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IDENTITY POSITIONINGS OF EFL TEACHERS AND THEIR  
BELIEFS AND NEGOTIATIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING  
AND TEACHING IN ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

A MASTER'S THESIS

BY

CANSU KOÇATÜRK

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BILKENT UNIVERSITY

ANKARA

DECEMBER 2018

2018



Identity Positionings of EFL Teachers and Their Beliefs and Negotiations about  
Language Learning and Teaching in Online Discussion Forums

The Graduate School of Education  
of  
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

by

Cansu Kocatürk

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

in

Teaching English as a Foreign Language  
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University  
Ankara

December 2018

İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BILKENT UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Thesis Title: Identity Positionings of EFL Teachers and Their Beliefs and  
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## ABSTRACT

IDENTITY POSITIONINGS OF EFL TEACHERS AND THEIR BELIEFS AND  
NEGOTIATIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING IN  
ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

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M.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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December 2018

This study investigated the ways EFL teachers enrolled in a masters' program negotiated language teacher identities (LTI) in terms of their beliefs about language learning and teaching through their positionings in an online discussion forum. The aim of the study was to elaborate on how EFL teachers discuss their beliefs about language learning and teaching in an online forum and while doing this, how their comments revealed clues for positionings of their language teacher identities. To this end, the position papers of teachers who were students in a master's program in teaching English as a foreign language at a foundation university in Turkey were explored. The archival data of the study was collected through the position papers and discussions. All data were analyzed according to Boyatzis' (1998) thematic analysis. The themes emerged from the analysis of the papers were categorized under two main sections as positioning of teachers as language learners and positioning of teachers as language teachers. The findings of the study revealed that participants engaged in positionings not only as learners but also as teachers. Teachers shared their teaching and learning experiences and commented on each other's papers via the position papers uploaded to an online forum. Through this negotiation, some comments revealed how teachers explicitly or implicitly position their identities as learners and teachers. Considering the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that online platforms can serve as an effective tool in providing teachers a way to negotiate their beliefs and identities.

Key words: Language teacher identity, positioning theory, beliefs about language learning and teaching, online forums

## ÖZET

Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin Kimlik Konumlandırmaları ve Onların Yabancı Dil Öğrenimi ve Eğitimi Hakkındaki İnançları ve Online Platformlarda Bu İnaç ve Kimlik Konumlandırmalarının Görüşülmesi

Cansu Kocatürk

Yüksek Lisans, Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce Öğretimi

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Aralık 2018

Bu çalışma, bir yüksek lisans programına kayıtlı olan yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretmenlerinin online bir tartışma platformunda dil öğretimi ve öğrenimi ile ilgili inançları açısından kimliklerini nasıl konumlandıklarını inceledi. Bu çalışmanın amacı yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretmenlerinin bir online forumda dil öğrenimi ve öğretimi hakkında inançlarını nasıl tartıştıklarını ve bunu yaparken yaptıkları yorumların onların yabancı dil öğretmen kimlikleri konumlandırmalarını nasıl açığa çıkardığını detaylandırmaktır. Bu amaçla, Türkiye’de bir vakıf üniversitesinde yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretiminde yüksek lisans programında öğrenci olan katılımcıların yazdıkları konumlandırma yazıları ve yorumları incelendi. Bu çalışmanın arşiv verileri Boyatzis’in (1998) tematik analizine göre incelendi. Bu incelemeden ortaya çıkan temalar öğretmenlerin yabancı dil öğrencileri olarak ve yabancı dil öğretmenleri olarak kimliklerinin konumlandırmaları olarak iki ana başlık altında kategorize edildi. Bu çalışmanın bulguları, katılımcıların kimlik konumlandırmalarını sadece öğretmen değil öğrenci olarak da yaptığını gösterdi. Öğretmenler birbirleri ile öğrenme ve öğretme deneyimlerini paylaştı ve birbirlerinin yazılarına yorumlar yaptı. Bu yorumlar ve tartışmalar öğretmenlerin kendi kimliklerini öğretmen ve öğrenci olarak doğrudan veya dolaylı nasıl konumlandıklarını ile ilgili ipuçları açığa çıkardı. Bu çalışmanın bulgularını göz önüne alınca, online platformların öğretmenlere inançlarını ve kimliklerini tartışmak için bir yol sağlayarak etkili bir yöntem olarak hizmet ettiği sonucuna varılabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı dil öğretmenleri kimliği, konumlandırma teorisi, yabancı dil öğrenimi ve öğretimi ile ilgili inançlar, online forumlar

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people who made it possible for me to survive this difficult and challenging thesis writing process. First of all, I would like to thank my thesis advisors, Dr. Deniz Ortaçtepe and Dr.Hilal Peker for their guidance and feedback throughout this process. I also would like to thank Asst. Prof. Dr. Erdat Çatalođlu and Prof. Julie Matthews Aydınlı for accepting to be in my thesis defense committee and providing feedback for my thesis. I am very grateful to Prof. Dr. Yusuf Ően, the director of the School of Foreign Languages of Hakime Erciyas Düzce University, for giving me the permission to attend the MA TEFL program. My biggest thank goes to my father Hasan Hüseyin Kocatürk, my mother Hüsne Kocatürk and my sister Cennet Kocatürk Alaçam because they have supported me not only during this period but also throughout my whole life. They have always made me believe that I am capable to succeed whatever I want. My dear friends were always there to support and guide me whenever I needed. The friendship of Őebnem Kurt and Pelin Çoban are the biggest gifts that MA TEFL has given me. I am so lucky to meet such amazing and strong women like them. I also thank Yasin and Leyla Karatay who have been there for me for almost ten years. They are like a family to me. Their support, guidance and belief in me persuaded me that I could write this thesis.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

Identity is a person`s way of comprehending themselves, the world around them, and their connection to this world. Since the concept of identity is the core of understanding a person, it has been the focus of attention in different areas such as psychology, and sociology (Bernstein, 2005; Bottero, 2004; Howard, 2000).

In the field of education, teacher identity can be thought simply as how teachers comprehend the idea of self-regarding the teaching profession. However, as a broad concept it is difficult to define teacher identity as it is formed by many different constituents and it could be affected by many different factors such as affective factors, workplace, or society. Considering specifically the teaching profession, how teachers perceive themselves as teachers (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000) influences how they practice their professions. As a result, they construct a further identity added to their teacher identities, and that is the teacher professional identity. As mentioned previously, there is no definite description of professional identity since the concept itself began to exist only about two decades ago (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). According to Beijaard et al. (2000), teachers believe that their professional identity is a mixture of "the distinct aspects of expertise" (p.1)

Teacher professional identity has a bidirectional relationship with the positioning theory which is defined by Harré and van Langenhove (1999) as "the

study of local moral orders as ever shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting" (p. 1). This bilateral connection stems from the fact that teachers (re)construct their professional identities according to how they position themselves and/or are positioned regarding their professional identities.

Considering the studies on professional identity in the literature, it can be seen that they have explored how teachers position themselves regarding their professional identities. This question has led some researchers to employ positioning theory as their studies' theoretical framework in order to investigate teachers' professional identities (Whitsed & Volet, 2013). Considering the existing studies in the literature and the data collection tools used in them (Ollerhead, 2012; Reeves, 2009; Trent & Shroff, 2013), there appears to be a need for studies exploring EFL teachers' positioning as professionals via the online platforms. In this sense, this study aims to explore the positioning of teachers regarding their professional identities through the position papers of former M.A. TEFL students uploaded on the Moodle discussion forum.

### **Background of the Study**

Teacher professional identity has become an important research concept in the last two decades, and many researchers studied teacher professional identity in terms of the definition of the concept, its composition, and features (Beijaard et al., 2000; Gaziel, 1995; Goodson & Cole, 1994; Samuel & Stephens, 2000; Sugrue, 1997; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). There is not a clear definition of teacher professional identity which has been accepted and agreed on in

the literature. Yet, Sachs's (2005) definition covers all the points stated by the former researchers:

Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (p. 15)

The studies on teacher professional identity are also various regarding their focus in different contexts and countries. Studies in the United Kingdom have put teaching practices and teachers' professional commitment in their center (Burn, 2007; Dillabough, 1999). In Australia, Canada and Norway, how teachers perceive themselves as professionals under changing work conditions and education policy has been focused on (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990; Huber & Murphy, 2006; MacLure, 1993; Søreide, 2006; Thomas, 2003). The focus of teacher professional identity studies in Spain, the Netherlands and the United States has been teacher reflection role and the formation of professional identity (Alsup, 2006; Beijaard et al., 2000; Burn, 2007). These previous studies show that identity as a construct is affected not only by personalities but also the environment. This clearly indicates the importance of the difference in contexts, and its significant role on the way teachers distinguish themselves as professionals.

