Women Teachers' Identity Transformation: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

In this autoethnography, I, Sharada Khanal, as the first author, explore my transformative journey as a woman English teacher through personal experiences and educational milestones. This autoethnographic narrative analyzes each narrative account through the theoretical lens of dialogical self-theory to interpret the connections between my (first author's) narratives and my identity transformation in relation to different I-positions. Evocative autoethnography in research enables me to apply flexible modes of inquiry derived from my life experiences, creating a more equitable and supportive environment for women educators. This study not only projects my professional growth but also offers a poignant reflection on the broader challenges and accomplishments women face in academic circles.

Keywords: *Evocative autoethnography, women teacher, identity, transformation*

Introduction

This paper explores the transformative journey of Ms. Khanal, an English language teacher, through a series of her anecdotal reflections and their theoretical interpretation by the second author, Dr. Poudel. Women English teachers' professional identity is shaped by the socio-cultural and institutional context where they perform their roles (Sunar, 2023). Teachers interact with communal norms, values, and practices. This interaction affects their sense of self and identity. They navigate and familiarize themselves with these influences through interactions, which leads to their realization of who they are as individuals and professionals (Neupane & Bhatt, 2023). Similarly, they face numerous hindrances, including a lack of professional development opportunities and unfair treatment in terms of gender and societal expectations, despite the teaching profession being a precursor to all the professions we encounter (Khanal, 2023).

Moreover, school administration should give the women teachers time, space, and support to reflect on their identities, values, and visions in relation to curricula, examinations, and the factors of girl student accomplishment because it is necessary to acknowledge the culturally formed beliefs that shape women teachers' values and identities (Clarke et al., 2023). They transform their personal and professional identities as teachers over time, focusing on intervening factors like necessary content knowledge and abilities to revise or design materials (Kim, 2023). Likewise, internal factors such as establishing a close relationship with one's inner self, teaching experiences, and self-positioning influence the identity reformation of experienced teachers (Suhr, 2014). This study explores the identity transformation of women teachers through evocative autoethnography, focusing on my personal and professionally significant memories and epiphanies within the broader cultural and social context of Nepali public colleges.

Mainali (2021) concluded that Nepali women English language teachers construct their professional identity through prolonged involvement and devotion, but it is not a ready-made cake to be eaten. Furthermore, Xing (2024) found that personal and professional factors, including strong beliefs, shape the dynamic nature of teacher identity. Parke (2018) states that she transitioned from a strict, content-based teacher to a constructivist facilitator with an emphasis on critical thinking. Parke (2018) analyzed the shifting nature of her identity through the reflexive interviews and a first-person narrative of the autoethnographic writing. Similarly, Kamali (2021) revealed that practicing autoethnography can make educators emotional, which helps maintain a balance between the emotional and rational aspects of human personality, leading to professional development.

In a similar vein, Kandel (2022) stated that teachers reconstruct their identities by publishing articles, engaging in journal writing and action research, disseminating research reports through national, provincial, and local peer-reviewed journals, attending seminars and workshops, and presenting papers at ELT conferences. A woman teacher feels isolated because of the irresponsible act of the college administration and not paying attention to their voice (Sitaula, 2023). Relating it to organizational justice, Guven (2020) argued that teachers' organizational job satisfaction, performance, motivation, and loyalty are determined by how fairly they treat all individuals, regardless of their sex or equal competency.

Yang et al. (2022) argue that it is essential to understand the process of resilience, rather than just focusing on personal limitations regarding identity tensions and challenges, in order to enhance a sense of agency and encourage action for the development of professional identities. Similarly, Bhandari (2022) found that developing optimism and a strong sense of achievement can be achieved even in the face of resource scarcity, as family support, teacher guidance, and one's intense desire to improve social status can serve as motivating factors. Likewise, reflecting on his experience, Lepcha (2024) noted that English language learning has been a catalyst for a paradigm shift in the linguistic, socio-cultural, educational, and political life of an indigenous person. Identity construction relates to autonomy development. In the absence of autonomy, women English learners from rural areas cannot make a difference. This fact made their choice of teaching a rational and realistic decision rather than an understanding of their potential through education. Patriarchy challenges in rural areas and negotiate social willpower.

