

Unpacking My Experience as an English Teacher in Turkey: An Autoethnographic Perspective

Majid Ghyasi* 

Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey



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Abstract

Identity studies have gained ground in applied linguistics and many conventional research areas are explored under the more inclusive term of identity. Due to the fluidity of identity, important life events including immigration play a major role in (re)construction of the identity of teachers. In this autoethnographic research, my identity positions as an Iranian English teacher in Turkey are re-counted. Employing autoethnography research, I use my reflection, diary, and records of my social media communication to recount the related events. While having my professional identity at the focal point, I will recount social, cultural, and even political narratives which might have affected the reconstruction of my identity. The reflection mainly includes narration of happenings at the school I used to work at, which was managed in a stricter way than other schools. There are also explanations about areas where I needed to show openness to adapt myself to the new roles in the school, while at some points I was more comfortable with being a foreigner than making efforts to blend into the new context. It also includes cultural and social differences from those in my hometown ranging from simple greetings to major behavior of the society toward a crisis that made the process of full integration not easily achievable. Finally, there is a reflection on some distinctive features that I observed over the period of my stay in Turkey. Encouraging teachers to keep a diary journal can be the main implication for classroom practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

The summer of 2019 is drawing to an end and I am sitting in my soon-to-be-rented-out apartment in the center of Tehran still unsure about work in another country. I am planning to travel to Turkey, the land of tea and the majestic Hagia Sophia, find a teaching job, and live there permanently. The thought of a new life in Turkey was racing through my mind, and since it was my very first time there, I was a bit confused but excited. I just thought gaining some general knowledge about the new destination could be a good way to relieve the stress one usually has when entering a new country. My knowledge of Turkey had been formed by my rudimentary study of some Wikipedia articles about the history, literature, and social life of Turks and the status of

* **Corresponding Author:** Majid Ghyasi, Department of Foreign Language Education, Üniver-siteler Mahallesi Dumlupınar Bulvarı No:1, Ankara, Middle East Technical University, Turkey. Email: majid.ghyasi@metu.edu.tr



foreigners in this country. I knew that among the countries in the region, Turkey has been one of the most welcoming countries for vacationers and job seekers. That was something that made me gain confidence about the decision. As for cultural differences, I was inclined to believe that it would not be a serious issue since Iran and Turkey have long had historical commonalities. My purpose was to stay in Turkey for a long time, so I knew I should do my best to gain as much understanding as possible about Turks and their life. Integration was not bound to gaining knowledge about them, but some degree of openness to accept differences as culture is not just characteristics of a group of people, but relations and interactions among people and groups (Abdallah-Preteille, 2003). Therefore, I was determined not to stubbornly hold onto norms I had gained knowledge of, but to do my best to show openness and respect and then find an intermediary role between the two cultures. This can help one experience a smooth transition into the new context by grasping differences while preserving their unique cultural features; something referred to as adaptation (Brown, 1980). I aimed to be cognizant of cultural differences, analyze them, and apply them if necessary, to have a potential acceptance into a new culture. With an awareness of the dangers of being an immigrant, the most blatant of which is racism, I was determined to avoid disrespecting differences, but to enjoy them. That necessitated forming new identities affected by the new culture as experiencing a new culture can help one reconsider some of their old ideas, and probably form a new identity.

The study of the integration and construction of ethnic and cultural identity of English teachers in their practice in the classroom in the new context is not a widely explored issue (Ajayi, 2011). However, it can greatly shed light on identity studies since identity is affected by the socialization of the person which is through the experiences in the past (Block, 2017). My reflection is to make an attempt to see the differences between the two cultures and then observe whether these differences lead to a change in the identity of the teacher at work, and what new roles and duty does the teacher adopt due to identity changes. Although mostly about my job, my reflection can include out-of-work social interactions to help me provide a better picture of my life in Turkey. My reflective practice is aimed at answering the following question:

How has my professional identity been (re)constructed as an Iranian English teacher in Turkey?

