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## Regular Article

## Becoming international teachers of English: A sociomaterialist analysis of teacher identity (re) formation over time

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the identity formation of two 'non-native' teachers of English over time. It shows how their identities became shaped through past teaching experiences and then postgraduate study in the UK, highlighting how these experiences were inter-linked. It also examines how postgraduate study opened-up new future identity possibilities and the implications of these. The study applies a narrative methodological framework to analyse teachers' short stories gathered through interviews and focus groups. Using actor-network theory as a theoretical lens, the stories teachers shared were analysed to show how both social and material actors may be significant in teacher identity formation.

## 1. Introduction

Language teacher identity has been the focus of a considerable amount of research in recent years (Barkhuizen, 2017), providing insights into how identities are formed and (re)-formed over time. *Becoming* a teacher is a seemingly complex process that involves not only gaining pedagogical knowledge and developing techniques for teaching, but also teachers' expressions of their personal and professional selves (Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). As Fenwick and Edwards (2010) suggest, for any teacher, this *becoming* involves more than personal desire and gaining certification; rather, it is through the countless objects that a teacher "designs, selects, organizes, stores, evaluates, maintains and responds to, as well as the humans with whom she interacts with every moment" (p.6). Therefore, how teachers interact with people and material objects in their teaching and development contexts influences their experiences of *becoming* teachers and thus their identity formation. While much research on teacher identity formation has emphasised the influences of social interaction (Block & Gray, 2016; Gray & Morton, 2018), there has been less attention paid to the influences of material objects in shaping identities. Thus, this paper focuses on the potential influences of both social and material actors on the identity formation of <sup>1</sup>'non-native' English teachers over time. Drawing on findings from a larger study, it focuses on the identity formation of two 'non-native' English teachers through their experiences as teachers in their home contexts and as postgraduate students in the UK.

My research questions for the main study were therefore.

- What (f)actors have played a part in shaping participants' professional identities through their past teaching experiences?
- What (f)actors have shaped participants' current professional identities as English teachers engaged in postgraduate study in the UK?
- What kind of identities do participants imagine for their futures?

1.1. *Becoming a teacher of English*

Becoming a language teacher (or any kind of teacher) involves considerable identity work, which, as Yazan and Lindahl (2020) argue, is integral to teachers' development as well as their practices in their teaching communities. Identities are therefore continually performed and influenced by the interactions of teachers in their classrooms, institutions, research and development activities (Gray & Morton, 2018, p. 3) as well as social engagement with local communities and wider society (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Block & Gray, 2016). As such, Sachs (2005) suggests that identity 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" (p.15). Such a framework involves the myriad of actors that are inter-linked with teaching and which interact with teachers in particular ways. These actors may become more or less significant depending on the contexts, the teachers involved and their responses to events at particular times (Pennington & Richards, 2017). Moreover, as argued by Britzman (1994) becoming a teacher involves socially negotiating identity options, consenting to some but resisting others. Attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> 'non-native' is in inverted commas to indicate the issues associated with this term (see Holliday, 2015).

unify teaching according to institutional norms may pressurise teachers to adopt particular identity options (Abdenia, 2012; Liu & Xu, 2011; Xu, 2013) creating tension between expected and desired identities. Emotions may therefore also be significant in identity formation as different actors determine teachers' emotional engagement in their practices and investment in development (Day, 2018; Zembylas, 2007).

The complexity of identity formation thus contributes to the problem of defining it because, as Barkhuizen (2017, p. 3) suggests, through the different ways in which identities may be examined, definitions are always likely to be "exclusionary" and "counterproductive" in some way. In response to this conundrum, Barkhuizen (2017, p. 4) proposes a "composite conceptualization" of identity which accommodates the various lenses through which identity can be understood. Of particular relevance to my study is the following extract:

"And LTIs [language teacher identities] 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)

As will be reported, the teacher participants shared stories of their experiences as teachers and postgraduate students which illustrated some of the ways in which *both* social and material actors were significant in their identity formation.

### 1.2. Influences of postgraduate study on identity formation

Becoming a *good* language teacher means different things in different contexts (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020), and as part of this process teachers often reach stages in their development when they wish or need to deepen their knowledge and develop their skills (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Accordingly, some teachers may look to gain further qualifications through formal study, such as MA and doctoral programmes (Barkhuizen, 2021). Indeed, both MA and doctoral TESOL-related programmes attract a diverse body of international (as well as home) students to UK universities (Copland et al., 2017). Such programmes therefore become sites of professional development not only through formal study but, potentially, by sharing of experiences of teaching and learning. Thus, postgraduate study in the UK may play a role in identity formation as teachers deepen their understanding of theoretical and pedagogical concepts, study in different academic contexts and learn about alternative perspectives of teaching and learning.

Teachers studying on postgraduate TESOL courses bring with them personal experiences of learning, and knowledge gained from different teaching contexts, thus their perceptions of teaching may vary (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Liu, 1998; Park, 2012; Shahri, 2018). Moreover, as Kamhi-Stein (2000) argues, international teachers studying in English-speaking countries often face issues linked to lack of confidence in their competence and language proficiency as well as prejudice against them as 'non-native speakers'. This has been the focus of some research investigating international student experiences of MA TESOL courses, and PhD study (e.g. Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Park, 2012; Reiss, 2011).

Studying in contexts such as UK universities, requires integration into a new academic learning community (Pavlenko, 2003; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), and as such involves a process of identity negotiation. In a study of MA and PhD students in the US, Zacharius (2010) shows how students questioned their legitimacy as English teachers when facing challenges interacting in English in academic and social situations. However, postgraduate study can also provide opportunity for teachers to critically discuss teaching experiences and perspectives (Brutt-Griffler & Saminy, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, 2000) and develop a deeper awareness of who and what has been influential in shaping these. Some teachers may also experience identity disruption as they learn about alternative ways of teaching which may not fit smoothly into the contexts they will return to (Li & De Costa, 2018; Liu, 1998; Nguyen & Dao, 2019), for instance, if

their syllabus is especially exam-oriented (Shahri, 2018). However, in a study of MA TESOL students in Australia, Nguyen and Dao (2019) show how pedagogical knowledge can also inspire ideas of adapting new practices for different contexts. Postgraduate study can therefore be a site where identities may be attributed or disrupted, or where alternative identities can be explored.