Earlier studies, such as Parke (2018), Kamali (2021), Lepcha (2024), and Sitaula (2023), focused on reflective practices that have the transformative power for educators and researchers. Similarly, Bhandari (2022), Mainali (2021), and Yang (2022) emphasized the importance of continuous professional development and adapting teaching approaches to local contexts. Likewise, Xing (2024) and Guven (2020) identified that autonomy and

supporting educational initiatives, including fair treatment and personal happiness, are transformative factors in teachers' identity. Involvement and autonomy of women teachers are necessary to achieve gender equity, allowing them to choose their roles and utilize their decision-making power, along with resilience, to move forward. However, in the context of Nepal, researchers have overlooked the issue of women English language teachers' identity transformation from an evocative autoethnographical lens. However, the construction of women English language teachers' identity in the Nepali context is not well documented. Concentrating on this area, I contribute to this knowledge gap. Similarly, this approach is particularly powerful in highlighting the subjective and emotional aspects of identity transformation, offering rich and evocative insights that traditional research methods might overlook.

More particularly, I provide insights into the factors influencing the professional identity of women English teachers by assessing their personal experiences and the hindrances they face. Understanding experiences helps systems foster their professional growth. Likewise, it contributes to the existing body of literature on teachers' identity transformation through evocative autoethnography, which explores the depth of personal experience and evokes an emotional response from readers, fostering empathy and understanding. Thus, such an understanding raises awareness about the broader socio-cultural context.

Autoethnography as a Method

Autoethnography is a qualitative method of storytelling and writing lives (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). It is an influential and rigorous research method that uses creative methods of data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Atherton, 2020). It focuses on the transformative nature of teacher identity and the significance of reflective practice and community support in nurturing professional development. Further, vignettes based on memory and storytelling have been a golden thread that has enabled me to position and understand my lived experiences (Cairns, 2023). Weaving personal stories into captivating narratives (Narayan, 2008) and researching our life experiences reconstructs the mental and emotional well-being of the researcher (Pearce, 2010). Through researchers' defenseless selves, emotions, spirits, and bodies, evocative stories are produced that generate the effect of reality. Such real-life experiences become the best means of assessing human experiences and even help us understand how to live and cope (Ellis, 2008). The uniqueness of evocative autoethnography is the refusal to exclude the "I", the first-person voice that is always the author on the pages of a journal, a book or a monograph (Bochner & Ellis, 2022). It transcends conventional limitations of objectivity and adopts the subjective and emotional domain of personal experiences.

When I (the first author) constructed my self–reflexive narrative, first I re-remembered my experiences that relate to my identities as a woman, English language teacher, user, and teacher educator. I had discussed most of my experiences with my classroom colleagues or students. Hence, my analysis involved re-experiencing and reinterpreting these experiences, which helped me understand how I transformed my identities by sharing my critical stories with others. I wrote a narrative account of each episode, which is the initial analysis. Then I analyzed each narrative account with the theoretical lens of dialogical self-theory to interpret the connections between my personal narratives. While analyzing, I retained only the prominent narrative accounts that reflected my identity transformation in relation to different I-positions.

Theoretical Lens in the Narratives

Dialogical self-theory, developed by psychologist Hubert Hermans in the 1960s, focuses on the dynamic and relational nature of the self as a bridging theory that exposes unforeseen associations among various phenomena (Hermans, 2012). I-positions refer to various roles or identities that an individual may assume. That is internal, for example, being a woman, the caring guide, the supporter for students, and the lifelong learner. It involves the internal dialogue that shapes one's thoughts, feelings, and actions. External I-positions involve interacting with others and receiving feedback, support, and other forms of assistance. The second one is the dialogical relationships of different I-positions. Other positions are meta-position and promoter position, which help to make sense of different voices and drive transformation and development within the self, respectively (Xing, 2024). It reveals the nature of human understanding, normally of the mind (Ho et al., 2001). DST assisted me in analysing my perceptions and experiences of transformative changes through the lens of internal dialogues and multiple self-positions.