Studies on teacher professional identity has also been affected by the recent developments in the use of Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs). For instance, Luehmann and Tinelli (2008) have examined how blogging provides a platform available for meaningful interactions between professionals, as well as providing various opportunities to learn about practices that are based on reforms to some science teachers. Similarly, Lu and Curwood (2015) have examined the

identities of pre-service teachers in an online discussion group. The results of this study indicate two kinds of identity adjustments as being committed to the social anticipations and values of the group, and being resistant to the social standards of group participation and involvement. These studies are a legitimate display of how the improvements in ICT are reflected in the field of education on a broad sense, and teacher identity on specific level.

In the last decade, how teachers position themselves regarding their professions has been one of the focal points of studies on teacher professional identity. Thereby, positioning theory has become a trending theoretical framework for teacher identity (Reeves, 2008). Davies and Harre (1990) has defined their positioning theory as:

Positioning is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines. There can be interactive positioning in which what one person says positions another. And there can be reflexive positioning in which one positions oneself. (p.5)

It is noteworthy here to examine a few more studies with teacher identity and positioning theory. While some studies focused on teacher identity from a broad perspective by taking into account the role of colleagues and school authorities, some other studies approached teacher identity from a more personal angle and concentrated solely on teachers in their way of constructing their professional identities. In this respect, Trent's (2012) study examines how native-speaking English teachers (NETs) in schools in Hong Kong position themselves and how they are positioned by their coworkers. The results of this study indicate that native-speaking English teachers' positioning in terms of their professional identities is questioned by both their coworkers and the school administration. On the other hand, Soreide (2007) has argued that teachers position themselves as different identities

and the interplay between these identities has a significant role in the development of teacher identity. Instead of being positioned into pre-prepared identities by the school administration or the school program, teachers construct their identities as professionals in a more individual and purposeful way.

To examine the interplay between positionings and professional identities of teachers, different tools, including narrative resources, interviews, have been used before. Since ICTs (specifically social networking tools) are used widely by almost anyone today for both personal and professional communication purposes, they have naturally attracted the attention of foreign language studies which focus on teacher professional identity (Luehmann, 2008; Trent & Shroff, 2013). However, based on the literature reviewed for the purpose of this study, there are no previous studies that used the ICTs to explore teachers' positioning themselves as professionals.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Teacher professional identity has become an area of interest over the last two decades (Beijaard et al., 2004). Some of the studies have explored the current and prior perceptions of novice teachers' professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2000). Some other studies have focused on pre-service teachers' professional identity formation (Chong, Low, & Goh, 2011; Hong, 2010; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Beijaard et al., (2004) have reviewed the literature and categorized the studies exploring teacher professional identity between 1988 and 2000. They have put these studies under three main categories as studies that focus on the construction of teachers' professional, studies which has focused on how teachers and the researchers perceive the identification of characteristics of teachers' professional identity, and studies which present the concept of professional identity by teachers' oral or written stories.

Recently, the concept of teacher professional identity has been discussed in relation to Davies and Harre's (1990) positioning theory (Sreide, 2006; Trent, 2017) in the literature. After ICTs have been integrated in language teaching, some studies have employed social networking tools as another tool to investigate teacher professional identity (Lu & Curwood, 2015; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). However, no researchers exploring teacher professional identity by using ICTs have used positioning theory as their frameworks.

Despite the fact that teacher professional identity has been a trending area in the literature, the studies in Turkey are still limited (Atay, 2008; Atay & Ece, 2009; Büyükyavuz, 2013; Demirbulak, 2011; Duru, 2006; Mutlu, 2015; Ortaçtepe, 2015; Sayar, 2014; Yavuz, 2010). None of these studies in Turkey investigated the concept of teacher professional identity through ICTs. Thus, there is a need for a study that explores this popular concept by integrating another popular area of interest in language teaching. In this sense, this study aims to explore the ways Turkish EFL teachers enrolled in a masters' program negotiate their teacher professional identities through their positionings in online discussion forums.

### **Research Questions**

This study will address the following research questions:

1. What kind of positionings do EFL teachers engage in on online discussion forums regarding their beliefs about language learning and teaching?
2. How do these positionings enable teachers to negotiate their language teacher identities (LTIs)?

### **Significance of the Study**

Both teacher professional identity and technology have been an area of interest in language teaching research during the last twenty years. While exploring teacher professional identity, positioning theory has been widely used as a theoretical framework, as well. In this sense, this study will contribute to the literature by including these two trending study areas together. This study could also be useful in showing how EFL teachers use an online platform to reveal their positions as professionals while they are studying in a master's program.

It is hoped that professional development programs in Turkey will benefit from this study in terms of exploring the role of online discussion forums in teachers' negotiating their teacher identities with their colleagues. The results of the study could provide a big picture of how teachers position themselves and are positioned by others while they are studying in a master's program. This may also help teachers improve themselves professionally. Considering the interplay between teachers' positionings and their teaching practices, teacher training programs could benefit from the results of the present study in deciding the content, materials and tools of their programs in a way enabling teachers to improve their teaching practices.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced a brief overview of the literature on positioning of teachers as professionals. Furthermore, the backgrounds of the study, the statement of the problem, research questions, and the significance of the study have been provided. The following chapter will present a detailed review of the studies which explore teacher professional identities through the lens of positioning theory in the literature.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Identity**

Considering the popularity of identity as a research area in the field of education, a widely accepted definition is available. Norton (1997) has defined the concept of identity as "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for future". (p. 410) The interest in identity in the field of education, specifically language learning has been growing steadily for some years (Norton & Tohey, 2011). While most of the research in language learning considered identity as settled, more recent studies have adopted a post structural approach which regards identity as a changeable concept (Norton & Tohey, 2011). Norton (2013) has stated that the connection between language teaching and identity is also important in terms of classroom practices. If there are identities which hinder the learning in the classroom, the educators can address those identities and improve the learning (Norton, 2013). The definition of the identity concept and how studies in the literature approach this concept indicate that identity is the core of understanding both learners, educators and the relationship between them and also their relationships with the world around them.

### **Teacher Identity**

The biggest barrier to understand teacher identity is the lack of an agreed definition of it because different points that need to be considered appear every time

when the researchers try to reach a definition. However, the literature has reached an agreement on that teacher identity is a versatile and also unstable concept (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In this sense, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) have indicated that studies on teacher identity have gathered around some features such as "the multiplicity, the discontinuity, and the social nature of identity" recurrently although they cannot reach a clear definition. These recurring features accentuate that teacher identity doesn't have a fixed nature but it changes depending on time and circumstances (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Another reason why there is no clear definition of teacher identity can be that it has been a trending research area only in the last few decades (Beijaard et al., 2004). In their study, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) have reviewed the recent literature on teacher identity to be able to determine the important characteristics of teacher identity, the categorization of teacher identity studies and the problems which needs to be touched upon in teacher identity studies. They pointed out that there was a confusion in terms of concepts in teacher identity studies and also how effective the context is in identity development should be a focus point in teacher identity studies.

### **Language Teacher Identity**

Language teacher identity (LTI) has been a popular research topic of language teacher education and professional development studies because teacher has an important role in the structure of classroom routines and procedures (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). In order to emphasize the importance and necessity of the studies on language teacher identity, Varghese, et al. (2005) have stated that various identities of teachers should be understood to make sense of the language teaching and learning.

Just like a response to the importance and necessity of the studies on LTI, a researcher who has taught English at different levels and has been interested in teacher development. Barkhuizen (2016) has compiled a book whose aim was to demonstrate different researchers' understandings of LTI. Although providing a single definition for language identity is not likely, Barkhuizen (2016) has defined it as:

Language teacher identities (LTIs) are cognitive, social, emotional, ideological, and historical—they are both inside the teacher and outside in the social, material and technological world. LTIs are being and doing, feeling and imagining, and storying. They are struggle and harmony: they are contested and resisted, by self and others, and they are also accepted, acknowledged and valued, by self and others. They are core and peripheral, personal and professional, they are dynamic, multiple, and hybrid, and they are foregrounded and backgrounded. And LTIs change, short-term and over time—discursively in social interaction with teacher educators, learners, teachers, administrators, and the wider community, and in material interaction with spaces, places and objects in classrooms, institutions, and online. (p. 4)

By serving the versatility of Barkhuizen's (2016) definition, Benson (2016) has examined LTI especially in terms of teacher agency and autonomy and states that language teacher identity is not just about how teachers act according to the roles which are decided by the society but it is also about how teachers understand this role and prosper it in a way improving them professionally. In this regard, Donato (2016) has drawn attention to the link between teacher education programs and LTI for further research by stating that he utilizes LTI not as a focus of studies but as a way to investigate classroom interactions and teacher development.