By participating in an academic study community, teachers are introduced to different aspects of research. As a result, they may see teacher led research as something they could be involved in rather than research being "something that university professors do" (Borg, 2017, p. 127). This is significant in building confidence towards claiming a teacher-researcher identity and understanding how research may help teachers address classroom issues and develop local teaching practices (Burns, 2010).

The literature on identity formation in relation to postgraduate study, has mainly been situated in contexts other than the UK (e.g. Abdenia, 2012; Barkhuizen, 2016; Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Park, 2012). Therefore, this study offers additional insight into the ways in which postgraduate study may be influential in UK university contexts. It also places particular emphasis on factors shaping identities by tracing not only 'who' but 'what' has been influential in teachers' past and present experiences, and how they might be inter-linked, and influential in formulating imagined professional selves. Following Fenwick and Edwards (2010), my study therefore recognises the significance of both social and material influences on teachers and their teaching, and I draw on actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005) as a theoretical lens to examine *who* and *what* shapes teacher identity formation.

### 1.3. ANT and teacher identity

Language teacher identity research, as discussed so far, has largely focused on identity formation through social interaction. Despite the valuable insights this has brought to understandings of language teacher identity, there has been less attention paid to the potential influence of material objects on identity formation. One exception is Hadfield (2017) who indicates the roles material objects, specifically EFL teaching materials and resources, may play in shaping teacher identities. Another is Mulcahy (2011) whose study focuses on identity formation of school teachers in Australia, showing how teacher *becoming* is a relational process performed through identities formed in a heterogenous web of social and material actors present in teaching environments.

A sociomaterial approach suggests that identities are shaped by social interaction, but also through interactions with discourses, teaching materials, technologies and other material objects integral to teaching environments. According to Toohey (2017) such a perspective on identity requires a focus not only on people but on the "material and symbolic arrangements that together assign particular identities to particular bodies" (p.14). This does not suggest that humans are determined by the material objects of their environment, but that they are in mutual interaction with them. Through these interactions, meaning and knowledge emerges (Canagarajah, 2018, p. 271). ANT can therefore be helpful in analysing how relations are formed with different entities, and how material objects can influence professional practices (such as teaching) through their interactions with those connected to them (Law, 2002).

Actors are formed through the associations (or disassociations) of both humans and non-human entities (e.g. artefacts, technologies and texts) (Michael, 2017, p. 153). These associations may be forced, intentional or spontaneous, but it is through such interactions that particular functions or actions are performed (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 12). In other words, entities assemble and act together to produce particular consequences (Law & Singleton, 2000, p. 174). As Law and Singleton (2000) explain, what might seem like a single object, or form of knowledge is "a set of related performances" (p.774). Each human or non-human is itself a product of inter-relations: everyone and everything has relations with others integrated into their history.

Therefore, actors interact with others to create an assemblage or network of heterogeneous components, held together by their inter-relations (Sørensen, 2009, p. 55) and the term *actor-network* describes these assemblages of people and material objects. A study of *actor-networks* is therefore a study of associations between humans and material objects, through which particular social orders are made (Latour, 1996).

When an actor is *enrolled* into an actor-network, it must perform accordingly to maintain the stability of the entity (Michael, 2017). Moreover, ANT considers each actor to have equal potential to be influential. This implies *symmetry* among actors (Latour, 2005) and does not presume difference between the effects that humans and non-humans may have (Latour, 2005, p. 185). In addition, ANT assumes a flat ontology; any local changes are inter-linked with wider network processes (Michael, 2017). Therefore, teachers' practices and identities performed in their daily classroom teaching are inter-connected with wider institutional networks of curriculum development and assessment practices (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 19). Identities may also be ascribed by others through assertions of power which work to maintain institutional hierarchies and norms (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). In other words, teacher identities become formed through teachers' interactions with others, and through the practices these relational processes produce (Mulcahy, 2011, p. 227). Moreover, teaching involves teaching methods, techniques, and material resources which shape interactions among teachers and students. For instance, as argued by Sørensen (2009), materials and activities such as language learning games (often used in communicative approaches) are active participants in lessons creating particular interactions between learners and teacher. Thus, instead of focusing on human cognition and action, an actor-network approach considers how material objects are not just present but are also influential in participating in teaching events potentially shifting dynamics among teacher and students (Sørensen, 2009).

Using ANT as a theoretical framework therefore enables me to trace the actors who have been and who may continue to be influential on shaping identities, as shown in the narratives of teacher participants. However, it is pertinent to note that there have been various critiques of ANT and I will briefly discuss those most relevant to my study in the next part.

### 1.3.1. Some criticisms of ANT

Although ANT appears to offer a novel conceptual tool to examine the interplays of social and material actors influencing teachers and teacher identities, it has been met with some criticism. This has, for instance, been focused around interpretations that portray networks as rigid, managed entities, and the risk of adopting an un-reflexive objective stance when using ANT for some purposes (see Whittle & Spicer, 2008; Gad & Jensen, 2010; Amsterdamska, 1990), as well as notions of stability and singularity that the network metaphor may suggest (e.g. Law & Singleton, 2014; Mol, 2002). Proponents of ANT have responded to this and attributed many of these concerns to different understandings of ANT's concepts and terms, including *actor* and *network* (Callon & Latour, 1992; Latour, 1996). Indeed, as Latour (1996) argues, "actors are not conceived as fixed entities but as flows, as circulating objects, undergoing trials, and their stability, continuity, isotopies has to be obtained by other actions and other trials" (p. 8). Thus, rather than actors playing a fixed role in a network they have become better seen as shifting across various roles and being linked to other networks, thus potentially performing multiple functions.

Furthermore, although processes of *translation* (Law, 1992) which bring actors to play a part in the functioning of a network, aim to stabilize a network, Latour (2005) recognises that relationships between different actors are unpredictable and may change, mutate or be broken. Latour (2005) therefore argues that through the unpredictability of entities and their interactions, complete stabilization or reified representation of a network is always disrupted.