Episode of Drawing Inspirational I-Positions in Teacher-Learner Relationship

Inspirational teachers have a profound impact on their students' lives. They serve as catalysts for students' personal and academic growth. Teachers' inspiration promotes students' engagement in the classroom (Sammons et al., 2014).

> *I (the first author) grew up in a remote village of a hilly region in a middle-class family. In 2052 BS, I was in class eight. I remember my English teacher, late Krishna Rana, speaking fluently and confidently, which captivated me. He suggested to me, "Read at least two new words along with their better pronunciation, and parts of speech every day, and make sentences of your own using those words immediately." I did almost the whole year round. I consulted the dictionary whenever I saw new words, especially in the newspaper. Even in writing, he said, you should write some lines or paragraphs about anything around you every day." I found a change in my vocabulary and writing. Later, I came to realize that I had developed confidence in the English language.*

It was the moment when I was determined to learn English. That period ignited the hunger for learning the English language. Creating an environment that inspires learners (Johnson, 2017) promotes their autonomy. It initiated my transformation from a curious schoolgirl to a determined learner. Later, majoring in English at the Intermediate in Education (I. Ed.) level was a result of that inspiration. It was my watershed period that shaped my language learning journey.

No sooner had I completed my intermediate education than I started teaching in a local private basic-level school named Vijaya Co-operative Boarding School. It was the beginning of English language teaching. As a novice student teacher, I faced numerous challenges in managing a mixed-ability, multilingual, and multicultural classroom.

Additionally, novice teachers face challenges in preparing lesson plans, motivating students, and maintaining relationships with students and parents (Septiani et al., 2019). There was a predominance of students from the Tharu and Magar communities. Similarly, I was able to attend only a few classes in college in the morning throughout my three-year bachelor's degree, as I worked as a teacher during the day. According to dialogical self-theory, my internal i-position as a lifelong learner and student interacted with my external I-position as a caring teacher, maintaining relationships with students and parents. Dialogue with students influences their internal conversations, shapes identity, and enhances growth (Khong et al., 2023).

Episode of Dialogical Interactions in Initial English Language Pedagogy

Teaching English in the initial stage of a teacher's career is both challenging and exciting. Teachers must be familiar with new responsibilities, interact with students, and meet the expectations of the administration, guided by traditional values (Bickhar, 2014).

One day in 2058 BS, I entered a class of grade seven. The students were so alert. I asked them to open the English Delight textbook. I maintained a pin-drop silent classroom. I directly started reading the text for them. After completing the lesson, I wrote down all the answers and asked them to take notes. The school principal said, "It's perfect." I even asked them, "Learn those answers by heart."

Rote learning has been the cornerstone of the education system for decades, where students are often encouraged to memorize exam-oriented textbooks (Thankachan, 2024). The routine of teaching the English language continued in the same manner, using the same methods and practices. However, school administrators were pleased because I was assigned to discipline class, and parents were satisfied because I provided a ready-made answer and had them memorize everything. I was a strict teacher. But, how cruel I was in the classroom, and I was still thinking of myself as a good teacher in the school. I tried to make them understand the topic, but hardly let them raise questions. Sometimes, I would punish them for being unable to answer what exactly I had written for them. The punishment system may temporarily control behavior, but it's not a long-term solution. The class used to be in my control, and students were passive listeners. It was a banking model of teaching. The priorities of parents and school administrators influence the choice of a better pedagogical approach. According to the multi-voiced nature of the self in dialogical self-theory, I, as a strict teacher, engage in internal dialogue that focuses on personal and professional values, and I follow administrative expectations. Here, administration and parents have become external I-positions with whom teachers have dialogical practices, where the self is influenced by society.