### **Beliefs about Learning and Teaching**

While discussing the language teacher identity, teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching should be mentioned because teachers' beliefs are important in terms of their classroom practices (Kim, 2011). To reveal the connection between

teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, Kim (2011) has studied the beliefs of native teachers about learning and teaching in Korea. The study focused on the question of what the sources of teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching and also their roles in class are. The results of this study showed that teachers believe that students' engagement in classroom is essential for the success in language learning. Kim (2011) has concluded that teachers' beliefs are influenced by their previous learning experience and there can be some problems when their own experiences and their students' experiences don't match. In this sense, the study underlined the fact that teachers should be aware of the learning experiences of their students but they shouldn't leave their own beliefs about learning and teaching completely.

In a different study, Peacock (2001) has studied how teachers' beliefs about language learning change during their three-year training. He believed that teachers' beliefs affect both their teaching experience and their students' learning experiences. The study compared trainee teachers' beliefs at the beginning to their teacher beliefs at the end of the training program but there was no significant difference between them. The study concluded that the mentioned training is not effective in terms of changing trainee teachers' preconceived beliefs and suggested an "instruction package to work on some of their beliefs" (Peacock, 2001, p. 188). Peacock (2001) has asserted that teachers' beliefs about their teaching and language learning are as important as the students' beliefs.

### **Positioning Theory**

In social sciences, Hallway (1984) has suggested the concept of positioning in her studies on men and women relationships as 'positioning oneself' and 'taking up positions,' and Harré and van Langenhove (1999) have used these concepts in the

same direction as her and they define positioning as follows: "positioning can be understood as the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of the conversation have specific locations." (p. 37)

Although the theory was originated in social psychology, it has found its place in different fields such as journalism and public relations (James, 2014; Miller, 2013). In the last decade, positioning theory has been popular especially in education and applied linguistics (Kayı-Aydar & Miller, 2018). According to Kayı-Aydar and Miller (2018), researchers are fond of positioning theory as a framework to explore classroom interactions and their effects on learning and identity because it provides an explanation to how potential actions can be limited or empowered by positions.

In educational research, positioning theory studies can be categorized into two groups as the ones which position learners and the ones which position teachers (Kayı-Aydar & Miller, 2018). Some of these studies which position learners specifically focus on how students position themselves and how the explanation of these positionings contribute to the improvement of educational programs or classroom practices. In this sense, Jensen (2011) has studied the positioning of students in health care system in Denmark to see how these students are positioned and how they position themselves in an education programme. Some other studies which position learners focus on gender differences. Evans (1996) studied students who were participants of discussion groups and discuss literary books to see how students position themselves and other group members with gender influence. Similarly, Ritchie (2002) explored the social interactions between the learners during science activities to understand how gender and power relations influence the learning.

Some studies which position learners involve language learners (Kayı-Aydar & Miller, 2018). Kayı-Aydar (2014) studied how social positioning of two language learners affect their learning. She analyzed the classroom talk and showed how one of the talkative students was approved by the others while the other student was isolated. The use of positioning theory as a theoretical framework in her study helped her to display that being talkative alone is not enough to get the chance to use language in classroom (Kayı-Aydar & Miller, 2018). In another study of positioning of language learners, Warwick (2008) analyzed the positioning of students according to their genders in an English classroom whose students were Latina immigrant women and how these positioning influenced both teaching practices of the teacher and learning experience.

It is essential to understand how teachers position themselves and students since it is related to how teachers employ their "powers, values and beliefs" (Kayı-Aydar & Miller, 2018, p. 86). Studies which position teachers generally involve identity construction of teachers. Vetter, Hartman, & Reynolds (2016) used positioning theory to show that how new teachers reposition their identities when they face with student mistakes. They concluded that the identities of new teachers are repositioned according to the ideologies of the school where they work. Similarly, Arvaja (2016) studied the diaries of a teacher in a one-year education programme and the study showed how this teacher positioned her storytelling and herself in narratives regarding the related characters.

Similar to some studies position learners, some studies position teachers also focus on marginalization in classroom context. In this sense, Francis (2012) studied how teachers position themselves during the sexuality education in South Africa and concluded that teachers tend not to mention other issues except from heterosexuality

during this education. These studies show that positioning theory is important to improve what we understand from the interactions and behaviours in classroom and also teaching and learning experiences (Kayı-Aydar & Miller, 2018).

### **Modes of Positioning**

**Intentional self-positioning (Reflexive positioning):** Although two modes of positioning theory (reflexive and interactive) are generally employed in identity studies. Interactive positioning can be explained simply as the positioning of others. One can position others intentionally or unintentionally. For the purpose of this study only reflexive positioning will be relevant. Reflexive positioning is simply the positioning of self and the expression of personal identity (Davies & Harre, 1990).

This mode of positioning can be seen in the ways;

One's appraisal of one's performance, one's justification for having taken a certain course of action, the attribution of one's actions to the whims of supernatural powers, one's private response to having been depicted by someone else in this way or that, one's supposing what repercussions one's actions will have on one's group, and the formulation of an anecdote about one's day that one plans to tell another (and the imagined response of the listener). (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p.76)

According to the constructionist perspective, the reflexive positioning is revealed in different discursive forms like feeling responsible for their behaviour (Yoon, 2008).

According to Yoon (2008), how teachers position themselves in the classroom can be explained better through teachers' established world views. She clarified this statement by giving the example of a teacher who positions herself as all students' teacher and another teacher who positions herself as the content teacher of some specific students. In both cases, teachers' positions guide them in their classroom practices.

The deliberate nature of self-positioning is revealed by "stressing one's agency (that is, presenting one's course of action as one from among various possibilities), by referring to one's unique point of view, or by referring to events in one's biography" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 24). Engaging in intentional self-positioning means that that person has a particular aim in his/her mind (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

### **Positioning Theory and Language Teacher Identity**

Studies in the literature have used positioning theory mostly to explore teacher identity (Correa, Martínez-Arbelaiz, & Gutierrez, 2014; Pinnegar & Murphy, 2011; Sreide, 2006; Tran & Nguyen, 2015). However, the number of the studies which explore language teacher identity through the positioning theory is limited. In one of these few studies, Reeves (2008) studied an English teacher who discuss his teacher identity regarding his learners. The results of her study indicated that the teacher positioned both himself and others deliberately while he was negotiating his identity as a teacher. The study also showed that positioning and investment emerge during a teacher's identity negotiation. In another study, Vetter, Meacham, and Schieble (2013) investigated how identity construction of teachers is affected by positioning of power. They studied the classes of preservice English teachers to see how these teachers' negotiation of power positioning with students allow or prevent them from achieving their chosen teacher identities. As seen in the studies mentioned above, although positioning theory is seen as a useful lens to explore teacher identity, specifically language teacher identity studies have not used positioning theory as a theoretical framework widely.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, a literature review on identity, teacher identity, language teacher identity, positioning theory, their definitions and the components which form these concepts have been introduced. In order to serve the aim of the research better, among various components of language teacher identity and positioning theory, intentional self-positioning and teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching have been explored in more details. In this regard, the studies which explore language teacher identity through the lens of positioning theory have been presented. However, the literature has shown that these studies are limited. To this end, this study aims to investigate how language teachers intentionally position themselves in terms of their beliefs about learning and teaching in their position papers. The next chapter will present the methodology of the study by explaining the details such as participants, instruments, data collection and analysis procedures.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This study explored the ways EFL teachers enrolled in a masters' program, negotiated their language teacher identities (LTIs) by their positionings in an online discussion forum. To this end, the position papers of the aforementioned students were analyzed with a qualitative research design in order to answer the following research questions.

1. What kind of positionings do EFL teachers engage in online forums regarding their beliefs about language learning and teaching?
2. How do these positionings enable teachers to negotiate their language teacher identities (LTIs)?

The students of a foreign language master program who are also actively teaching EFL at different universities in Turkey were asked to write position papers on three different subjects as part of EFL Methodology course requirements. Upon completion of their position papers, these papers were uploaded on an online discussion forum, Moodle. Moodle is an online platform that is being used with educational purposes such as creating online courses, sharing some documents or materials, and having discussions based on the materials, assignments or papers shared. As a next step in the assignment, the students were supposed to write comments about each other's papers on Moodle.

This chapter includes four main sections: the setting and the participants, data collection instruments, data collection procedure, and data analysis procedure. In the first section, the setting and the participants of the study were described in detail. In the second section, the instruments, which were the participants' position papers, were explained. In the third section, the data collection procedure was mentioned step by step. In the last section of this chapter, the whole data analysis procedure was explained.