Identity

Studies in anthropology, sociology, as well as applied linguistics have turned attention to identity constructions. The most widely used theory to lead the studies of both learners and teachers is poststructuralism, which was the result of the birth of postmodernism (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986). The perspectives falling under the poststructuralism theory reject the unitary idea of identity which views identity as easily identifiable categories, such as nationality, race, gender, religion, etc. Instead, it sees language as forms interdependent with the speaker of the language where speakers in a given situation create meaning in a dialog (Norton & Toohey, 2011). The meaning is created through the understanding of the person about their relationship to the world which is affected by time and space (Norton, 1997). It is about how in an interaction, people position themselves and are positioned in a social, historical, and cultural context (Block, 2009; Duff, 2012; Norton, 2010; Norton & Toohey, 2011). The issue of positionality in a given situation forgoes the value-laden nature of identity and sees the present group as the community which shapes a person's identity, therefore, identity in a sense is "to which group do I belong?" (Hofstede et al., 2010). That means people can change their identities over a lifetime and can hold multiple identities (Hofstede et al., 2010). Having poststructuralism as the leading theory of my autoethnography, I try to see the changes in my identity through the positions I have adopted once faced with new educational, cultural, or social incongruities in a given context.

The most important aspect of my life in Turkey was my job, so my identity as a teacher of English is supposed to be affected by interactions and be constructed or reconstructed accordingly. That is because we all develop identities at work, and just as the identity in the general sense, one's professional identity needs to adapt itself to the new situation. I was not sure whether what I had learned at the university in Iran and what I had practiced as a teacher of English at one of the best language schools had made me able to call myself a professional in the field. I was not sure whether I would again enjoy my students' learning, the same popularity, and the same support from the management. To defeat my apprehension and prevent myself from prejudice, I just rested on the final idea that as the last resort: all I need to do is to give myself free rein and develop a new professional identity. This type of identity is referred to as the self-image which we present as being a teacher (Burn, 2007), and it consists of a teacher's personal and professional experience and also the interaction of personal experiences and 'the social, cultural, and institutional environment' (Slegers & Kelchtermans, 1999, p. 579). In other words, I could not claim success provided that I just intended to be myself, but my surroundings were bound to play an important role in shaping my new identity. Zare-ee and Ghasedi (2014) list several factors which define professional identity:

“...historical factors related to personal experiences such as early childhood experiences or early teacher role models; sociological factors related to what surrounds a prospective teacher, what parents expect of her, or where she stands compared to a native speaker; psychological factors related to the significance of self-perception in teacher professional identity formation; and cultural factors related to (student) teachers' perceptions and notions of the professional community in their geography, of government policies, of language education policies, and of power and status issues” (p. 1993).

At work, normative expectations and the degree of openness shown by the teacher are effective factors in the move toward the formation or reformation of the teacher's professional identity (Reynolds, 1996). In addition, this identity is affected by the context in which the teacher is working. It is “being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person’, in a given context” (Gee, 2001, p. 99). The context-embeddedness of identity makes it an ideological and historical matter (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2000) which along with values and practices are rooted in history (Hofstede et al., 2010). When a teacher's discourse community changes, they form a new aspect of themselves arising from transactions between their goals, beliefs, their self-image, and the limitations and opportunities in their social and historical context (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). My identity reconstruction started once I felt myself in a new context where the new image demanded to build the required expertise, beliefs, perceptions, and values adjusted to the sociocultural demands of the context and teaching profession in Turkey. Such a change is a requisite to walk on the path toward expertise, though it might cause reconsideration of one as a teacher and might even turn into some tension. Here is an expert's idea on this matter:

“Teaching is the embodiment of one's knowledge, skills, beliefs, and practices into an appropriate teacher identity...there is always the possibility that one will face tensions between one's teaching and social identities, [and] these tensions keep the person evolving as a teacher, responding to one's changing identities and values, as one brings them to inform teaching practice” (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 69).

As an example study that shows the importance of context in limiting the agency of the teacher, I can refer to the research on an ethnically Spanish teacher of Spanish language born in the United