Concern over the network 'metaphor' is also raised by Sørensen

(2009, p. 57), in relation to her research on educational technologies. She sees the term *network* as potentially misleading particularly when linked to stability, for instance in depictions of how objects settle and become hidden parts in a network (or black-boxed in ANT terms). Indeed, she found that components of the educational software networks she studied often showed mutation and variation rather than stability. She thus follows Law and Mol (2001) in adopting the concept a *spatial imaginary* of patterns of relations rather than the *relational imaginary* of the network (2009, p.62) to better describe the networks in her analysis. This portrays networks as spatial formations of emerging and mutating relations between the actors (human and non-human) that are part of these. As Müller and Schurr (2016) also point out, relations may shift without an actor disassembling but by being changed in some way. In other words, "entities may move in and out of the network, new relations may be forged and existing ones cut, but instead of disrupting the whole network, this just transforms the resultant actor." (Müller & Schurr, 2016, p. 222). This arguably moves ANT closer towards the blurred boundaries, affects and shifting topologies that are so integral to assemblage thinking (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). In terms of teacher identity, this is helpful in considering how professional identities may shift and become re-shaped as individuals move among different networks and in some cases adopt (or are forced to adopt) different identities.

As mentioned, ANT has also been critiqued for portraying unitary roles and immutable meanings in networks functions (e.g. Gad & Jensen, 2010). However, it could also be argued that it is still relevant to the 'material turn' (or ontological turn) in science, technological and sociological studies (Michael, 2017, p. 120). This concerns how different realities are enacted in relation to practices and recognises the multiplicity of these practices (Michael, 2017). This is shown in Mol's (2002) analysis of multiplicity among atherosclerosis patients which highlights how different forms of atherosclerosis were being enacted among different human actors, technologies and hospital practices. Her study shows how patterns of relations may be different but still entangled with each other. This concept of multiplicity can be seen as relevant to teachers teaching English in multiple ways, shaped by the various actors they encounter (institutions, rules, books, colleagues, managers) and the knowledge and beliefs they have accumulated from other experiences.

Such developments in socio-material analyses have therefore generated, and continue to generate, new lines of thought beyond more 'classic' ANT concepts originally proposed. Some of the more classic ANT concepts I draw on in the paper (e.g. *black-boxed*, *enrolment*) are useful in depicting the seemingly resistant nature of the institutions and environments that teachers work within. However, these are discussed with recognition of the multiple and complex nature of identity formation laid out earlier and with the recognition that actor-networks have become understood as ambivalent (Singleton et al., 1993; Fenwick, 2011), fluid and unpredictable.

## 2. Methodological framework: Use of narrative

Narrative research focuses on stories of life experiences (Ntinda, 2019) and by listening to others' stories, researchers can gain insight into the ways in which people make sense of happenings linked to social and cultural contexts. As discussed by Reissman (2008) there are various approaches to narrative analysis, and I adopted a 'short-story' approach which provides a form of narrative created during a more formal research setting, such as an interview process (Barkhuizen, 2016). Barkhuizen (2016), for instance, uses short stories in his study of an MA TESOL student to analyse her experiences as a student, and links this to follow-up stories of her teaching experiences. Short stories therefore can effectively link different moments in a teacher's experiences to construct a coherent narrative.

There has been increasing attention paid to the potential links between materialist (and sociomaterialist) approaches to research and use of narrative analysis (Loots et al., 2013). This could be interpreted as a



response to concerns that the socio-constructionist foundation of narrative research focuses on human meaning making and social actors while neglecting the potential roles of non-human actors in the stories constructed in research studies (see [Smith & Montforte, 2020](#)). Bringing a sociomaterialist lens into narrative research, therefore, does not assume humans to be the subjects who act and material objects to be those acted upon. Instead, it offers recognition of heterogeneity and the equal potential of all to be influential ([Smith & Montforte, 2020](#)). Significantly, actors influence flows of events and their outcomes, or what happens in a story. ANT is therefore useful in exploring power relations implied in narrated events and in showing how these are formed at both macro and micro levels of the contexts of stories told ([Vickers et al., 2018](#)). Moreover, while teachers may tell stories about situations which appear similar, there may be differences in how events unfold, the actors involved and the effects produced through their interactions. This reflects the multiplicity in how teachers perform their practices; they are not simply exhibiting different perspectives on teaching but are frequently inhabiting different teaching worlds ([Fenwick & Edwards, 2010](#), p. 158). Teacher experiences are also shaped by beliefs, societal expectations and institutional policies, hence as argued by [Law \(2004, p. 13\)](#), there may be political reasons why a particular reality is enacted over others. The stories of my participants, therefore, are made distinct by the context they are set in and the interplay of actors involved in the situations they talk about.

## 2.1. Data collection

The participants in the larger study this paper is based upon were recruited from postgraduate TESOL courses (MA, MEd., PhD and EdD) of two UK universities I recruited participants with prior teaching experience and the teacher participants in the main study came from Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, Ecuador, Indonesia, Greece, Vietnam, Algeria and Oman. In view of the scope this paper I could not report on all of these and so chose two participants from the same context with different teaching backgrounds. They were from Saudi Arabia, of different levels of experience, and from different institutional environments (school and university).

## 2.2. Interviews and focus groups

After gaining university ethics approval for the study, I recruited potential participants initially by email; I established personal contact with those who responded and provided further details of the study. From this, I established a group of 14 participants and, after administering consent forms, arranged face-to-face interviews followed by focus group meetings in the two institutions.

Interviews have been widely used in narrative research ([Ntinda, 2019](#); [Sharp et al., 2019](#)), providing opportunity for individuals to construct stories of their experiences usually in response to interviewer prompts. This construction of stories indicates a collaboration between participant and interviewer ([Clandinin & Connelly, 2000](#)). On the other hand, [Freidus \(2002\)](#) argues that while focus groups have been less used in narrative research, they provide opportunity for story-telling and potentially a more “deeply layered” understanding of a particular phenomenon for the researcher (p.160). For instance, the story of one participant might trigger another to recount a related happening which may not otherwise have come to the fore. In addition, as [Freidus \(2002\)](#) found in her research, focus groups encourage an exploration of points raised and may open up further avenues of discussion. Finally, combining interviews and focus groups can add rigour to data collection; what is said on similar topics can be considered from different storied accounts ([Freidus, 2002](#)).