### **Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted in a M.A. TEFL at a foundation university in Ankara, Turkey. This particular program was selected for this study because the program provides an online discussion platform for its students which is a readily available source for the researcher.

The M.A. TEFL program requires at least two years of teaching experience in order to be eligible for the selection process. The candidates for the program are evaluated within three exam sessions including an open-ended question exam, a language proficiency exam and an interview. According to the results of these exams, the right candidates for the program are selected. Once the applicants are accepted into the program, they are required to take courses and write their theses within one year. Therefore, most of the students get permission from their institutions and they become full-time students during one year. In some cases, some students can attend the program as part-time students and they finish their studies in four or six semesters unlike the full-time students.

During the program, the students take various courses that are designed to improve their teacher and researcher personalities. The students also have a chance to exchange ideas and teaching experiences with each other not only during the

course hours but also on Moodle discussion forums. This exchange is enriched because of the assortment of unique teacher identities the students enrolled in the program carry, as well as the variety of universities they come from.

The participants of the study are 23 M.A. TEFL students who are also EFL teachers at different universities in Turkey. They studied in the program during 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 academic year. More than half of the participants (18) of the participants are female while five of them are male. More than half of the students (20) of the participants are native speakers of Turkish while three of them are foreigners.

## **Instruments**

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The qualitative data of this study was the archival data which was obtained from Moodle, an online platform to share ideas.

**Position papers.** The students of M.A. TEFL take an EFL Methodology course where they discuss foreign language teaching methods and their implementations in actual classes. As a requirement of this course, the students are expected to write position papers explaining how they positioned themselves in terms of the following particular topics; a) as a language learner, b) as a language teacher, and c) as a cultural mediator. Once students write their papers, they upload them on Moodle, which is used as an online educational platform by the university. Students are also supposed to read at least three papers of their classmates, comment on them and respond to the questions/comments that are addressed to their papers.

**Moodle.** In order to provide students a platform where they can reach course syllabus and materials, submit assignments and share their teaching experiences and ideas, the university enables them to make use of Moodle. Moodle is an online learning environment which is implemented in the TEFL program. The professors moderate the content (giving assignments, checking them, and keeping track of the process of comment exchange between the students) of their courses on Moodle.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher received the approval from the ethics committee of the foundation university where the study was conducted for her study and data collection procedure started. Since she conducted her study with archival data from a masters' program course, she asked the instructor's permission and help to be able to access them. All the position papers which were included in this study were downloaded from Moodle. Since these papers were written as a response to some specific instructions, they were categorized under some tentative themes based on these instructions as: language learners, language teachers, culture mediators, post-method era, and teaching with technology. As the demographic information of the participants could be significant in terms of the results of the study, information such as age, educational background, teaching experience etc. was obtained from Bilkent University Graduate School of Education.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The archival data of this study was analysed according to Boyatzis' thematic analysis (1998). First, hard copies of position papers were gathered and they were filed for each participant individually. For the sake of anonymity, each participant was named with codes as P#1, P#2 etc. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis serves as a useful tool providing data which is rich in details and

complicated at the same time. Alhojalian (2012) also stated, “thematic analysis is considered the most appropriate for any study that seeks to discover using interpretations” (p. 40). Therefore, the researcher applied thematic analysis to her study in order to get results as rich as possible by interpreting the participants’ responses to the instructions assigned. For the purposes of this study, the researcher followed the six-phases of thematic analysis provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). In this sense, the researcher first familiarized with the data reading and noting down the first ideas that emerged. Then, potential themes were collocated and these potential themes were reviewed and refined in case some of the potential themes were not real themes or they could be divided into two separate themes. Finally, according to the overall picture that the analysis revealed, themes were defined and named clearly. For the purpose of this study, the researcher categorized these clear themes under two main sections as teachers’ positioning themselves as teachers and teachers’ positioning themselves as learners.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter first provided information about setting and participants, data collection instruments. Then, the data collection and analysis procedures were explained in details. The next chapter will present the findings of data analysis.

## **CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction**

This study explored the ways EFL teachers enrolled in a masters' program negotiated language teacher identities (LTI) through their positionings in an online discussion forum. To this end, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What kind of positionings do EFL teachers engage in on online discussion forums regarding beliefs about language learning and teaching?
2. How do these positionings enable teachers to negotiate their language teacher identities (LTIs)?

In order to answer the research questions, the archival data of the study were obtained from position papers which participants wrote for their Methodology course and posted on Moodle. These papers were analyzed according to Boyatzis' (1998) thematic analysis. The researcher categorized the position papers individually and then went through all the papers and identified some themes that emerged naturally. These themes were presented under one main concept: participants' beliefs about language learning and teaching. This chapter explains the results of data analysis in one main section.

## Results

### Participants' Beliefs about Language Learning

This study addressed the question of what kind of positionings EFL teachers engage in regarding their beliefs about language learning and teaching in online discussion forums. In order to answer this question, 23 participants' position papers were analysed and a frequency table was created to show how many times participants wrote comments about their beliefs about language learning (Table 1). Throughout these comments, the participants explained how participants see themselves as language learners, and they also talked about their language learning experiences. In this part, the themes emerged from the participants' comments were presented as one main section: participants' beliefs about language learning.

Table 1

#### *Themes For Participants' Beliefs About Language Learning*

| Themes                                      | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Teaching Skills                             | 28        | %26        |
| Learning Experiences and Teaching Practices | 24        | %22        |
| Autonomy                                    | 21        | %19        |
| Teacher Dominant Learning                   | 11        | %10        |
| Fear of Making Mistakes                     | 10        | %9         |
| Learners' Age                               | 5         | %5         |
| Authentic Environment                       | 5         | %5         |
| Future of Education                         | 5         | %5         |

**Teacher dominant learning.** Almost half of the participants experienced similar classroom contexts in terms of the focus of the learning. Eight of the participants explicitly stated that they were in teacher dominant classes. Participant 1

(P#1) mentioned that she depended on the teachers especially for the input. She elaborated on what she meant by being dependent on teacher by stating that her role as a learner was limited in the class and the main source of knowledge was the teacher. Similarly, P#4 defined her classroom environment as a teacher-dominant one as she stated:

As for teacher – student roles, the lessons were teacher-centered where the students remained passive and answered the teacher’s questions only.

The teacher dominant nature of the participants' learning experiences caused some problems in terms of improvement especially in the productive skills. As an evidence for this connection, P#8 wrote:

In the earlier stages of my language learning process which corresponds to high school years the classes were mostly teacher-centered, grammar-translation method was used, and L1 use was extensive, so while improving my reading and writing skills, I had a low proficiency of listening and speaking skills which caused me to lack self-confidence and to be shy about making mistakes in public.

In a similar manner, P#9 stated that as her classes were teacher and course book dependent, she developed a prejudice against the language and her motivation was affected in a negative way. P#21 shared an anecdote which proves how the focus of the lessons may affect learners in a bad way, especially when it is combined with a discouraging manner of the teacher by writing:

Our teacher was rather a strict character who was completely intolerant about errors we made, so I remember that we were even made to repeat the grammar rules in Turkish and learn these rules by heart. What’s more, we had to participate in a teacher-driven “game” -if one can call it so-called “Kader Anı” (the moment of truth) as a reference to the most thrilling part of a popular TV show of the time. What all about this game was that the teacher used to write the vocabulary that we had learnt till then on the board, and he called on a random student, then asked them to both pronounce the word correctly and say the Turkish equivalents while the other students were waiting for their turn in a complete silence. No mistakes were allowed and we were graded for the number of mistakes we made.

According to these explanations, it can be deduced that the participants had the similar learning environment even though they were all in different schools in different cities. All the participants whose comments were explored under this section experienced their language learning in a teacher dominant environment. Their teachers either did not have the adequate content knowledge or did not employ engaging teaching methods in their classes. The participants mentioned that this kind of a learning experience made students more passive in class. They did not enjoy their classes or they did not trust their teachers in their teaching methods or knowledge. Considering the participants' comments, the positions of the learners in class seem related to the learning environment they are in. Specifically in the participants' case in this study, as Meighan (1990) has put it, this teacher dependent nature of the classes made participants position themselves as "resisters" who resist to learn the language or "receptacles" who wait to be filled with the information by the teacher.

**Autonomy.** Fourteen of the participants shared different anecdotes, which were related to how they managed or how their teachers helped them to be autonomous learners. Two participants mentioned that as they already love learning a language, they did not have difficulty in becoming an autonomous learner. P#2 explained how her intrinsic motivation was important in her learning experience by saying:

I cannot say that I am a perfect language learner. But it is certain that I am a perfect language lover. Once I start to learn a language, I put it right in the middle of my life.