States (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). While at school, in her neighborhood in a Spanish-speaking community, she could practice her agency, but it was difficult for her at college. That is because she was positioned as an ethnic and linguistic minority as race, ethnicity, and non-nativism play roles in the teacher's agency. It confirms the poststructuralist concept of identity where context embodied in the change of job and place of work influences the teacher's professional identity. The analysis of narratives showed that her race as well as the categories that she had made (to which group do I belong) caused her to be distanced from the White teachers as well as those non-white teachers as she found herself not sharing any of these traits. It all ended up with her complete withdrawal from the profession. As for me, race did not seem to be a major issue as I believed sharing the same racial categories with Turks would have no discriminatory consequences. However, the change in the context of work can result in a change in identity and the context is not bound to race only. However, every individual is born with certain identities (gender, race, complexion, etc.) which act as pigeonholing criteria for the teacher. Such views are known as essentialist views which can create serious obstacles to the better functioning of immigrant teachers. This is shown in the study about two Taiwanese teacher students as international speakers of English who are vying for the approval of their legitimacy as teachers of English over a two-year Master of Arts program in TESOL (Golombek & Jordan, 2005). Despite their confidence in their abilities as teachers of English, the teachers are identified based on their race rather than their knowledge of the subject matter. However, the authors report innovative strategies applied by these teachers to combat native speakerism norms and reposition themselves as legitimate teachers. Gaining enough knowledge about students and the context of work is found to be effective in the battle against the long-held pseudo-belief of native speakerism. In spite of the idea of associating proficiency and competency in teaching to the place of birth which can damage the professional identity of a teacher, other numerous factors effective in teaching such as rapport, and knowledge of teaching can always come to help a non-native teacher of English.

The reconstruction of the identity I am trying to document is relatively similar to the experience of Wenying traced in a case study by Sun (2012). Wenying is a Chinese teacher of English whose first year of practice in New Zealand is observed to discover the close relationship between her identity and her knowledge. Wenying's cultural heritage had a strong influence on her performance as in her culture, the teacher's performance occupies the focal point and the student's learning falls into the second priority. Wenying's teaching is characterized by "the careful presentation of clear models for students to follow; emphasis on memorization; step-by-step repetition, reproduction, and recitation." (p. 765). That proves that in this new country with a remarkable cultural distance from her country, she was trying to stick to her identity as a Chinese teacher, which was reflected in her performance as a teacher. Finally, she aimed to make sure that 'everything goes smoothly', which is driven by an idea rooted in her heritage culture. My case differs from Wenying's in terms of the relative cultural proximity of my homeland and host country. Now, the time is ripe to have a short description of the country where my professional identity is tracked, and how Turkey can be valuable to me.

Turkey

Turkey is the land of beautiful seas and beaches, heaven for clothes lovers, and a perfect destination for lax Muslims. Once in Turkey, visitors can savor every mouthful of the delicious kebabs and have great moments over sips of traditional drinks. Turkey is a kinescope of architectural feats reminiscent of shahs and their luxury. A trip around Turkey is a raree-show of the first human settlements on earth, Byzantine civilization, and Ottoman architecture. As an Iranian, one can enjoy entering the country without any visa restrictions. While many countries subsumed under Western block impose entry restrictions for Iranians, thanks to two old friends

and leaders of the countries, Ataturk and Reza Shah, Turkey has remained visa-free for Iranians. The country has recently been a haven for English teachers from Iran. I could not find access to the exact number of English teachers from Iran in Turkey, since almost all of them work in private schools and language institutes, but my observation shows a high number of them. Yearlong contracts with accessibility to the best publication companies along with a comparatively high number of English medium schools and universities in Turkey have opened the floodgate for many English teachers from Iran. These factors are enough to convince any English teacher from Iran that life in Turkey can be profitable and joyful.

After three years of living in Turkey, I have decided to have a reflection on the first two years of my work as a teacher of English at a private school to track my identity reconstruction. It can be tracked since identity emerges from the lived experience, past practice, beliefs, and one's own feelings as well as those who have observed them (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2000). I am going to recount the contributory role of macro-sociological and ideological context, institutional and community context, more immediate factors as well as my personal identity (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2000). These factors are going to be my signposts to direct my narration, but I might deviate from them if needed. Before narrating the account, some points on the way the study was done should be clarified in the next section.

2. METHODOLOGY

Since the present study is a reflective practice of the researcher, it falls under the category of autoethnographic studies. There has been an increase in autoethnography research in applied linguistics over the past decade exploring areas, such as language learning, language teaching, teacher education, language counseling, and immigration, to name a few (Keles, 2022). Autoethnographic research is a reflective practice where ethnographic methods are used to interpret data from one's autobiography in relation to the culture where the main intention is understanding the self-linked to the culture (Chang, 2008). With varying degrees of emphasis on the research process (graphy), culture (ethnos), or self (auto) (Reed-Danahay, 1997), this type of research is carried out under five types of methods of inquiry. For the sake of penning my reflections, I benefit from reflexive or narrative ethnographies. This type of ethnographic inquiry has culture as the main foci of attention, bases the data collection on the author's reflective practice, and gains data from self and interactions (Ellis, 2008). SAGE Encyclopedia of qualitative research (2008) lists some features of autoethnography research as the following: It's usually in the first person and the focus is on a single case and the journey rather than the destination; the convention of writing is more similar to literary writing and is written in episodic form; the reader feels as a 'co-participant' in the dialogue; it includes emotional and bodily details; and the story is to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled. What gains importance in such a type of research is the importance of reflection, which is an essential component of self and sheds light on the recognition of self as an essential component of identity (Antonek et al., 1997). The self-narrative nature of this type of inquiry can be emancipatory for me to break out of the usual frames of qualitative research and take advantage of any literary genre to impart the message.