Episode of Dialogical Journeys through Challenge and Growth

Women student-teachers face challenges of managing the dual roles of student and educator, including balancing academic responsibilities with societal expectations. Though women teachers are burdened by their dual career, they strive to move ahead with determination (Laaboudi, 2021).

After a few years, at the end of the year of my bachelor's degree in 2060 BS, I got married and took on additional responsibilities and roles simultaneously. It was a great victory for me to have the opportunity to attend Kirtipur to pursue a master's degree in the same year of my marriage. Almost twenty-two years ago, sending a daughter-in-law from a small village in the Chitwan district to study in a hostel was quite revolutionary. In the healthy and competitive environment of the girls' hostel, I refocused on my career, having taken on the great responsibility of bearing and rearing a child. It caused a delay of some months in dissertation writing.

The demands of motherhood, such as childbearing and caring for a child, interfere with my academic progress, causing delays. Married women often have to balance conflicting demands between family responsibilities and academic work (Amos & Manieson, 2015).

I recall my pregnancy days in 2073 BS. I was teaching at a public college. I could not make such a loud sound to control the large class size. I felt dissatisfied with my own classroom management. Even after childbirth, I had to resume the class just after forty-five days. I could not drive my vehicle myself. So, I booked an auto every day for some hours. When the auto started moving ahead on the bumpy road, I felt excessive

pain in my belly, and with tearful eyes, I requested the driver to drive slowly. So did he; perhaps he understood the situation. At the same time, I had a great problem with babysitting. I often called my mother and my mother-in-law alternatively. But it was not always possible. Sometimes, I had to rely on neighbours. It's not free from stress.

Although the Nepali government has sanctioned a paid maternity leave of a minimum of ninety days for working women in government, non-government, and private organizations before or after childbirth (Forum for Women, Law and Development [FWLD], 2018), it is not being implemented properly. Only government organizations followed it, but public and private institutions still adhere to the outdated system of granting only forty-five days of maternity leave. Moreover, there is a notable absence of flexible working hours and babysitting provisions, which further complicates the situation for women in balancing their professional duties with their maternal responsibilities. Women teachers are effective time managers who care for their children, manage household chores, and teach (Barik, 2017). The Dialogical Self Theory emphasizes the needs and voices of working mothers that should be identified and integrated into organizational practices to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

In 2066 BS, I was busy during the day shift at a renowned public college. In the morning shift, I decided to engage in another institution. I learned about the vacancy announcement for a private +2 college. I submitted all required documents. They even observed my class and found it impressive. Later, they didn't call me to join it. When I inquired about the reason, one of the founders of that institution said, "You have only one child, and later you may have another child, and that will create disturbance here." He further said, "We prefer a male candidate."

I was resilient in maintaining my professional identity despite such external challenges. According to the Dialogical Self Theory, there is an internal dialogue between my professional goals and the societal expectations. The comment from the founder is offensive and discriminatory, representing an external societal voice that challenged my professional identity. Later, I transformed this experience into my source of strength to fight against such external challenges.

Another incident I recall is that immediately after completing my MA at Tribhuvan University, I returned to my hometown, Chitwan, in 2063 BS. The first time I went to a private +2 college, I faced an impressive interview. However, in the middle of the observation class, I heard two or three students calling me "Mummy." I could see distrust in their eyes because they thought of me like their mother or sister. I was the first woman to apply as an English language teacher. I continued taking classes. After a few days, they believed me. Later, they said, "You are our best teacher."

The students' initial reaction to calling me "*mummy*" replicates an external dialogue where they anticipated familiar roles in me. These external perceptions influence my internal self-dialogue, which likely prompts questioning of my professional identity as a teacher. However, I continued interacting and teaching, finally changing students' perception from seeing me as a maternal figure to identifying me as a competent and the best teacher. The social and cultural narratives that structure teacher identity formation. However, the changing nature of women English language teachers within the socio-cultural context of the teaching environment develops my self-concept.