Similarly, P#4 explained that her learning style or preferences were not affected by her language classes which were teacher dependent. As she had aptitude and motivation, it wasn't hard for her to be an autonomous learner.

Nine participants talked about how autonomous they were by giving examples of some learning strategies or ways to practice the language which they developed on their own. P#5 explained her autonomous learning methods as:

The other way of improving English was keeping a diary and a travel journal in English and I have always tried to find some ways to go to English-speaking countries as I believe that one of the best ways to learn a language is in its natural environment.

In the same sense, P#1 gave examples of the ways she tried, and found useful as an autonomous learner:

I became more aware of my learning process and take more control of it since my goal was to improve my language skills up to a native like level. Professors got out of the center of learning and I put myself there. For example, I started to watch more and more foreign films, TV series and listened to foreign music in my free time. I also liked reading and I remember reading a lot of books and I never read Turkish translations of the books. I tried to participate in every activity and speak as much as I could during classes. I found ways of using English out of the classroom. For example, I used my cell phone in English most of the time and took part in the drama club of the department. If I couldn't find anybody to speak with, I talked to myself. One other strategy I employed was imitating my professors and the way they used English. For instance, one of my professors used a wide variety of words, some of which I had to look up, and I used dictionaries to keep up with him.

P#10 mentioned a method which she developed in order to improve her pronunciation skills as follows:

I used to watch English movies or TV shows with subtitles, listen to foreign music and pay attention to the words or patterns. This helped my speaking and pronunciation.

Taking awareness and autonomy one step further, P#19 stated that she knew that what kind of a learner she was and she developed some learning methods, which worked for her:

As a second, I was aware of my learning styles because I knew that I was much of a visual learner than aural or kinaesthetic, en passant which is not dichotomous, yet I could not learn unless if I saw it on the board. Thus, I wrote the new words, grammar rules or some spoken language on post-its and

stuck them on my room's walls. I also had a separate notebook for the new words, idioms, collocations, some basic drawings of words, synonyms and antonyms.

Although almost all participants mentioned that they had a teacher dominant learning environment, not all of them were affected by this environment in the same way.

While some of them were influenced by this environment in a negative way and lost their interest in language learning and avoided engaging in learning, the comments in the papers showed that some of the participants managed to become autonomous despite the nature of their learning environment. It can be concluded that these participants who positioned themselves as autonomous learners through their comments and anecdotes in their papers were able to be individual explorers according to Meighan's (1990) metaphorical classifications of learners. They were not dependent on their teachers and they saw their teachers as a facilitator rather than the main source of knowledge. In these kinds of learning environments, they came up with their own learning strategies and methods. They agreed that being an autonomous learner was important while learning a language because their attitude towards the language was affected in a positive way once the language was a part of their lives.

**Learners' age.** Two of the participants touched on the effect of age of learners on learning. They approached the age issue in terms of being conscious about learning and being able to develop their own learning strategies. P#1 explained this relationship between the age and learning as follows:

Age was critical about my strategies since I was well aware of learning a new language (German). However, I guess learning English from the first year of my education somehow made it more natural unlike German and I did not use the strategies I used during learning German.

Similarly, P#10 stated that when she was in high school, she was aware of what to do and how to do it in terms of language learning. Another participant (P#16) mentioned the Critical Age Hypothesis, and made a connection between being a good learner and age. She wrote:

We weren't old enough to develop bias against foreign language education which paved the way for seeing the positive side of it. Confirming the critical age hypothesis, very few students at the class had difficulty. This was not only because of a really supporting English teacher, but also it was based on the age level of the class, k-12 children having 24 hours of English per week

Although most of the participants didn't explicitly mentioned the connection between age and the ability of being able to come up with their own ways to learn the language or to practice it, somehow the remaining another six participants stated that their awareness of their language learning journeys started in high school or at university.

It can be concluded from these explanations that the participants believe that there is a connection between the age of learners and language learning. They stated that this relationship worked in two ways. Some of them believed that when the learners were old enough, they could be more conscious about their learning and they could be more aware of the things they could do to be better learners or to be more successful in their learning. Some others stated that when the learners were young enough not to develop prejudice against the language, they could be more interested in learning a language. When the learners had negative experiences over years, their chance of developing a negative attitude towards the language increased. Especially the participants who made a connection between the learners' age and the level of their awareness positioned themselves as conscious learners and they meant taking control of the learning experience with this kind of positioning.

**Fear of making mistakes.** Another theme obtained from the participants' papers is the fear of making mistakes. Nine of the participants mentioned their fears of making mistakes in the classroom in their position papers. P#7 said that the only problem in her language learning journey, which she couldn't overcome, especially when she was at the university which she couldn't overcome was the fear of making mistakes. P#8 explained her fear not as a reason to be unsuccessful but she elaborated that because of her poor listening and speaking skills, she was afraid of making mistakes, especially in public.

Some other participants (P#10 and P#11) approached the issue of the fear of making mistakes from a very different angle. They believed that their fears of making mistakes stem from their wish to be perfect. In this sense, P#11 wrote:

I'm still a little bit uncomfortable with making mistakes but this never stops me from participating a discussion in the class. I analyse my own speech and others, and I'm usually very critical of myself. I always try to be better.

P#10 detailed this connection in her own words as follows:

I wasn't very tolerant about my own mistakes, I always thought I had to be a perfect student (!), and I felt embarrassed when I made even a small mistake.

On the other hand, two participants acknowledged that they were not afraid of making mistakes, and they attributed this to their characters. They didn't mention any strategy or method which they used to be "fearless" learners. In this sense, P# 17 wrote:

I consider myself a relatively confident language learner, in the sense that I am not too hesitant to make mistakes. Of course, no one likes to make mistakes in a foreign language, but I normally don't have issues with speaking up in class and being corrected. I readily seek out native speakers to practice with because I feel like conversing with natives is the easiest way to sound as natural as possible when speaking, and to become a better listener.

In the light of these statements, it can be inferred that even if some learners were afraid of making mistakes while some others did not, the fear of making mistakes was an important point in language learning. According to the participants' written statements, this fear of making mistakes was interrelated with personality features. While the shy learners did not want to be embarrassed in public, the confident ones were comfortable with being wrong or being corrected. Furthermore, another significant point emerged from their self-analysis of their fear of mistakes. Even though the participants did not mention about their country of origin as a factor in their language learning fears or their confidence, the two participants who were not afraid of making mistakes were not Turkish. This fact might indicate that the learning environment and culture of the learners could be an effective factor in terms of the fear of making mistakes during the learning process.

**Authentic environment.** Five participants referred to the authentic learning environment throughout their papers. They believe that when the learner is in an environment where the target language is spoken, he/she becomes more motivated to learn the language. Two participants explained this issue of authentic environment in terms of having the chance to interact with native speakers. On the other hand, four participants emphasized the fact that living in the target culture and interacting with native speakers or foreigners is really effective to make students more motivated and more willing to learn. P# 6 considered herself lucky because she had the chance to work in tourism and interact with the tourists. Similarly, p#21 was studying in a touristic area and thanks to his teacher, he had the chance to go to tourist attractions and talk to some native speakers or foreigners.

The most striking anecdotes were shared by two participants who were not Turkish and had language learning experiences with more than one language. They

both underlined the importance and the necessity of communicating in the target language. P# 18 explained how speaking in the target language affected her language learning by giving two different examples and explained how the necessity of speaking in the target language affected her language learning. About her experience in Navajo, she wrote:

I spent two years teaching 2nd grade in an elementary school on the border of the Navajo Reservation, and 90% of the students at our school spoke Navajo in the home. Being surrounded by Navajo speakers, my ear quickly tuned to the language, and as each sound in Navajo is represented by a single letter in the Navajo alphabet, I was quickly "reading" and "speaking". However, I didn't understand much. I wasn't successful at learning Navajo because one, every Navajo speaker I interacted with also knew English, so I didn't have a true need to learn, and two; I didn't take Navajo language classes.

As a counter example, she wrote about her language learning experience in Turkey as follows:

When I moved to Turkey, I did some reading about second language acquisition and took a completely different approach when grappling with the basics of Turkish. I knew I would need to interact with people who couldn't speak English, so I hired a neighbour to come work with me twice a week. I had started out working through some grammar exercises with her, but quickly ditched it and switched to reading children's storybooks with her instead. I started reading for gist, and we got through the books with a lot of body language, bilingual dictionaries, and Peter Pikkert's "A Basic Course in Modern Turkish", which had an extremely helpful index of all of the Turkish suffixes in the back of the book. Whenever I noticed a pattern in the language, I was in that index, trying to figure out how the language functioned. Before long, my neighbour became my friend, and we spent a lot of time together, which provided invaluable exposure to the language as well as speaking practice for me. For the first time, I had a true need to communicate in a foreign language, and that is what motivated me to continue learning. I did take 2 Tömer courses to help me fill in the gaps and improve my accuracy. I took level 1 the first summer I was in Turkey, and after a year of doing the above, I took level 5 the following summer.