Data Collection

Like most autoethnographic research, my study uses personal narratives based on memory work as the main data collection tool (see Keles, 2022). As far as interpersonal communication as a data collection tool is concerned, I can reach out to my old colleagues for their assistance. From the team of six English teachers, three Turkish and three Iranian teachers, just one still teaches in that school. But we still see each other, so it is not hard to find them and share old memories. Moreover, textual data accompany me through this journey, since I have been keeping a memoir of my

important life events since July 2017. In addition, social media posts and online conversations (Keles, 2022) can come to the assistance of my evocative practice. The curiosity of my friends and acquaintances at the beginning of my time in Turkey made me actively share my experience with them mostly through private chats. Thanks to the high-tech world, that data can be retrieved and used here. In addition, my letter of intent, sent to my current university as a requirement for the application, contains valuable data too. It is because this letter is supposed to convince the university why I am going to study there, and I have used my teaching experience as some of the reasons for my decision. Finally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our school went fully online for a rather long time. This made us use an intermediary interface to run our classes via ZOOM and WhatsApp applications. I had to save my ZOOM board for a while to use them again in classes where I had to teach the same content. WhatsApp, which was mostly used for communication purposes, has a backup function, which can provide rich data about our communications with the boss, supervisor, colleagues, and students.

I initially formed a chronological outline of my life in Turkey and most specifically of that period of work at the school. My diary was greatly helpful in the reflective work. Afterward, I tried to benefit from the sources mentioned above and fill in the story with more details. The first version was a complete life story with events not related to the purpose of this autoethnography. In the final stage, I tried to have a thorough edit of the work and just include events related to the purpose of the study. At some points, I had to seek the advice of my former colleagues to help me remember some events. In particular, they provided valuable assistance in retrieving the stories related to the main role players like the boss and how he used to behave towards us.

My Language-Learning Background

I became an English teacher because I just loved English in high school, and I became more enthused with it when I did my Bachelor's in English literature and a Master's in English language teaching. After a year of teaching at a private school, I started teaching English as a serious job at a language school in Tehran. My life in Tehran was characterized by long hours of work (about 50 hours a week), and long hours of socializing with friends. Tehran's time had a great influence on both my personal and professional life. Personal influence since it changed me from an overly introverted person with a limited worldview to a more extroverted character with an experience of meeting many local and international people. My activities on Couchsurfing.com opened the doors of my house to many world travelers from various countries who would stay in my place and would share their great stories about their travels around the world. These intercultural experiences broke down the visa and the financial barriers of going to other countries since I had the privilege of having many people from around the world in my tiny apartment. As a novice teacher at work, I focused on implementing as much knowledge of my master's studies as possible in the class. That was not perfectly possible because a main textbook and two others along with a lack of time for a preparation made me just follow the syllabus to be rated as a good teacher. Overall, teaching in Tehran was a great experience as it both helped me build up my expertise through intensive teaching and gave me the chance of attending quite a number of related workshops. After a while, going abroad became a fashion among colleagues and friends, and the fact that we all knew English very well added fuel to the burning desire. Motivated by the fad for flying away, I started thinking about Turkey and ended up working in a private K-12 school. Life in that school presents most of the stories in the current research.

3. MY STORY

I started work at the private school on August 19, 2019. The first day at work started with a brief meeting with members of the English department. The nice informal chat over a small

breakfast at a café reminded me of what I had heard about many city residents in Turkey: Having a small breakfast during weekdays and a big one on weekends is something common. We gave a brief background about ourselves, and then the topic changed to become entirely about our future boss.