While there are different approaches to gathering narrative data through interviewing, I used [Reissman's \(2013\)](#) concept of *personal narratives* defined as individual stories in response to interview prompts, which aligns with [Barkhuizen's \(2016\)](#) short story approach mentioned

earlier. From the stories gathered as data, my aim was to gain insight into the social and material actors inter-linked with participant experiences. This involved identifying the actor-networks integral to narratives constructed and told ([Fenwick & Edwards, 2010](#), p. 151).

The interviews were based around a set of themes, which aligned with areas frequently mentioned in the literature on teacher identity. These themes were: *beliefs about teaching; classroom practices; challenges; opportunities; encouragement; change; professional aspirations*. Each theme was followed with question prompts to stimulate but not restrict responses. I sent the participants these details a week before the interview and asked them to produce a mind-map of teaching and postgraduate study experiences based around the themes, which they then brought to the interview. I decided to use mind-maps as these would provide a prompt from which participants could focus on points most significant to them (see [Wheeldon, 2010](#); [Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2019](#)). Moreover, as mind-maps are participant generated, the process of mapping enables participants to think through ideas and relations between different happenings ([Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2019](#)).

Focus groups were planned as groups of 3-5 individuals and were based around questions relating to the themes of the interviews and providing a framework to stimulate discussion. I sent the questions to the participants a week before the meeting to allow preparation time and thus encourage participant-directed discussion.

As the researcher, I acknowledge the unpredictability of both interviews and focus groups. The ways in which relations were formed or resisted during the data gathering processes of my study may have influenced the narrative data produced. I therefore kept notes on the dynamics of each meeting and any instances that might have impacted on the data produced. In addition, while I did not play a character role in participant stories, I was part of the method assemblage ([Law, 2004](#)) that incorporates theory, data collection and analysis techniques, the researcher and researched. My decisions throughout the research process including what aspects of the narratives to include ([Connolly, 2007](#)) were therefore influential on the findings reported.

## 2.3. Data analysis

I first transcribed data ‘verbatim’ for both interviews and focus groups using tools in NVivo. I paid attention to [Pavlenko's \(2007\)](#) caution against “addition and omission”; which refer to the addition of punctuation turning a spoken text into a written one and the omission of natural pauses, fillers and repetition found in authentic speech. I therefore included fillers and used ellipsis to indicate pauses, as well as noting emotions expressed (e.g. laughter). In accordance with [Smith and Montforte \(2020, p.3\)](#) I considered transcribing as a constructive process through which I became familiar with participants’ stories and which also stimulated thoughts on potential data groupings. I added annotations to the transcripts of ideas for grouping and linking data.

For the interviews, I then produced analytical maps of the main points of each interview mapping participant responses to interview themes. These maps provided a visual summary of the stories told during the interviews and the potential actors involved and could be referred back to and added to at any point of the analysis process. Following this stage, I created a written summary for each interview and transcript using the memo tool in NVivo. The purpose of the memos was to expand on details noted in the mind-maps and produce a summary of each interview. The memos were organized around the over-arching themes of past experiences, present postgraduate study and imagined-futures of the participant and written in note form. These stages described so far involved re-visiting and re-reading data and enabled me to conceive further theming of data through expressions of similar or diverging issues. The next step was to create notes under the themes of past experiences, present postgraduate study and imagined-futures to create links between different stories and participants. Through this *theming* process ([Smith & Montforte, 2020](#)) I formed further groupings of data paying attention to links between past, present and future to trace identity

formation, and to the interplays of actors in the stories told.

Following transcription of the focus group data, I produced memos to summarise the discussions. I wanted to bring together responses to questions in different focus groups, and after some trialling found Padlet to be a useful tool for this. Padlet is a software package that enables users to pin electronic sticky notes on a board. The sticky notes enabled me to summarise participants' responses to a certain questions and thus create links across different focus groups. Following this step, I then further themed data as for the interviews, and identified potential links between interviews and focus group data.

My general approach of drawing maps and manually writing notes, combined with creating documents and annotations that could be stored in NVivo created a process which facilitated considerable re-visiting and re-reading of data. It is also in line with [Smith and Montforte's \(2020\)](#) suggestion of writing as a form of analysis: "As you jot down notes, write memos, edit your report, you discover ideas, what counts and how stories hang together" (p.4). However, I recognise that my approaches to gathering, analysing and interpreting data also produced particular insights among other possibilities ([Fenwick & Edwards, 2010](#)), and that, as argued by [Law \(2004\)](#) what was "othered" or left out as well as what was included in my reporting of data was also significant in the findings.

### 3. Results

In line with the scope of this paper, I focus this section on just two participants, Hakim and Muriel (pseudonyms) from Saudi Arabia. Hakim had been teaching English in state schools (ages 11-16) for 17 years. He completed his Master's degree in the UK and then returned a few years later to do his EdD. Muriel had taught English on a university foundation course and had 4 years of experience before coming to the UK initially for her Master's degree after which she moved directly onto her PhD.

The findings reported on for each participant first provide insight into their past experiences and teaching contexts, before linking to aspects of their postgraduate study experiences and possible future identities.