In the same manner, P#20 compared and contrasted his two completely different experiences; one, when he had to learn the language in an inauthentic environment and the other one, when he had to communicate in the target language:

I found myself focusing too hard on acquiring the language, although nothing seemed to stick to my head and I was forgetting everything after the class. There was too much vocabulary being thrown at us, and we were just spending a lot of time memorizing words. At the end of my course I didn't retain much. On the other hand when I visited Saudi Arabia and was teaching ESL there for a few months, I found myself naturally picking up the language quite easily. Everyone in the country spoke Arabic, and I was pretty much forced to learn it. I think it's easier when you just immerse yourself in the language and are surrounded by it, thus forcing your brain to acquire the language.

According to these explanations and anecdotes, the participants believed that the environment where the language is learned had a crucial part in their language learning process. Turkish participants had to learn English as a foreign language in their own country. The native participants had similar experiences with different languages. These participants shared anecdotes that showed when the learners had a chance to be in an authentic learning environment, they became more interested in communicating and engaging in learning. They stated that when the learners had to use the target language in order to communicate, they felt more willing to do it compared to their being willing to do the same thing in the class.

### **Participants' Beliefs about Language Teaching**

In order to answer the question of what kind of positionings EFL teachers engage in regarding their beliefs about language learning and teaching in online discussion forums, 23 participants' position papers were analysed and a frequency table was created to show how many times participants wrote comments about their beliefs about language teaching (Table 2). Throughout these comments, the participants explained how participants see themselves as teachers, and they also talked about their teaching practices. In this part, the themes emerged from the participants' comments were presented as one main section: participants' beliefs about language teaching.

Table 2

*Themes For Participants' Beliefs About Language Teaching*

| <b>Themes</b>                               | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| Teaching Skills                             | 28               | %26               |
| Learning Experiences and Teaching Practices | 24               | %22               |
| Teaching Approaches                         | 5                | %5                |

**Learning experience and teaching practice.** Almost all participants (20 out of 23 participants) concurred that their experiences as learners affected their teaching practices, and they further mentioned that their own learning strategies and methods became effective in guiding their students to become autonomous learners and to develop their own strategies. P#1 stated that she tried to teach her students some of the strategies, which she used personally or read about. P#2 said that since she liked watching movies, listening to songs, and reading literary work while she was a language learner herself, she tried to make her students be able to see the fun parts of learning a language as well. P#8 explained that how the methods, which she enjoyed and found useful during her learner years became effective on her teaching practices as follows:

I must admit that the way I learnt the language still affects the way I teach since I enjoy teaching grammar and every so often make my students translate some parts of the reading texts into Turkish.

Similarly, P#11 stated that her own learning experiences influenced not only the strategies she taught to her students but also the way how she planned her classes by writing:

My own learning experience makes me advise my students to read a lot. I try to inform them about the culture so that they are interested. I try to remember what kind of activities made the lesson fun, and I try to use them in my own classes. I remember some of the grammar points I had difficulty in so I'm extra cautious when I teach them. I know that it is really boring when they don't participate in the lesson so I encourage them. I try to use some authentic materials because I loved it in secondary school. And I remember that when a teacher actually showed that s/he cared, my motivation was boosted so I try to show them that I care about them.

Another participant (P#3) elaborated how she used the similarities between her learning experience and her students' experiences in order to make them feel confident and motivated. She wrote about how her experiences as a language learner provided her the ability to put herself in her students' place. She also mentioned that sharing her experiences with her students made her more credible in the eyes of her students:

Teaching from a language learner point of view consolidated my way of putting myself into the learners' shoes and I came to a conclusion that having ability is not a must to learn a language. Of course there are various factors affecting language learning process but as a teacher I every time try to remind myself that everybody can learn! In my teaching hours, I give examples from myself saying that I experienced the same challenges while learning and it is normal to have difficulties in learning because I know that learning is a process that needs time and patience. My aim here is to motivate them by indicating the similarities.

Three participants highlighted the connection between their learning experiences and their teaching practices from a different point of view. They mentioned their teachers who influenced them either in a good or a bad way and how the practices of these teachers affected their current teaching practices. P#4 explained how she and her teachers were different in terms of the focus of their classes. She mentioned that unlike her teachers, she tried to design her classes as learner centered by keeping in mind that different students could have different learning styles and preferences. Similarly, P#20 emphasized the importance of feeling empathy towards learners as follows:

My experience as a language learner would help me when I'm teaching a second language to others because I would know what these learners are going through, and how difficult it can be sometimes when you are learning a new language. For someone who knows just one language, and is teaching that language to others, may not appreciate the effort it takes for one to learn a new language.

P#6 shared a striking anecdote and revealed the fact that learning experiences definitely affect teaching practices but not always in a positive way:

When I started teaching at YTU School of Foreign languages, an Australian instructor was assigned to observe my classes and give feedback to me. I got really prepared with a nice lesson plan consisting of to-the-point examples for the language focus and intelligible visuals. I thought everything went well and I performed to the best of my ability, but she warned me about my weak boarding skills since she thought I was a real auditory learner who expected everyone to be so. As an auditory learner, since my learning experiences and beliefs are mostly based on face-to-face interaction and questioning and answering on the spot, it gives an idea of the relationship between why I might have expected the same performances from my students as a teacher and my learner beliefs.

The participants' teachers did not affect them only in terms of teaching styles but in terms of their psychology, as well. P#15 shared an anecdote about one of her teachers whom she found a bit arrogant and stated that unlike her arrogant teacher she wanted to establish a positive relationship with her students.

According to the participants' statements, their learning experiences definitely had an impact on their teaching practices. The participants reflected on their former learning experiences by approaching from different perspectives. They mentioned both their teachers' personalities and their teaching method and their own learning experiences. They used their experiences with their teachers in deciding on their teaching methods or designing their courses. Their own learning experiences helped them to develop empathy towards their students and understand them in a better way, and they could be more successful in helping their students find their own learning strategies. Their experiences with their teachers or their own learning experiences

were not always positive. However, these bad experiences still had impact on their teaching practices. They mentioned that thanks to these experiences, they knew what not to do as teachers because they saw the bad examples and they knew the challenges that their students could face with.

**Teaching skills.** More than half of the participants (13) emphasized teacher effect on language learning process. While some of them approached this effect by focusing on the competence of teachers in their fields, some others associated this effect to positive atmosphere which the teachers created in their classes. In order to display the close relationship between the learning and the teaching skills, P#15 provided two specific examples from her previous learning experiences. The first example is about her middle school English teacher and explained how his incompetency in his field made her learning process ineffective:

I started learning English when I was in the middle school and to be honest, it did not start very well since our teacher's area of expertise was science. He was not really paying any attention to us. He was completely busy filling the board with a hundred and more sentences. The only lesson that I can remember from those months was when he was teaching us how to ask the time. I think the reason for that is because he drew clocks on the board and I enjoy and easily recall the use of visuals and illustrations in class.

In her second example, she stressed the creative teaching methods which were used by her high school English teachers, and how those methods served in her favor during her learning process:

We started reading lessons with widely known easy fairy tales such as "chicken little" who thought the sky was falling. Whenever we finished reading a piece, we are asked to create a play version of it and stage it. I loved being a part of those role-plays. As a result I can easily say that I am a doer who enjoys hands-on experience tasks. As mentioned in our chapter, I do believe that there are multiple intelligences and learners who possess different learning styles like visual learners, auditory learners, reading-writing preference learners, kinaesthetic learners or tactile learners as introduced to the literature by Neil Fleming. We were also encouraged to do extensive readings as they were giving us term homework. They would usually be

reading a book assigned by them and do character, plot, writer analysis. Reading outside class is not a problem for me because I like reading in general. I remember that our main course teacher had a huge collection of costumes. She would also dress up when she was teaching a new subject. For example, one day she entered the class wearing a pink fairy costume with a tutu holding a glittery wishing wand in her hand and saying things like “I wish you...”

Two participants criticized their teachers' traditional methods and their lack of creativity in their classes. P#4 expressed her dissatisfaction about her teachers' failure to focus on the productive skills, error correction and communicative activities in their lessons:

L1 was used excessively in the classroom and communicative activities were not paid much attention. As for the skills, teaching grammar and reading were prioritized but the other skills were usually neglected. I remember we played some games at times and I really enjoyed them. There was not any error correction except for grammar exercises.

