquiry-based learning is different from the traditional approach, their identity also shifts, and they tend to develop a newer identity completely different from their previous one. Table 2 presents how teachers perceived their identity transformation with change in pedagogy over time.

The identities of the respondents were transformed in the following manner and have also manifested themselves in the form of classroom practices.

Knowledge provider  $\implies$  Facilitator

Assessor of knowledge  $\implies$  Assessor of skills

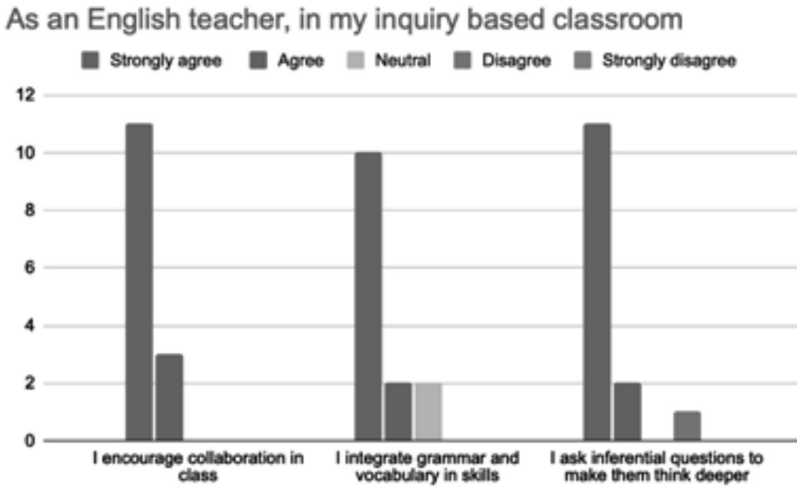
Sole supervisor  $\implies$  Collaborator



**Table 2**

Earlier Identity	Evidence	Transformed Identity	Evidence
Knowledge Provider	"I used to teach them the rules of grammar, give them the meaning of words that they found difficult and also helped them answer comprehension questions in their notebook. I used to give them notes on figures of speech and authors/poets mentioned in the syllabus." (P 4)	Facilitator	"I facilitate the learner's inquiry process and support them with the relevant resources." (P 3)  "Inquiry initiation through thought-provoking questions, guiding the inquiry in the right direction" (P 10)
Assessor of Knowledge	"Earlier I would set the question papers and then assess them on lessons that we did in our classes." (P 5)	Assessor of Skills	"... I integrate elements like grammar and vocabulary in my reading lessons. My reading of a text is always followed by a writing task." (P 7)
Sole Supervisor	"You know, I would always be supervising everything single-handedly in my class, I would plan the entire lesson, do corrections, initiate discussions, etc. So, you see, I never made my students be a part of any planning." (P 14)	Collaborator	"I am now in collaboration with my learners as opposed to someone who would solely supervise." (P 6)  "Collaborating activities like problem-solving have increased in my planning. I let my students plan tasks." (P 2)

As can be observed in Figure 3, when asked about their classroom practices, 71.4 per cent of participants strongly agreed with the statement that they integrate grammar and vocabulary into skills while assessing the students. Similarly, 78.57 per cent of the participants regularly posed inferential questions to students during the inquiry-based language classes in order to make them think deeply. 78.5 per cent of the respondents also encourage collaboration in class thus justifying the identity of being a 'collaborator'.

**Figure 3:** *Practices in IBL Classrooms*

### New Professional Identities Developed During Inquiry-Based ESL Classes

Based on the analysis of interview data, several new identities have also emerged. Some of the identities are-

#### 1. Learner Teacher

A few of the participants have reported that they feel that in inquiry-based learning, they take up the role of a learner themselves, thus learning from their students. In addition to this, to match the learners' learning capabilities and requirements, teachers need to step up and keep themselves updated in terms of technological competence. Here are a few excerpts that point to the same.