#### 3.1. Hakim

Hakim's stories of his teaching experiences related to the challenges he had faced and the impacts of these on his classroom practices and beliefs about teaching. His stories especially highlighted his concern over teachers' limited autonomy and indicated who or what had restricted his own sense of autonomy. For instance, he expressed his frustration over the syllabus and books he had to use and the ways in which supervisors monitored his adherence to these. In the stories he told he referred to the prescriptive nature of teaching texts and how these made him feel like a *conduit*, a term used by [Freire \(1970\)](#) to describe how knowledge is carried and transmitted to students:

*"You have your text-book and you have your teacher's guide like a manual to use [...] these made me think of myself more of an instructor than an educator because I have to carry out ready-made materials even the guide...the manual tells you how to teach what to teach when to stop"*

And you aren't comfortable [...] [I]

*"Absolutely you're not a teacher actually you're just like Freire calls a conduit"* [HakimI1]

In relation to this, Hakim also talked about how supervisors made sure teachers complied with the syllabus and teacher's guide:

*"If you don't do it [follow the syllabus] you're accountable by the Ministry [...] they have their supervisors watching you and you are watched by them".*

*"Yeah they came to my class to see my teaching erm are you going according to the plan? Are you behind the plan? Why are you behind the plan? If you're a bit fast you shouldn't have done that you have to show them how you delivered this particular class like 'Did you do a roleplay or a gap-fill? If not please do it ....this class should be given by this teaching methodology [...] I call it the prescriptive route'"* [HakimI1].

As such, through their presence, supervisors seemed to ensure that the syllabus, coursebook and teacher's manual were adhered to. As Hakim points out, preferred methodologies were interwoven with these texts and so teachers were monitored for not just *what* but *how* they taught.

Hakim also noted the how the presence of exams influenced teachers' as well as students' performances. He gave an example of the impact of exams in a discussion of his perceptions of 'good' students in a focus group:

*"the difference between good and bad [students] is not created by the teacher himself but is created by the system and you are judged actually by the results of the students"* [HakimFG1]

Hakim further explained how the presence of exams had pushed him to prioritise exam performance of his students over other aspects of learning (such as speaking activities) even though he believed these were more useful. His stories therefore depict how the presence of exams may act with the syllabus, coursebooks and teacher's guides to direct what teachers do.

Hakim referred back to these teaching experiences in relation to postgraduate study. Postgraduate study aims to build a deeper understanding of theoretical knowledge and awareness of how theory and practice interlink in relation to teaching ([Hawkins & Norton, 2009](#)). Accordingly, while studying on his EdD programme, Hakim was introduced to theories he had not been aware of before, and became particularly inspired by Freire's concepts of critical pedagogy and his notions of *conduit* and *banking concept of education*:

*"Something I feel will have a big effect on my moral...on myself as a teacher is the way the ministry of education treats me as like erm when I read the book [textbook] I feel of myself as a language transmitter instead of an educator I'm just an instructor [...] I'm not a partner in education reform and that is something that affects me severely and I have to cope with it err I don't know how to change it..."* [HakimI1].

Hakim also explained how the banking concept reflected how he was expected to teach:

*"I had a belief at that time I used to believe as a students who's sitting on a chair not giving trouble [laughs] yes...again going back to Paolo Freire [...]..but I'm thinking of the banking model of education where my role is to throw information and the students' role is to take information...err this was my ideal at first a student going back doing all the exercises coming back again ....[HakimFG1]*

*"I'm fond of his idea of a banking model of education ..some parts because this is what actually we do in our context how I treat my students like in an empty container "* [HakimFG2]

It appeared that learning about Freire's theories helped him to understand why his students had seemed disengaged in his classes; the various actors controlling his teaching (the syllabus, books, teacher's guides and supervisors) positioned students as recipients of knowledge and also pushed him towards adopting an identity as a *conduit* rather than fulfilling his desire to become a motivational teacher.

Hakim also talked about the opportunities presented through his EdD. In one discussion, he emphasised how he had become more critical:

*"Well I feel a change in my thinking actually the way I think now the quality of my mind ...I used to think to reflect because I'm a reflective person about my students and teaching [...] but not this reflection has a new element to it which is criticality ..actually studying the issue from various angles and I see how I'm changing in seminars err discussing with others...when I read" [HakimI1]*

*"I began to re-evaluate most of my conceptions and perspective even... what teaching should be what I've been doing .....so I think the EdD will manage to add like an element of criticality to the way I see things and accept them as well." [HakimFG1].*

By viewing situations from different perspectives, encouraged by interactions with his peers, and reading texts such as articles, he began to question himself and others.

Moreover, Hakim explained that he was becoming more confident as a researcher through his EdD:

*"My writing is better and I learned how to do research properly and this is a good tool which I might do a lot in the future because I can do a piece of research easy enough err I didn't how to do research before and I really couldn't write in English" [HakimI1]*

Becoming an academic writer therefore seemed feasible, and Hakim began to consider research as a future identity aspiration:

*"I think of using my knowledge here to develop my research expertise back there and I have the intention to do more and more research into my context using the knowledge I got from my EdD programme [HakimFG1]*

*"I think this research is for me and my department it will reflect my students and give me an idea how to be a good teacher yes" [HakimI1]*

This indicates how future applications of knowledge and research skills could develop practices to address some of the issues Hakim had shared in his stories.

As another future identity option, Hakim talked about becoming a teacher-trainer. As [De Costa and Norton \(2017\)](#) suggest "language learning is enhanced by effective teacher training" (p.11), and Hakim talked about ways in which he could share knowledge with other teachers. He noted that his EdD studies had given him the confidence to consider this:

*"I might be sent to a training centre to train teachers which I do think I have the capacity err knowledge to do now. I actually see myself as a trainer now" [HakimI1].*

Therefore, it seemed that postgraduate study had both enabled Hakim to develop a more critical perspective of his past experiences and teaching context and given him confidence to envisage new identity options for the future.