Dialogical Journey of Locating Professional Transformation

The professional transformation of women teachers is a multifaceted process. There are many aspects of professional growth involving continuous learning, development

opportunities, and attending workshops and seminars. Kandel (2022) focused on participation in English language teaching conferences, conducting research, and the use of information and communication technology to promote the professional identities of women teachers. Even though a co-operative knowledge community of mentors and friends assists women for their professional growth.

> *One day in the summer of 2019, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was taking an online class for second-year bachelor's degree students in management. I found it difficult to handle Microsoft Teams, although we initially conducted classes via Messenger and Zoom. Many students were not attending the class. I asked one regular student, Niraj, "Why are your other friends not joining the class?" and he replied, "Many of them do have internet access, even if they have, their network is very poor." At that moment, I realized I should do a survey on students' attitudes towards virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. I received help from my daughter and friends in creating a Google Form Questionnaire, which I sent via a messenger group and email to students from multiple colleges. It was the first step to the research journey that was ignited by the toughness of coping with technology.*

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of technology in the learning process (Khanal, 2021). At the same time, I faced a problem with an online teaching platform that represented an external dialogue with my internal self-positions, as I held multiple roles - a teacher adopting technology, a researcher, and an educator aware of learners' difficulties. The interaction with Niraj explained the issues surrounding internet access, which represents an external dialogue that influenced my internal self-positions. This communication stimulated me to adopt a new I-position as a researcher to investigate students' attitudes towards virtual learning. Eventually, adopting technology enhances innovative teaching and transformative learning. Similarly, I remember:

> *In 2023, I attended the National conferences organized by Balkumari College and Boston International College as a presenter in Chitwan. For the first time, I learnt how to present a paper. I met scholars from various disciplines. Most importantly, I came into contact with my friends. My first acquaintance with numerous professors from Kathmandu University, Tribhuvan University, and Pokhara University impressed me greatly with their research activities. Moreover, my meeting with professors from Kathmandu University, along with my already engaged friends at the same university, motivated me to enroll in the MPhil English Language Education (ELE) program at Kathmandu University.*

According to Dialogical Self Theory (DST), my experiences at those conferences reveal a multifaceted relationship of internal and external dialogues that shape my identity transformation as a woman English language teacher. Here, I took on multiple I-positions, such as I-presenter and I-learner. Mentoring is always positive and plays a vital role in transforming a teacher's professional identity (Hayes & Pridham, 2019). Engaging in professional organizations is notable for promoting identities. My encounters with scholars, friends, and mentors are external dialogues that had important impacts in inculcating my interest in new professional aspirations and personal growth. Eventually, such mentoring helps to produce quality educators (Bowman, 2014).

Conclusion

This evocative autoethnography focuses on my personal and professionally significant memories and epiphanies within the broader cultural and social context, revealing the challenges, inspirations, and growth that come with piloting the academic situation. It also

projects the dialogical interaction of personal experiences with scholarly voices, including internal and external conditions that assist the evolving identities of women educators. It reflects the transformative composition of multiple I-positions in dialogue, such as a learner, a teacher, and a woman directing personal and educational situations. This study, which involves personal stories, aims to provide evidence of adaptability, resilience, and the continuous pursuit of knowledge that pave the way for women teachers. It contributes to the existing body of literature on teachers' identity transformation through the use of evocative autoethnography, which explores the depth of personal experience and evokes an emotional response from readers, fostering empathy and understanding. Thus, such an understanding raises awareness about the broader socio-cultural context.

Author Contributions

Sharada Khanal, the first author, is a woman teacher. She generated the information for this paper from her own experience and told her stories in a first-person narrative. She interpreted and analyzed the information in the initial stage. Tikaram Poudel, the second author, guided Ms. Khanal in conceptualizing and designing the study. He contributed to framing the theoretical construct and refining the analysis and discussion. This paper is the product of the collaboration of Ms. Khanal and Dr. Poudel. Both authors approve the manuscript.

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