Our Boss

We were told that the principal of the school had been a teacher of Turkish literature before; that he had a fallout with his business partner and then opened his own school. Emphatically, they told us that he is too serious when it comes to working. As we were speaking in English, the word ‘serious’ could have been deciphered in different ways. We later realized that the boss (owner and principal) loves to have everything under control, to comment on educational issues though his expertise is only in the Turkish language, and to behave in a way so that people get petrified. Even worse, he shouts his head off when flying into a fit of rage. Even teachers cannot be released from his rage. To this, excessive disciplinary actions can be added. He is too sensitive about cleanliness to the point of calling students to go back and set their chairs properly after their lunch, having an urgent meeting with the whole school due to some rubbish on the ground, and making 11-year-olds stand still for long hours for being noisy in class, to name a few. Surprisingly enough, there are many students who passionately love the principal and talk proudly about his way of management. For some, he is a hero, and for others, he is a caring father, a kind guardian, though an angry one. Some students had left the previous school just to have him as their principal. That was something I needed to digest. How can one gain a charismatic status while being so strict? Of course, he was a good public speaker and could paint a vivid picture of students’ future. He could motivate them to work hard and bear any difficulty. That could have given him a charismatic stance among his fans, of course, there were some students and teachers who despised him. We bore witness to his harsh behavior when his strict rules were violated. He would even lecture us on how to teach, though his knowledge of English was almost nothing. We observed his belief in a unidirectional hierarchy of management which is always a top-down approach. I was even more mesmerized when in the teachers’ meeting he alternated between many roles of being a preacher at a time, then a Mr. know-it-all, and then the judge and the jury. With the help of translations, I realized that a series of idea exchanges happen between the boss and the teachers about students, textbooks, syllabi, and anything related to education. However, when the topic of the talk switches to non-educational matters, the boss becomes the sole speaker and the passivity of the audience goes up. Apparently, there still exists the preaching tradition.

Starting Teaching

The first week was set aside for familiarizing new teachers with how things work in the school. The orientation program included meetings about the course book, general information about the status of the students, materials, and paper marking. On the first day of teaching, I stepped into the class and experienced something different from what I had in Iran. The students did not get up upon the teacher's entering the class. Of course, I saw it as a cultural difference and tried to get used to that. The first session was a warm-up event mostly spent on greeting and getting to know each other. Since it was their first time meeting a foreign teacher, students mostly inquired about my reason for choosing Turkey. The chat went on talking about nice things I had found in the country, and how food, economic situation, levels of English, and life is different in my country. One of the nicest topics I enjoyed was talking about food and football, and students expected everyone, even the teacher, to have a favorite. Not having a favorite of either, I was just happy to go for one, and then observe the grimace on the face of students who either showed approval or disapproval of my taste.

When starting teaching, I initially realized that the students were not much different from my students in Iran in terms of class participation, type of questions, and their habit of homework completion. The joy of having such perfect students was soon gone and the novelty of the new foreign teacher wore off when I realized my questions would be left unanswered if I just addressed the whole class. Voluntary participation would not happen as frequently as I expected which was derived from my experience in my country. Once a student meddled in to educate me about that by saying: “teacher! you have to pick someone to answer your question.” A question for the whole class would not signify a question in need of an answer. After a while, I could not even hear all the students uttering a reply to the morning greeting. I thought I was not popular among them and consulted with our supervisor about this issue. She asked me further questions to find out that it was just different from what I expected. I had to bear with it. After teaching for about three months, I could see more differences. To remember how my classes went over those months, I sifted through the materials I had prepared at the time, and talked to some of my colleagues, and here is the result of my reflection about the way Turkish students learn English.