### 3.2. Muriel

Muriel was passionate about learning English and wanted to develop the same passion in her university students. When talking about her past experiences, she illustrated how she had tried to engage them with her personality, telling stories, jokes and discussion. However, her approach had presented some challenges to her as it did not align with the teaching 'norms' of her institution:

*"I like to joke you know...tell stories [...] one of the students complained about me talking about topics like talking politics and with a very conservative society [...] I was warned by the supervisor ...focus on your lesson."*

*How did you feel? [i]*

*"I'm not a machine I'm a person as well ...I have to engage some of my personality in the classroom [...] but in the institute they started to take privileges from the teachers [...] we're gonna give you this book which is*

*300 pages and you have to finish them within 4 weeks and there's no time for you to be creative" [MurielI15]*

Despite her empathy for her students, Muriel felt obliged to follow a mechanical delivery of the syllabus in a way that was contrary to her beliefs and the creative identity she aspired to:

*"I used to think I care about how you [students] behave in the classroom participate how you try to work or learn or at least be funny have fun ... not just sit there" [MurielI15]*

*"[...] so with the challenges I'm bound by the syllabus these are the things you can give ....your shouldn't try to ponder [...] whatever you want it's the book you have to teach and it's exam-based teaching." [MurielI15].*

Muriel also talked about the presence of exams and in particular the classroom tests that were given throughout the term. These were stressful not only for students but for teachers as they did not always know when they were to be given:

*"We also had quizzes...er...tests and you don't know exactly which day... so the first time I remember in the break the supervisor came with papers and said right now you give this test and I was worried in case I hadn't taught everything". [MurielI15]*

Her stories indicate how the presence of these tests, the supervisors, and the designated coursebook directed her back to the syllabus and worked together to ensure she adhered to it. Together these appeared to have limited her autonomy to become a more engaging teacher.

Nevertheless, Muriel remained especially concerned about student motivation and participation and sought to focus on these in her PhD. During her interview, she reflected on her own experiences of 're-becoming' a student in the UK, and recognised the challenges she had faced in participating:

*"It was interesting because as a teacher you might not understand how students feel even though you were a student before but as a teacher who became a student I noticed that when I attended my err classes I didn't participate at all." [MurielI15]*

Muriel said this was because she was afraid of making mistakes and she realised that her students faced similar challenges. This further stimulated her to focus her research on student participation and motivation.

Another significant aspect of her postgraduate study was learning about alternative teaching methods. Before studying on her MA course, Muriel said she had been unaware of the range of language teaching methods available, as alternative to the 'norms' of teaching in her university in Saudi Arabia.

*"It was kind of a shock to me when it came to my Master's degree and we had to take a course on methods and approaches in language teaching .... 'Oh God I've never heard of that!' When they asked me what approach I use I say 'I teach I just read from the book!'" [MurielI15]*

Therefore, Muriel realised that these methods could offer alternative identity options and an opportunity for change. Muriel spoke about this further when talking about her beliefs about teaching in the focus group:

*"So you know some of the things I did not know even existed until I came here to do my master's ....like what's task-based teaching? These methods like direct method teaching grammar with speaking and er communicative teaching ... 'Oh what is this?' I was surprised to see all these different ways". [MurielFG3]*

While learning about such methods, Muriel realised that lessons could become more learner-centred and engaging. This realisation helped her to link methods to her concerns over learner motivation, and she focused her PhD research on using technology to encourage participation and motivation.

When talking about her imagined-future self, therefore, Muriel discussed how her PhD studies had inspired her to use technology as a



motivational tool with her students. She developed an app which could be used alongside the mandatory coursebook but which encouraged students to participate.

*"I was amazed by the App I used so instead of ...I was focusing on reading skills you give them a passage to read [...] so they read and answer some comprehension questions and then 'OK who can answer the questions?' and everyone is afraid even though they find the answer ..err with the App we put the questions in the App and it was like 100% of the students participated"* [Muriel15]

*"When it's time to discuss you can see people trying you know..encouraged because they saw their answers right in the App so they say 'I'm right I'm going to answer'"* [Muriel15]

Therefore, while Muriel was unsure about whether she wanted to go back to Saudi Arabia as a teacher, she imagined becoming more focused on App-development to further address student motivation:

*"If I go back and develop anything there it would be on err tasks like my research task-based mobile learning ...so you take the tasks that are in the book and try to tweak them in a way that relates to students and put activities in the App"* [Muriel15]

Doing her PhD opened up new identity options for Muriel while at the same time providing knowledge and skills to address issues she had faced as a teacher.

Although these findings represent the experiences of just two teachers, they provide some insight into the various actors influential on their identity formation and show how in some cases, different actors worked together to produce particular effects and ensure conformity among teachers. I now discuss these findings with reference to the literature and the theoretical perspective ANT provides.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Past teaching experiences

Both Hakim and Muriel's stories showed how tensions can emerge between an institutional system and the actors it enrolls to maintain stability and teachers' desires to express their identities in particular ways. Their experiences show that while actors such as supervisors, coursebooks, syllabus and exams seemed to direct them along particular paths, it seemed that there was friction between identities expected by the institution and desired by individuals. While such reports of tension are evidenced in the literature (Liu & Xu, 2011), Hakim and Muriel highlight a range of influences from supervisors, syllabus texts, coursebooks and manuals and exams as well as students. Together these functioned as *actors* in the institutional *actor-networks* the participants were part of.

According to Fenwick and Edwards (2010, p. 57), syllabus texts determine what is taught and are inter-linked with the wider curriculum, the institutional organisation (its size, management, resources) as well as its associated hierarchies and expectations. Fenwick and Edwards (2010, p. 18) argue that a syllabus, itself formed through the heterogenous networks that informed its existence (e.g. decision-makers, curriculum and policy texts) functions as an obligatory point of passage with which a teacher's lesson plans, materials and supervisory guidance should all be aligned to maintain and hold a network of teaching practices together. A syllabus therefore functions to provide direction but can also be restrictive, as shown by Hakim, for instance, when he referred to the 'prescriptive route' of the ministry which restricted how he taught. Britzman (1994) talks about "pre-established borders" of institutions and teachers "desiring to be different while negotiating institutional mandates for conformity" (p.24). Conformity therefore translates identities into what Xu (2013) calls rule-based identities, and by limiting expressions of desired identities teachers, like Hakim and Muriel, may become disillusioned.