P#5 provided a recent example from her experience in learning German. By adding a teacher perspective to her student experience, she could observe the teacher's teaching skills and competence in the field objectively:

As a third language, I started learning German last year. Although I finished the track with the highest grade in the class, honestly speaking I was not satisfied with the process at all. The reason was the teacher taught all the structures and vocabulary in grammar-translation method and just followed the course book and did not create communicative activities.

Eight participants approached the issue of teachers' effect on the language learning process from a different point of view and focused on the positive, encouraging and motivating learning atmospheres which their teachers created. P#7 explained the relationship between the positive atmosphere in class and the learners' motivation and success explicitly:

When I read through my experiences, I can conclude that teacher-student relationship, enjoyable atmosphere, not feeling under pressure and the sense of achievement have shaped my experiences as a learner.

Similarly, P#10 indicated that sometimes an encouraging and motivating teacher could be more effective than a competent and skilful teacher by giving two examples from two different periods of her language learning journey:

At the secondary school, my teacher's positive attitude was the biggest factor in my growing interest in language, even if he was not even a trained teacher (he was just an engineer who knows English).

My favourite teacher at the high school was a good motivator, besides being a successful facilitator and a model for me, and she occasionally made those inspirational talks whenever we were blocked while preparing for the YDS exam.

P#23's anecdote about his English teacher displayed the importance of how positive feelings towards a teacher could motivate students to be responsible:

I guess the first thing that contributed to my love of English was the teacher, whom I used to admire. I still call her the best teacher so far. Since I loved the teacher so much, I used to believe that if I didn't do my homework, I would break her heart and I didn't want to hear negative things about me from her.

To sum up, it can be concluded that participants in this study had a tendency to establish a connection between teaching skills of a teacher and his/her students' language learning journey. While some of them emphasized the importance of content knowledge, the others dwelled on the motivating and encouraging role of a teacher. Eventually, they all agreed when a teacher is qualified and motivating enough, the learners become more successful. They came to this conclusion by reflecting on their own language learning experiences.

**Teaching approaches.** In order to portray their positions as language teachers, more than half of 23 participants (17) preferred to write about the methods and teaching philosophy which they employed in their classes.

P#2's paper showed that apart from teachers' own experiences and personal preferences, the teaching philosophy of the institutions where they worked could be

an important factor in deciding teaching approaches. As an inexperienced teacher, she adapted her institution's approach and employed some methods to be able to maintain it:

My institution has adopted the communicative approach, so the speaking skills and activities are really important for our students. In order to be able to maintain this approach, I try to talk less and leave the stage to them. With the continuous pair-works and group works, they discuss their ideas without hesitation, because they know that I am always there to help them, motivate them and show them the right way. It is really easy for my students to lose their motivation and get bored since they have the same teacher, same book and same class all the day. I can understand them. In order to wake them up and save them from their boredom, I do the activities they like especially within the last hours of the days. They really enjoy role playing activities for example. We even take videos sometimes, and I see that while they are watching them, they realize their mistakes and correct themselves. Debates are also helpful for them. When they are supporting the idea of their groups, they get so excited that they speak English naturally, without thinking about the sentence structure or words. I never correct them in such activities as the important thing is that they can express themselves, with or without mistakes. I believe that these activities not only make them enjoy the course, but also allow them to use what they have learned so far.

P# 1 put her learners in the center of her teaching approach and measured a teacher's competence with his/her ability of eliminating the barriers to learning:

My personal approach to teaching EFL is quite simple: “you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink”. You really cannot teach a student unless s/he wants to learn. This means either environmental obstacles, such as classroom, or personal obstacles, such as anxiety or motivation, to be considered first. Once a teacher is skilful enough to overcome such obstacles, wheels start turning. Otherwise, unfortunately, it is a waste of time for both the teacher and the student.

Like P#1, learners become the focus of the learning process in p#2’s class. Claiming that the most effective learning takes place in an environment where the learners are involved in learning process, she prefers to refer her role in class as a “facilitator” rather than a teacher.

My teaching philosophy to teach EFL can be summarized by a saying “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” My aim is not to be a teacher but to be a facilitator. When my students want to be actively involved in learning process, I realized that they could find the key

for success. However, we should keep in mind that we learn from failure, not from success so in my humble opinion, making mistakes, learning in different paces, questioning and criticizing are indispensable for teaching.

One of the participants (P#6) wrote the identity that she took on as a teacher is being a "life-long learner-teacher". She elaborated that she tried to pursue opportunities to improve herself professionally and to be able to keep up with what is new in language learning:

My personal approach to teach EFL is to keep up with the teaching field which is exposed to constant change. I have made a career in ELT from part-time to full-time, which has enabled me to improve myself as a teacher thanks to my experiences in diverse teaching settings. I have always been trying to create opportunities for me to become an innovative teacher such as joining the Erasmus ex-change program, attending ELT conferences, receiving a grant from Turkish National Agency for a CertTESOL in-service course in London, taking courses in educational technology and starting an MA TEFL program at Bilkent University. I think that I make use of my experiences as a life-long learner-teacher to teach English more effectively since I think all students deserve to be treated well with the latest techniques in ELT.

It can be concluded from these statements that participants were affected by many different factors, including their institution, their previous learning experiences, professional development opportunities, in shaping their teaching approaches. All participants who wrote comments about their teaching philosophy mentioned that they tried to create a learner-centered learning atmosphere where learners could engage in learning actively.

### **Conclusion**

Twenty-three participants' positionings themselves as language learners and teachers were examined in this study. The archival data for this examination were gathered from the position papers that participants wrote for their Methodology course during their M.A. TEFL program. In order to answer the question of what kind of positionings Turkish EFL teachers engage in regarding their beliefs about

language learning and teaching in online discussion forums, this chapter presented the findings from the thematic analysis of the papers. The next chapter will present discussion, pedagogical implications, limitations of the study, as well as suggestions for further research.

## **CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS**

### **Introduction**

This study explored the ways EFL teachers enrolled in a masters' program negotiated language teacher identities (LTI) through their positionings in an online discussion forum. To this end, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What kind of positionings do EFL teachers engage in on online discussion forums regarding beliefs about language learning and teaching?
2. How do these positionings enable teachers to negotiate their language teacher identities (LTIs)?

This chapter consists of four main sections. In the first section, discussion is presented and the findings are discussed in the light of the research questions and the related literature. In the second section, pedagogical implications are given. In the third section, the limitations of the study are shared. Finally, suggestions for further research are mentioned in the fourth section.

### **Discussion**

#### **Beliefs about Language Learning and Teaching**

Considering the themes that emerged from the analysis of position papers and participants' discussions, the analysis was presented under two main categories as the participants' beliefs about language learning and teaching. positioning themselves as language learners and language teachers. In this section, the findings about the participants' beliefs about the language learning and teaching will be

discussed under two main same categories: participants' positioning themselves as language learners and teachers.

**Participants' positioning themselves as language learners.** The findings of the present study related to the teachers' language learner positionings will be discussed under certain themes: teacher dependent learning, autonomy, age, fear of making mistakes, and authentic environment.

Firstly, participants acknowledged that their learning experiences took place in a teacher dominant atmosphere. As students, they were dependent on the teacher as they perceived their language teachers as the only source of knowledge and input. For instance, P#4 stated that her language class was teacher dominant and their roles as students were passive because they only listened and answered questions. This teacher dominant nature of the classrooms affected learners' attitude towards the language negatively and put some barriers to improvement of productive skills. In this sense, P#8 stated that her productive skills were poor because of teacher dominant atmosphere, intensive L1 use, and employing grammar-translation method, and consequently she was not self-confident. According to Meighan's (1990) metaphorical classification, learners can be resisters in language classes and this means that they may not be willing to learn the language and resist the learning process. In these cases, using force or punishing the learners are not effective ways. In this sense, the findings suggested the participants of the present study positioned their language learner identities as "resisters" who resist learning the language. William and Burden (1997) have stated that the existence of teacher as the only source of knowledge can put learners in a position where they are "*mugs*" or "*receptacles*" that wait to be filled with knowledge. The findings of the present study

are in line with this view, as well. The participants ended up being shy and demotivated because of the teacher dominant classroom atmosphere and their passive role as learners in the classroom.