Learning Differences

We observed that for Turkish students, explicit grammar teaching seems both tiring and ineffective. Despite their willingness to know about the structures as it is reported by Sari et al. (2017), they have developed the habit of learning them inductively. The examples used to teach grammar had to be derived from an activity they had just done, or examples that pertained well to the real-life situation. For Turkish English learners, learning happens much better if the real-life relevance is explained. That was a major finding enabling me to lessen the degree of rule-based explanation in my grammar teaching. However, that could be just attributed to that school only, since the issue of what Turkish students favor in terms of explicit or implicit ways of teaching is yet to be discovered (Sari et al., 2017). More about grammar is the matter of teaching passive voice structures. For my students, the passive voice seemed an exotic tense, so they struggled to grasp the real logic behind this tense and then use it appropriately. Familiarizing students with the existence of the passive in most languages including their native language was a great help, though the issue was not completely resolved. There should be more studies about the best way for Turkish students to learn the passive voice, and why there is a major problem in learning it. The other teaching issue was the unpopularity of repetition. In Iran, repetition still plays a role in learning, especially in the case of low-level or young learners. In an English class in Iran, when the word ‘repeat’ is heard, the class automatically turns into a chorus group and starts repeating after the teacher. I have my doubts about whether in theory repetition is viewed as a legitimate way of teaching, but I have seen its efficiency in practice, so I would see no reason not to implement it. Besides, I have found repetition as a way to attract the distracted attention of the students to the lesson. However, after immigration, I needed to develop a new understanding that students are not familiar with repetition, and will only repeat once only when they are briefed about it. As far as pronunciation is concerned, I cannot complain about the pronunciation and intelligibility of the English spoken by Turks. There were just a few long-held ingrained pronunciation mistakes, which I tried to eliminate, but did not gain much success. In some words, /s/ is always /z/ (e.g basic) or /e/ sound is /æ/ (when, then), or *build* is pronounced as it is written /u/ not /i:/. My attempts mostly through hard-earned repetition were not effective since they had become accustomed to pronouncing these in such ways. Then I thought this is what World Englishes means, which does not require setting English spoken in core (Kachru, 1985) as the standard norm. Then the next challenge, however, was to set a limit for the mistakes. For example, when ‘do an effort’ is a recurring mistake, should I correct it or just see it as Turkish English?

I found the textbook plays a central role in students' level placement, term duration, and final assessment. Extra material development was also based on this centrality, which would regulate the attention paid to each teaching point. My use of repetition was limited by this central role and the benefit of using students' mother tongue could not be backed up by the textbook. In the meeting with the supervisor, she did not seem to be a fan of these strategies since the textbook does not support them. However, my foreignness was a great pretext to benefit from translanguaging. If the meaning of a word were difficult to understand, for example, I would ask for a translation in Turkish. Sometimes an argument would ensue since an exact translation could not be found. I think I used my status as a foreign teacher well to have a critical look at some points.

A Critical Incident

By the end of roughly the sixth month of my life in Turkey, news of Coronavirus had dominated most news headlines. Since Iran was among the first countries to have reported cases infected with the virus, our status at the school was partly smeared. My other two Iranian colleagues and I experienced mild racism. I can remember one of my Turkish colleagues jokingly covering his mouth pretending he was cautious of being infected. In other cases, my Iranian colleague would say that students were whispering 'Corona is coming' in Turkish when she was to enter the classroom. The situation was followed by numerous questions asking why Iran is being hit so hard and what we were going to do about it. This was short-lived and we did not have to shoulder the responsibility of the pandemic anymore when Turkey reported the first case a few weeks later, and fortunately, the patient had not carried it in from Iran. The subsequent news of the status of the pandemic in Turkey made the two countries similar in terms of the number of infected patients, which means if the virus is culturally sensitive, we are similar in that. With online education and the fear of the pandemic, the horrible days dragged along. As for the students, lack of socialization and fearsome situations blurring the outlook had made even the liveliest and the most energetic students into spiritless individuals.

The way the Coronavirus was managed by the government can be said to be adopting a middle-ground policy—letting the wheels of the economy continue turning while closing schools and other public places. However, the way the virus crisis was reacted among people was different from that in my country. In Ankara, people seemed to be warier of the dangers of the virus by more carefully observing quarantine and distancing rules than what I had been informed of the behavior of people in Iran. This behavior can be proof of Turkey's high level of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010). People in such societies are afraid of ambiguous situations and love to have everything structured to avoid any vagueness. The reports of numerous rules about quarantine and frequent changes in these rules can be signs of the existence of high levels of this index in Turkey, or at least in the city I was residing.

Frequent Changes

The fact that those living in high ambiguous tolerant societies love everything to be structured is confounded when I think about our daily school schedule. In our school, the influence of the pandemic had our teaching schedule change daily. At some points, we did not know what we were supposed to teach a few minutes before the start of the class. The boss would create the next day's schedule the night before and would change it on his own. We went through days when the schedule was announced just five minutes before the class and informed us of the plan of the day for the next 3 or 4 hours only. Of course, no one had to voice their disagreement since the boss had full authority over the schedule. Over the passage of time, students were raising their disagreement about such unplanned manners, but of course, all they could do was to keep their parents informed about that. However, in our school, parent-teacher meetings did not exist, and

parents would only visit the boss from time to time. Not quite frequently, some select teachers on behalf of all teachers would have a meeting with parents. These meetings were only limited to disciplinary problems, the general progress of the child, and the financial situation of the school, nothing deeply educational though.