My findings further exemplify how syllabus texts function with other actors, for instance, how supervisors' roles were aligned with the syllabus and associated texts and therefore how they made sure teachers' delivered lessons according to institutional expectations. Their monitoring and corrective actions were intended to enrol teachers into an institutional network of policies and preferred practices and guide them towards compliance so that teachers functioned in ways which would further endorse them, to stabilize the institutional *actor-network*. In effect, when actors (such as teachers) become successfully enrolled, they perform the identities required of them (Hamilton, 2011). Thus, in accordance with Fenwick and Edwards (2010, p. 24) this made the institutional beliefs of how to teach increasingly visible and influential. In other words, if the majority of teachers follow the books, teach from the syllabus and employ preferred ways of teaching, the system 'norms' become strengthened. Supervisors in Hakim and Muriel's stories thus functioned to maintain such stability. At the same time, supervisors were being acted upon by the coursebook, syllabus text and exams which in turn shaped their roles. This highlights a kind of symmetry among different actors, a fluidity of power to "establish and make durable a pattern of associations" among actors (Michael, 2017, p. 21).

The presence of exams was also influential on Muriel and Hakim. Exam success becomes a priority for teachers, students, institutions and parents as these exams provide access to progression and may, as Li and Baldauf (2011) indicate, be decisive in a student's future. The presence of exams therefore further directs teachers back to the syllabus and coursebook. Hakim also explained how teaching effectiveness was linked to student performance in exams. Similarly, Abdenia (2012) suggests that a good teacher may be measured by student satisfaction of learning and in Hakim's experiences, this was reflected by expectations of high exam scores. Moreover, Muriel's story of in-class tests shows how they too functioned as a reminder to teachers to follow the syllabus. Teachers may therefore prioritise exam practice materials in lessons over content they see as being more beneficial for language learning (Li & Baldauf, 2011).

### 4.2. Influences from postgraduate study

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) argue that context plays a significant role in shaping teacher identities and these findings show how interplays of actors in their teaching contexts have been influential in Hakim and Muriel's identity formation. As argued by Darvin and Norton (2015), there can be tension between expected versus the preferred identities teachers wish to invest in and such tensions seemed interwoven with the teacher identities Hakim and Muriel brought to their postgraduate courses in the UK.

Hakim and Muriel had to adapt to the new socio-educational context of a UK university, and as Singh and Richards (2006) point out, interactive sessions rather than lectures are often a preferred form of delivery on MA TESOL courses. Students are expected to respond to questions and participate in discussions to become *enrolled* (as actors) into sessions. ANT uses the term *purification* to describe situations in which certain practices are valued over others (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 49) and in seminars, the lecturer, materials, teaching approaches used together mobilise practices which demand students to speak out. This may create anxiety for students as shown in Muriel's stories. Of particular significance is how she reflected on her experiences to re-consider her students' reluctance to speak in lessons and realise they may be experiencing similar emotions. As Zembylas (2003) argues, emotions shape how individuals construct their identities and relate to others. Thus, while the effect of former learning experiences is known to shape teachers' practices (Britzman, 2003), *re-becoming* a student may be significant in identity formation through critical reflection on one's responses to experiences of study through both a teacher and learner lens. This recognises the value of activities which encourage self-reflection and sharing of feelings being integrated into postgraduate course content with the aim of deepening awareness of issues such as participation



and the ways in which interactions with teachers, peers, materials and technologies may shape this.

Also significant in experiences of postgraduate study was the roles of different teaching methods and approaches. Methods are under-pinned by particular theories and ideologies of teaching (Crookes, 2015) which mobilise certain teaching techniques, integrate certain materials and activities and may shift learner and teacher roles. Although not specifically referring to language teaching, Sørensen (2009, p. 176) talks about a particular learning practice as “a pattern of relations of human and non-human components” through which both participation and conflict may occur. Muriel indicated that she had been introduced to teaching methods she had not been aware of before, such as more communicative approaches, in contrast to the more traditional grammar-focused methods her institution had endorsed. This adds to findings of Nguyen and Dao’s (2019) study which showed how postgraduate study facilitated understanding of learning through communicative activities. Although Muriel had indicated some of the tensions that might occur if she tried to do anything differently in her teaching, these methods introduced her to potential solutions to issues with student participation and seemed to open-up new identity possibilities.

Hakim’s stories on the other hand, provide some insight into how theoretical concepts and criticality were both significant and interconnected influences of his doctoral studies. Becoming critical involves developing a critical consciousness of teaching, a concept discussed by Crookes (2015), through which teachers develop critical stances towards their profession and institutional contexts (Abdenia, 2012; Park, 2012). Hakim was especially influenced by Paolo Freire’s work, notably his banking concept of education (Freire, 1970) which helped him to better understand the discomfort he felt with the identity of a *conduit* who merely transferred knowledge to students. His experiences suggest he had what Britzman (1994) calls the “traditional powerlessness” of being a teacher when he felt pushed to accept this identity even though it was contrary to his desire to engage and support students. Hence, becoming more critical enabled him to question and consider different perspectives or demonstrate what Abdenia (2012) calls shifts in “critical autonomy” (p.710).

Furthermore, Hakim’s stories show that while he had initially “taken things for granted” theories of critical pedagogy helped him to develop an approach of questioning norms of practice in his local context. This notion of taking things for granted is conceptualised as “matters of fact” by Latour (2005) Matters of fact are accepted and even hidden (*black-boxed* in ANT terms) within routines that are unquestioned. However, *matters of fact* can be turned into *matters of concern* by questioning and unravelling situations to consider the actors involved and how they exercise power over others. Becoming critical therefore involves exploring a situation from multiple positions and as Mol (2002) points out asking “Is this practice good for the subjects (human or otherwise) involved in it?” (p.165). Hakim thus illustrates how engaging in postgraduate study can develop critical teacher identities by linking knowledge to *matters of concern* in local contexts.

#### 4.3. Imagined future identities

Becoming a teacher-researcher can be an important part of identity formation; gaining recognition for one’s work and being seen as a contributor to knowledge can influence how teachers perceive their position in their teaching contexts (Burns, 2017). Hakim, for instance, said he imagined himself involved in action-research to develop teaching practices in his local context and address some of the issues he had described. This would enable him to critically challenge teaching issues and experiment with solutions (Burns, 2010). In essence, action-research encourages teachers to examine the ways in which, different interactions may be initiated among social actors (learners and teachers) and material actors (lesson resources, technologies, classroom objects such as the whiteboard) and the effects these have on learning. It may also highlight what is feasible within the constraints of the systems

teachers work within.

