



## Teacher Professional Development as Identity Work: 2 Activities

by [Kristen Lindahl](#)

We've never had more options available for professional development (PD) as English language teaching (ELT) professionals, thanks to online delivery and increasing global connections. Many of these sessions focus on developing key strategies, learning new skills, or developing teacher cognition. However, it's important to remember that each ELT educator is situated in their own context, with different social, cultural, and historical-political circumstances influencing the *what*, *how*, and *why* of their English teaching practices.

That is, each ELT educator has their own professional identity that is shaped by those same circumstances, and that identity is often developed and negotiated during PD activities. In this article, I describe some of the research supporting sources of English language teacher identity development and negotiation. I then describe two activities you can try in your next professional learning to share an identity-oriented approach with your colleagues.

### Language Teacher Identity Development: The Research

Teacher learning and PD can be defined as more than the acquisition of skills or strategies, and recognized as a continuous process—bound by context—of developing and negotiating teacher identity. Following are some key conclusions about language teacher identity from current research (Yazan & Lindahl, 2020).

First, language teacher identity is connected to other social identities related to race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, class, nationality, religion, faith, and community membership. In addition, teachers will repeatedly negotiate and enact identities over the course of their careers. These identities are influenced by significant life experiences. Reflecting on life experiences involves ongoing engagement with narrative that both revisits past experiences and reimagines future practices.

This process is often emotionally charged, as teachers will have to negotiate tensions that sometimes emerge among sources of identity. Ultimately, teachers' identities orient their professional *agency* (the feeling of control over actions and their outcomes) and *investment* (putting effort into something to achieve a result) in their careers.

## Integrating Identity Work Into Professional Development

Two activities for grounding PD in identity-oriented ways are creating an identity wheel and a language portrait.

### 1. Identity Wheel

The identity wheel creates a visual for PD participants to reflect on their own social identities and then connect social identities to English teaching and learning. To conduct this activity, first share the “Identity Wheel” as either a [fillable PDF](#) if you are in an online setting, or on paper if you are face-to-face (see University of Michigan’s [Inclusive Teaching website](#) for extended instructions, video examples and downloadable PDFs).

#### *Step 1*

Ask the participants to complete each segment of the wheel with one to three words, as they see it relating to their life.

#### *Step 2*

In each segment of the wheel, ask participants to write at least one number that corresponds to the prompts in the center. For example, if they want to learn more about their identity relative to ethnicity, they would put a “3” in that segment.

#### *Step 3*

Provide an oral or written discussion space for participants to consider how their professional and personal identities here or otherwise influence who they are as a teacher. Participants can also consider how students’ personal identities influence their agency and investment in the English language learning process.

Reflecting on their responses to the identity wheel gives teachers the opportunity to reflect on spaces where they hold *privilege* (an advantage that only one person or group of people has, usually because of their position) and spaces where they may be *marginalized* (placed in a position of little or no importance, influence, or power). Ideally, this reflection is just one way to support educators in developing the self-awareness needed to enact social change. If you’re interested in reading more about similar activities, you may want to check out the book [Social Justice in English Language Teaching](#) by Hastings and Jacob.

### 2. Language Portrait

Another activity you can use to incorporate identity into PD for ELT professionals is to encourage them to create a language portrait. A language portrait (Coffey, 2015; Lau, 2016) is a visual representation of a person’s language(s)—dialects, varieties, accents, speech communities, and so on. A language portrait focuses reflection on a teachers’ linguistic repertoire, or the communicative tools a person has to participate with a range of audiences across social and cultural contexts (García et al., 2017).

### *Step 1*

Ask participants to draw a picture of themselves, and then add their language(s) in various colors to that picture.

### *Step 2*

Have participants explain why they added the language(s) that they did, where they did. Peoples' language practices usually go beyond the boundaries of "official" named national and state languages (Otheguy et al., 2015), so participants can and should be creative in how they label their own language practices. Here are some questions you can ask participants after they create their language portrait:

- What did you notice about your own language practices?
- How do they connect to other aspects of your identity?
- How do they support or challenge you as a teacher?

*Note:* If you are in an online environment, the platforms [Padlet](#), [FlipGrid](#), or [Jamboard](#) are great spaces for teachers to record a short video or add an image and then explain how that video or image illustrates an aspect of their linguistic repertoire.

Reflecting on and recognizing linguistic repertoires can support teachers' exploration of how their linguistic identities were impacted by their own schooling, how their linguistic identities may impact their own interactions with students, and how teachers relate to and include or exclude multilingual students. Naashia Mohamed, TESOL Blogger, adapted the language portrait [activity for classroom use](#) if you're interested in using it with students, too!

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, PD for English language educators will likely be more relevant if it is connected in some way to the identities and the context(s) of those participating in the PD. When teachers can connect new learning to their life experiences and their current circumstances, the likelihood that it will become part of their teaching practice is much greater.

## **References**

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