New Identities

Some abilities that I developed in the school over the two years of working there were to expand my roles beyond teaching only. In Iran, I was only a teacher who would be provided with all the extra materials needed to supplement the book. I was not responsible for preparing any tests and just had the responsibility of marking the papers. In this new job, however, I was also a material developer. We were instructed to prepare materials, have them photocopied, and give them to students as extra homework or class activity hand-outs. The task was extremely difficult considering our weekly hours of teaching. Because of having many classes in a week, it was exhausting to find something on the net or a book, review it based on the level and interest of the students, and then have students complete it. Every day I would go to class with lots of papers in my hand which were mostly the source of stress for the students. Being prepared with haste, the materials were of low-quality graphic design, contained untaught points, and sometimes had vague instructions. Having some busy teachers think about the topic covered, while the time could have been spent on relaxation or the next lesson's preparation, and then preparing their own materials could not have created better results. A reshape in my professional identity was to bear the fact that the teacher should also be a professional material developer, which I adopted unwillingly but felt I would have enjoyed more if I had not been forced to do it under some hectic conditions.

Another issue that is attributed to the whole education system in Turkey, not just my previous school is the high number of timed English proficiency tests (Yuksekogretim Kurulu, YOK). Besides some well-known proficiency tests as requirements for taking a job or finding a way to the university, some exams only approved by a university or a school make the number even higher. The result has been the emergence of exam-oriented educational systems with more tests for critical grades (8 and 11) since they need to be prepared for the high school or university entrance exams. Since English does not carry many points in these tests, the motivation of the students to excel in English goes down, which affects their class participation and homework behavior. As an English teacher, I had to take this new role as a test savvy to gain knowledge about tests, find out about the related testing strategies, and orient my performance in class toward a specific target test.

Unexpected Ending

My second year was nearing the end when I was unexpectedly called into the office of my boss's assistant just to be informed that my time at the school had ended. I was fired. The news came as a complete shock. Obviously, I demanded a reason but received nothing as an explanation. I insisted on getting a reason for their decision so as not to repeat the same mistake in the future. The assistant told me the boss is not in town and once he is back, he will have a meeting with you and two other fired English teachers to talk about details. That meeting was never held. I perused the incident and came up with many different scenarios. The only thing which could give me some solace was that I might have done something which had been seen as a mistake in the eyes of the people at school. They even canceled my work permit without notifying me, which created serious problems since I stayed in the country illegally for a few days. My stay in Turkey was at stake as well as my mental and emotional health. Besides being fully flabbergasted, I would have felt heartbroken, disappointed, and angered if I had not discovered the main reason behind this action.

Unfounded rumors were circulating about my dismissal, but I was never explicitly and officially informed of the reason for this one-sided decision.

4. DISCUSSION

Thinking back through time, despite some challenges and the unfair termination of my contract, I cannot deny the delight of the nice moments I had in school when I would gain some knowledge about a certain cultural matter. The purpose of this section is to recount the reconstruction of my professional identity affected by the novelty of the situation.

I had to come to terms with the fact that in the school meetings, a long monologue by the boss and almost complete silence of the teachers should not be surprising even when the boss asks for comments. However, the informal talk after the meeting with the boss gives the teachers a great opportunity to just bare their souls and talk about whatever they want. The principal's popularity in spite of his army-like method should be justified by referring to Hofstede et al.'s (2010) Power Distance Index in which Turkey has a relatively high status. In these societies, people of higher rank believe in their being in the possession of an unlimited degree of power, and those of lower ranks are expected to pay full obedience. Here, the direct confrontation at a meeting can be seen as undermining the power of the boss, thus a better option would be an off-meeting chat. The purpose of meetings in such contexts is what Hofstede et al. (2010) see as an opportunity for colleagues to socialize and for bosses to show their assertions. However, this power distance is not seen in the classroom, as I expected the students to stand up when I would enter the class. I had to change my expectation and attribute this presupposition to the education I received in my country. From the very first grade, we were demanded to stand up and chant some slogans in support of our religion and important figures. We saw it as a sign of respect and continued doing it throughout our years of schooling. Even at university, the habit stayed with us and just the chanting was not performed. Since Turkish and Iranian cultures do not differ significantly in terms of the Power Distance Index (Hofstede et al., 2010), the difference should be more related to rituals formed over the years rather than culture in the sense of emanating from values.