Hakim’s experience of teaching combined with the knowledge gained from his EdD study deepened his knowledge and critical perceptions of teaching. This led him to consider becoming a teacher-educator, an identity he had not considered himself knowledgeable enough to claim prior to his studies. As Barkhuizen (2017) points out, this role may shape future norms of teaching by working with novice teachers to develop pedagogies suited to particular contexts. Hakim thus saw how he might apply his knowledge to move away from the banking concept he believed was damaging to teachers and students.

Muriel, on the other hand, envisaged becoming more involved in designing learning material rather than teaching. In accordance with Toohey et al. (2015), Muriel believed that technologies can be useful in fostering learner engagement. However, such resources may also be introduced into learning contexts without due consideration of the ways in which already established materials are integrated into teaching and learning (Sørensen, 2009, p. 190). This is significant for Muriel’s research on Apps in a context where teachers seemed to follow an exam-oriented syllabus with books prescribed by the institution. Introducing a new material could therefore be disruptive, but Muriel showed how she could integrate her App to support the given textbook rather than replace it. Her App provided activities linked to the same texts as in the book thus facilitating a deeper engagement with these. Her research showed how the App introduced something novel into lessons, changing dynamics and interactions as students would participate more willingly, interact with the texts and respond to the teacher rather than remain silent. Sørensen (2009) also argues that it is important to have insight into how traditional materials shape teaching practices in order for introduced technologies to contribute further (p.191). Thus, Muriel’s prior knowledge of the syllabus and experience of the given books enabled her to use sensitivity in design and implementation. In effect, this illustrates Sørensen’s (2009) argument that technology, as an *actor* in learning networks, can create different forms of learning, knowledge and participation while attending to the particularities of educational practices.

#### 5. Limitations

In this paper, I have discussed some of the storied experiences as told by two teacher participants. This provides some insight into ways in which social and material actors may influence teacher identity formation, although it should be noted that these are not to be generalised to other contexts. My findings were also based on the recollections of participants, whereas including views of others involved in each story (e.g. supervisors) would bring additional perspectives to my understandings of the experiences discussed. Similarly, while I was not able to spend time in the teachers’ contexts, adopting an ethnographic approach (which has sometimes been used with ANT) would also bring additional insights by observing the effects of different actors, and further show how ANT may be useful in studies of language teacher identity. My findings are also shaped by what I left out or as Law (2004) puts it ‘othering’ of data, that is the decisions of the researcher to include certain extracts of data but omit others. While I had to make such decisions in this study, I recognise that these impact on findings reported on and discussed. Finally, using mind-maps and padlet in my data collection and analysis process, provides examples of how visual tools may be useful and how these particularly aligned with ANT and its focus on interactions and relations among different actors. However, these require further investigation in order to provide a more robust comparison with other tools.

#### 6. Conclusion

While previous studies of teacher identity formation have focused more on the significance of social interaction and thus social actors (Gray & Morton, 2018), my findings also explore the potential of

non-human objects present in teaching contexts to perform particular functions and also become influential actors through interactions with others. This adds to Mulcahy's (2011) ANT study of teacher identity formation in general education, by focusing on language teacher identity in particular.

The findings highlight how material actors present in teaching situations can impact on teachers through the functions they perform. Hakim and Muriel's past experiences provide insights into their identity negotiation in the institutions they had worked in. These show that while social actors were still influential, material actors could be influential also and emphasises their interrelatedness. Muriel and Hakim's experiences provide insight into how syllabus texts, course books, supervisors, teachers' guides and the presence of exams together created actor-networks functioning to uphold institutional expectations of teachers and direct their practices. This supports how institutional actor-networks have been depicted in the literature (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010) in terms of establishing 'norms' of teaching practices and ensuring teachers adhere to these to maintain stability. As Fenwick and Edwards (2010) argue an ANT perspective contributes by depicting how institutional actor-networks circulate normative discourses through the functions of their actors.

The interplays of the different actors illustrated support Toohey's (2017) suggestion that teacher identities may be entangled with classroom resources, institutional discourses and policies about teaching. Indeed, my participants highlighted some of the challenges they had faced in their institutions, the actors involved and the impact on their identities. Both Muriel and Hakim felt pushed towards adopting particular identities misaligned with those they aspired to. My study therefore contributes to previous research which indicates friction between expected and desired identities (Liu & Xu, 2011; Pennington & Richards, 2017) by emphasising how different actors were involved in persuading teachers towards identities that aligned with institutional ideals. By using ANT, it also became more notable how participants referred to material objects in their stories' e.g. "the manual tells you what to teach" (Hakim); "You're bound by the syllabus" (Muriel). This supports Hadfield's (2017) point that material objects may direct identity options, sometimes in restrictive ways.

The findings also show how postgraduate study can influence identity formation in different ways, linked with teachers' past experience. Theoretical concepts can help teachers to think differently about their work, and issues they had taken for granted, and support an understanding of ways in which teachers can be manipulated by the systems they work within and the actors integral to these. The knowledge and concepts introduced in postgraduate study may also inspire teachers to find solutions to challenges they have faced in their teaching. For instance, Muriel's use of technology to develop a learning App exemplifies how she addressed an issue in her teaching by introducing her App into learning in a way which worked with rather than conflicted with other actors involved.

Finally, studies of teacher identity are important because, as shown here, they reveal the complex nature of teaching and its "cognitive social, ideological, emotional and historical" dimensions (Barkhuizen, 2017). Deepening understandings of the interplay of actors in these dimensions is beneficial for teachers, teacher educators and researchers; for teachers, in terms of understanding how to negotiate more desired identities in their contexts; for teacher educators in terms of guiding and providing informed pedagogical support for teachers; for researchers in helping to forge links between theory and practice and work with teachers in developing their practices.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Josie Leonard:** This paper was produced by one author. It was drawn from the author's doctoral thesis, and represents a relatively small-scale study.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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