Secondly, even though most participants mentioned their negative learning experiences due to the teacher dominant learning environment, according to their comments, some participants managed to get rid of the barriers to their learning by being autonomous learners. These participants employed different methods to reach a level of autonomy in their learning. For instance, P#2 stated that her love towards the languages paved the way for her success in language learning. Similarly, P#4 showed her intrinsic motivation and aptitude to the language as a key to her autonomy. Apart from motivation, some participants mentioned that they were able to overcome the problem of teacher dominant learning environment thanks to some methods that they implemented. Several participants (P#5, P#1, and P#10) gave examples to these methods by mentioning watching English movies, listening to English songs, imitating the professors, keeping a diary, and joining an English drama club. These findings show that these participants whose comments are included under this theme position their learner identities as autonomous learners. The findings also suggest that being an autonomous learner can give learners the chance of taking the control of their own learning and they can be successful despite all the barriers caused by the teacher dominant learning environment. The findings that have been suggested here are in line with the findings of Lamb's study (2011) in which he claimed as “the learners' identity as learners and their motivation are closely linked to their voice, both in the sense of them being able to have control and influence over their learning and in the sense of them being listened to by the teacher” (p.77).

Considering the findings about the autonomy, participants seemed to connect the autonomy with the age of the learners. They mentioned that since the learners get more conscious as they get older, concordantly they become more conscious about their learning journey and manage to become autonomous learners.

Thirdly, findings of the present study suggest that the participants position themselves as learners with fear. Even though the learners have different reasons for their fears of making mistakes, they all acknowledge that fear affects their learning process negatively by hindering their learning. For example, P#7 called her fear of making mistakes as the only problem in her learning journey. Similarly, P#8 mentioned that her poor productive skills caused her to be afraid of practicing these skills in public and making mistakes. However, two of the participants explicitly stated that they were not afraid of the mistakes as language learners. Although these participants attributed this fearless attitude to their characters, the fact that these participants were not Turkish unlike the rest of the participants was worthy of consideration in terms of the findings of the present study. It can be concluded from this finding that teachers' positioning themselves in terms of their learner identities can be affected by extrinsic factors such as nationality and culture.

Last but not least, authentic environment where the learners have a chance to use the target language is significant in language learning. The participants claimed that the learners who were in an authentic environment or who had chances to

interact with native speakers or the target culture became more motivated and successful in their learning process. For instance, P#2 and P#21 considered themselves lucky as they lived in touristic areas and had chance to interact with some foreigners in target language. According to findings presented in this authentic environment section, the necessity of using the target language stood out as an important advantage of authentic environments. For example, P#18 and P#20 shared some anecdotes that showed how their attitude changed positively and they became successful in using the target language. These findings are in line with the findings of Ollerhead's (2012) study. Ollerhead (2012) observed that while one of the learners in her study considered himself as a poor learner, he became highly motivated and engaged in conversations on a school trip to the market. As this learner was a trader himself in his hometown, the market and the content of the market conversations served as an authentic and familiar environment and material for him. The findings of Ollerhead's (2012) study suggested that this learner's identity began to change after this trip when he experienced the language in an authentic environment and he became more confident and motivated in class rather than afraid of participating and making mistakes.

**Participants' positioning themselves as language teachers.** The findings of the present study related to the teachers' language teacher identity positionings will be discussed under certain themes such as: learning experience and teaching practice, teaching skills, and teaching approaches.

Firstly, the findings suggest that participants position their language teacher identities in the light of their former language learning experiences. Unlike their

teachers, participants stated that they tried to establish a learner-centered learning environment and guide their students by sharing the methods and strategies that they employed in the past. For instance, P#2 mentioned that she tried to make her students see the fun part of language learning as she enjoyed watching movies, listening to music, and reading literary work in the past. Similarly, P#1 explicitly wrote that she shared the strategies which she personally used or read about once. The fact that the participants focused on the autonomy in their classes showed that participants position themselves not as the source of knowledge but rather a facilitator or a guide. Participants' learning experiences also have an impact on how much they focused on learners' motivation levels. Participants who suffered from strict and discouraging teachers during their learning experiences stated that they could put themselves in learners' place and designed their classes and relationship with their learners in the light of this sense of empathy. For instance, P#3 and P#20 emphasized the importance of feeling empathy towards their students and this way they could build a more credible relationship with their learners and make them feel motivated. These findings are in line with Kim's (2011) study in the sense that teachers' beliefs are influenced by their previous learning experiences and language teachers tend to position their identities in the light of these beliefs and experiences.

Another significant finding of the present study reveals that participants implicitly employ some positioning of their language teacher identities while they are negotiating their beliefs about language teaching. Almost all participants touched upon their teaching approaches in order to elaborate their beliefs about language teaching, and they tended to reveal some clues for their language teacher identity positioning while doing this. They agreed that a good teacher is the teacher who had the required content knowledge and also an encouraging and positive attitude

towards her students. This finding can be supported with the study of Beijaard et al. (2000) in which they described teachers' professional identity in terms of the teacher as a subject matter expert and the teacher as a pedagogical expert. The participants in the present study also stated that the learners should be in the center of the learning. For instance, P#2 claimed that the most effective learning took place in an environment where the learners were involved in learning process; she preferred to refer her role in class as a “facilitator” rather than a teacher. While discussing her teaching philosophy, one participant (P#6) wrote that she took on the identity of a “life-long learner and she tried to follow the opportunities that she could use to improve herself professionally. These findings are in line with how Beijaard et al. (2000) described the recent conceptions of teaching as "classroom manager, facilitator of learning, etc. and teaching is much more than the transmission of knowledge"(p. 3).

### **Pedagogical Implications of the Study**

Findings of the present study present some significant pedagogical implications. The analysis of the position papers of participants who are also students in a master’s program shows that teachers make use of some platforms where they can negotiate their beliefs about language learning and teaching, position themselves in the light of these negotiations and share their teaching and learning experiences with each other. Teacher training programs could benefit from the study in designing their curriculum and choosing an online tool that provides the teachers a chance to benefit from each other’s experiences and perspectives. Considering how teachers' negotiation of their identities enable them to reflect on and evaluate their teaching practices, instructors or administrators in teacher training programs can design courses or provide platforms where teachers can negotiate their teacher identities

through their teaching practices. In institutions with crowded teaching staff, organize all teachers to come together physically could be difficult and online platforms could serve as an innovative and effective solution to this challenge.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study explored how participants positioned themselves in terms of their language teacher identities and how they negotiated their beliefs about language teaching and learning by interpreting the participants' papers and discussions related to these papers. However, considering the nature and the conditions of these kinds of studies, some limitations can be mentioned and these limitations can be useful in terms of interpreting the results of this study. The first important limitation of this study was the number of the participants. Considering the nature of the study, more position papers from more participants could have provided richer data in terms of both the amount and the content.

Another limitation is the lack of interviews with the participants. Since the time of the study was a few years after the position papers were submitted, the participants were out of reach of the researcher. In depth interviews with the participants could have provided more insight to the analysis of the identity positionings of teachers in online forums. Doing an interview with the participants could have given them a chance to reflect on their papers that they wrote a few years ago. The data from these interviews could have revealed whether their ideas changed over the years.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Considering the findings and limitations of the study, some suggestions can be made for further research of the issues that has been investigated in this study. To

begin with, research studies exploring how language teachers' identities have been negotiated in online platforms in their studies are limited. Therefore, more language teacher identity studies can be conducted by exploring the online platforms that are employed with educational purposes.

Secondly, in consideration of the limitations of the study, an interview with the participants after they finish the master's program and start their jobs could provide insight to the changes in their positionings themselves and beliefs about language learning and teaching. Comparing the data from their time in the master's program and the data from the time after the program could present efficient results.

Thirdly, a quantitative study exploring the positionings of language teacher identities and their beliefs about language learning and teaching could be useful in terms of providing a more extensive understanding. For example, a small corpus can be created to investigate which key expressions are used and how often they are used in teachers' positioning themselves. This kind of a research design could reveal some patterns that cannot be easily observed qualitatively. Triangulating the data with quantitative data would be helpful in making the results more objective, as well.

Finally, considering the amount of the studies that have explored the online platforms used for the purposes of training teachers in the literature, more studies could be conducted to investigate the uses and benefits of online platforms and serve as good sources to design teacher training programs.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study explored the ways EFL teachers enrolled in a masters' program negotiated language teacher identities (LTI) in terms of their beliefs about language learning and teaching through their positionings in an online discussion

forum. The aim of the study was to elaborate how EFL teachers discuss their beliefs about language learning and teaching in an online forum and while doing this, how their comments revealed clues for positionings of their language teacher identities. The findings showed that participants engaged in positionings not only as learners but also as teachers. Teachers shared their teaching and learning experiences and commented on each other's papers via the position papers uploaded to an online forum. Through this negotiation, some comments revealed how teachers explicitly or implicitly position their identities as learners and teachers. Considering the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that online platforms can serve as an effective tool in providing teachers a way to negotiate their beliefs and identities.

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