**Excerpt 7:** "I became a learner-teacher, started being more courageous, adaptive and flexible." (P 6)

**Excerpt 8:** "As a teacher, we must constantly upgrade ourselves and be accurate. This requires a lot of preparation and research before a class. Therefore, I am constantly learning while teaching. Learners also come up with innovative, out of the box ideas that are new for me ... we learn together." (P 3)

**Excerpt 9:** "I have become an inquiry-based learner myself to model that in my classroom." (P 9)

**Excerpt 10:** "I can see myself as an everyday learner. I learn so much

from my students. They are very smart and come up with new things every day." (P 14)

The excerpts above reveal the, the roles that the teachers fulfil in order to attain the identity of 'Teacher Learner'. Teachers need to learn about students' learning processes, understand their perspectives, and keep themselves updated in order to respond to students who think out of the box and come up with new ideas. The respondents of this study have been able to do all these tasks to assign themselves the identity of 'Teacher Learner'.

## **2. Research Assistant**

Participants also associated themselves with the identity of research assistant. They help the students do research and answer their inquiry questions. A research assistant provides students with the inquiry questions, provides them with the appropriate resources, and helps them with producing plagiarism-free work. Here are some of the excerpts from the interview that indicate that the respondents indeed fulfilled these tasks in order to identify as research assistants.

**Excerpt 11:** "I first prepare the basic requirements and supporting material which further lead the students to inquire and being curious. By providing them guided questions and websites, I help them as research assistant." (P 1)

**Excerpt 12:** "I myself do extensive research to provide the correct information in a simpler and more effective way. I only help them with resources and materials, they do all the learning themselves." (P 4)

The emergence of the categories such as facilitating research and helping to identify resources indicate that the participants had assumed themselves as a research assistant. This identity also suggests how power dynamics change in the IBL classroom by strengthening the learners and learning processes.

## **3. Enabler of Learning**

Some respondents of the survey identified themselves as 'Enabler of Learning'. The term 'enabler' refers to something or someone that makes things happen (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Teachers are considered to be enablers of learning because they help their learners unlock their potential and perform better every day. The focus is on the learners rather than completing the syllabus. Here are a few excerpts

that inform us of how teachers in IBL classrooms see themselves as 'enabler of learning'.

**Excerpt 13:** "I see myself as a teacher who motivates learners to explore and improve their skills. I encourage them to work on themselves to create original work. Thus, I enable them to learn independently." (P 8)

**Excerpt 14:** "By promoting critical thinking in students, giving opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning, reflecting on their learning journey. Providing constructive feedback to students. Preparing students for the future in all aspects." (P 5)

The respondents, through their answers during the interview, have identified what a teacher needs to do in order to be an enabler of learning. These are the same skills that one practises in their inquiry-based classrooms. Thus, it can be ascertained that student agency is an aspect that teachers promote by being 'enablers of learning'.

#### **4. Collaborative Contributor**

A teacher as a 'collaborative contributor' is one who encourages everyone to work together as a group to achieve a common goal or a learning outcome. Teachers, in an IBL class, collaborate with the students and at the same time contribute to it. Here are some excerpts highlighting the same.

**Excerpt 15:** "I have become more confident and can collaborate even better with the learners. I provide them with the inputs whenever required and always motivate them to work together." (P 2)

**Excerpt 16:** "I feel like a more relevant teacher. I feel like I am equipping learners with skills that are more relevant to the current times." (P 12)

Respondents reported that they contributed to students' learning by equipping them with skills that are more relevant and will help them in the future. The teacher's role has shifted from being a knowledge provider to that of a collaborative contributor in the meaning-making process.

#### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the research, it can be stated that teachers' identities transform with the change in pedagogical approach. In the traditional English language class, the teacher would have the identity of 'knowledge giver', 'sole supervisor', and 'assessor of content'. However, in an inquiry-based classroom, the teacher's identity transforms into

that of a 'facilitator', 'assessor of skills', and 'collaborator'. These transformed identities also attune to teachers' classroom practices. Data further revealed the formation of new identities in the process of practicing inquiry-based learning. Respondents reported developing the following identities: learner teacher, research assistant, enabler of learning, and collaborative contributor. All these teacher identities support various facets of IBL and help learners demonstrate 'choice', 'voice', and 'ownership'.

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