As far as respecting quarantine rules and differences between Iranians and Turks are concerned, sociocultural differences between the two cultures drawn from (Hofstede et al., 2010) can explain this difference. Under the index of uncertainty avoidance societies differ from each other in terms of their response to events that are not fully known to the people. It is "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous and unknown situations" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 191). Turkey's uncertainty avoidance index is 85 while Iran's is 59 meaning Iranians can be more tolerant when it comes to ambiguity. Since predictions of the post-pandemic world were not possible, we can say it was an extremely uncertain situation. That could explain the over-cautiousness of some people about their health issues.

Changes in my professional identity in the new context included reconsidering my teaching to suit the preference of students. Be it cultural or not, embedding grammar in a real-life situation was the main educational orientation that I was happy to notice and did my best to perform. Gaining the status of being a non-native opened my eyes to the fact that a person's mother tongue can be an asset in a foreign language class. That was a major educational tool in my classes and that could have been experienced differently if I wanted to teach students with the same mother tongue as mine. In addition, my awareness of the World Englishes phenomenon made me assured that some common minor mistakes can be ignored and intelligibility should be the determining factor. I experienced a new type of management, which tends to make everything unpredictable. Preparing myself for a lack of planning and abrupt decisions was something that I had to add to the repertoire of norms in the school. Adopting the role of material and test designer was another

major reconstruction of my identity, something which was not accomplished perfectly at the school, but made me more aware of my desire in preparing materials.

I also discovered that I am not an obedient person as I had always thought, because at some points I thought I could make a better decision than what was imposed on me. Affected by the boss's hegemonic behavior, I believed that there should be opposing views everywhere to benefit from variety. Unanimous agreement on a topic achieved by the boss's attitude can never result in any type of progression at an educational institute. More importantly, there was cultural variety in our school which could have been harnessed well. Grouping around primary identities in the postmodern era results in an identity crisis (Dervin, 2012), and the ability to benefit from the available complexity is a better solution than reducing it. The experience of three teachers gained from other cultures could have been a great help had our boss acted more democratically. Finally, my professional identity was affected by potential cultural misunderstandings. I suppose the decision to end my employment at the school could have been colored by something related to culture; something which always can play a role when it comes to having the status of foreignness.

Aside from work-related issues, I cannot claim success in establishing a new identity including my values, norms, rituals, and practices (Hofstede et al., 2010), things defining culture, and those of the host country. I was open to experiencing new horizons in Turkey and was determined to find my way among locals, but I have not been successful in getting fully integrated into Turkish culture. I identify myself as an Iranian, though I have come to the understanding that being fully Iranian cannot bring success at work. But once I leave the workplace, I feel more comfortable when I am in the Iranian community. Cultural differences are always beautiful and are the source of variety in our lives, but cross-cultural issues cannot be assumed as a combination of these beauties, but sometimes, alas, a clash of such beauties. In the present world, with an influx of immigrants and travelers going around the globe, the matter of cultural clash is still an unresolved issue.

5. CONCLUSION

I have tried to narrate my two-year life as a non-native teacher of English at a private school in Turkey. I have gone through identity reconstructions that made me more aware of the new environment in terms of educational matters, and more knowledgeable about myself as an immigrant. The new rise in immigration has caused an increase in the number of foreign language teachers. Their autoethnographic account can greatly help those who might be willing to follow in their footsteps. Their stories as someone who has lived the experience, and narrated it as the person in charge of teaching as well as research can be a valuable contribution to the scholarly work. For me, this reflective work helped a lot in analyzing the changes I have gone through to see whether I am still the same teacher I used to be or have been affected by the demands of the job. Narrating one's life story through narration either for personal use or research purposes can help one practice reflective teaching.

I do not know whether I should call myself lucky or not to have started work in a school that for the most part did not follow mainstream education in Turkey. My experience was exceptional here because the rules, regulations, and authorities at the school made me encounter even more cultural shock. After three years of working in Turkey's educational institutions, I still see people shocked when I talk about my previous workplace. That shows that the case I narrated here, especially about poor planning, harsh behavior of the principal, long study hours for the students, and my mysterious sack cannot be attributed to other schools in Turkey.

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