Exploring Korean EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Their Professional Identity and Possible Conflicts in a High School

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An, Hyo Seon. "Exploring Korean EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Their Professional Identity and Possible Conflicts in a High School." *Studies in English Language & Literature* **43.4 (2017): 125-151.** This study aims to explore the professional identity of Korean high school EFL teachers. A total of nine teachers working in an academic high school setting were interviewed and their responses were transcribed for analysis and further interpretation. In particular, how they position themselves as EFL teachers in a high school was examined by thematic analysis of the transcripts of interviews on their perceptions of professional identity roles and their own definitions of professional expertise. The results of the current study indicate that Korean EFL teachers in academic high schools are very likely to experience identity conflicts in their positioning as EFL teachers. The major conflicting features of their identity formation are shown in 1) their perceptions of their professional roles as EFL teachers (a role as a foreign language learner model vs. a role as a proficient English expert) and 2) their perceptions of an ideal English education (content-based English education vs. skill-based English education). The results seem to support the theoretical understanding of the main features of language teachers' professional identity: They are multiple, shifting, and in conflict. (Jeonbuk Foreign Language High School)

Key Words: teachers' professional identity, identity formation, teacher education, EFL, high school

I. Introduction

As the field of education is considered a major force for Korean national reformation, educational policies in English education have also undergone dynamic

changes over the past few decades (Chung & Choi, 2016; Jo & Kim, 2012; Kwon & Kim, 2010). The revised national curriculum emphasizes the balanced development of English language skills. Once English immersion education was strongly encouraged to make up for Korean EFL students' weaknesses in productive skills, and the number of native English speaking teachers in the classroom has increased. Currently, criterion-referenced evaluation in English has been widely applied at all school levels, even that of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) English exam, to promote the development of students' practical communication skills and avoid extreme competition to earn higher English scores (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Rapidly changing polices have confused high school students and their parents, causing them to worry about how to cope with the changes. Korean EFL teachers in high schools are not an exception. Korean EFL teachers in academic high schools would be those that have been struggling the hardest to survive amid the turmoil. Considering the gap between the ideal goal of developing students' communicative competence and the practical goal of having students get high scores on the CSAT, we anticipate that Korean EFL teachers working in academic high schools are often faced with tough choices about what and how to teach. In that sense, as pointed out in many identity studies, it would be meaningful to understand them better by exploring their identity perceptions, as that can help them devise strategies to deal with their difficulties (Park, 2010; Tsui, 2007).

Despite the need for such a study, it is true that the current body of literature has been weighted toward studies conducted in the inner circle[1] countries, such as identity studies of immigrant teachers (Zhang, 2014). As the role of English as an international language has become important, however, studies of nonnative teachers

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[1] According to Kachru (1985), there are three concentric circles identified according to the degree of diffusion of English, i.e., the Inner Circle (first language varieties, e.g., the United States, United Kingdom), the Outer Circle (English as a Second Language varieties), and the Expanding Circle (English as a Foreign Language varieties).

in the EFL setting are also as badly needed as ever. In particular, studies targeted on Korean EFL teachers in high schools would be worth conducting when their dynamic environments in English teaching are taken into consideration.

The aim of this study is to listen to the voices of Korean EFL teachers in an academic high school setting, which is usually regarded as a more complicated and unpredictable environment, and explore their perceptions of professional identity – how they perceive themselves as English teachers and what conflicts they might have in their classrooms. To understand EFL teaching, it is necessary to understand EFL teachers by identifying who they are (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). Korean EFL teachers in high schools have coped with a series of innovative policies and curriculum revisions. They may be the teacher group that can best represent the current problems of English education in Korea. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to contribute meaningful implications for Korean EFL classrooms and take a further step in a desirable direction for teacher education.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of Korean EFL teachers in an academic high school on their professional identity roles and teacher expertise?

2. What are some of the conflicting issues in their professional identity formation as EFL teachers?

3. How do they position themselves as EFL teachers in the high school setting?

II. Literature Review

2.1. Construction of Teachers' Professional Identity

According to the dictionary definition, "identity" means a collection of uniquely related characteristics of a person. Considering a human as a social being, it seems natural that identity is regarded in many studies as having multiple and dynamic

features and as developing within the interwoven contexts of the person on both the personal and social levels. This basic understanding of identity is from the post-structuralist perspective, based on Weedon (1997)'s social post-structuralist theory of identity. She maintains that an individual embodies the sense of self in discursive interactions where multiple self-images are continually negotiated and shaped in ways that relate them to the world. According to Weedon (1997), identity can be described as one's subjectivity enacted during this process.

Due to the importance of "teaching" within social contexts, teacher identity has been one of the major topics in addressing the issue of identity. As Johnson (1996) pointed out, teaching is "a socially constructed activity that requires the interpretation and negotiation of meanings embedded within the context of the classroom" (p. 24). Olsen (2008), considering this unique feature of teaching, defined teacher identity as a set of influences by factors related to self-construction, social positioning, and meaning systems, which are interwoven within various activities simultaneously responding to social contexts and relationships as a teacher. This seems to represent how teacher identity is interpreted in the field of study. It is also in line with Norton (2000), summing up common features of teacher identity mentioned in the literature as complex, multifaceted, and constantly evolving.

Studies exploring the major features of teacher identity have been highlighted in the field of study in the expectation that understanding these features of teacher identity would yield meaningful implications about teachers' professional development: Teacher identity reflects the teacher's self-image of what the teacher wants to be, and thus inevitably affects the teachers' decisions in the classroom in their teaching roles, teaching strategies, and interactions with students and colleague teachers (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). Studies in teachers' professional identity in that sense could be understood as an extension of this increased interest in teachers' professional development.

What then is teachers' professional identity? It literally means the understanding of oneself as a teacher in the contexts related to the teaching profession (Burns &

Bell, 2011). Like the definitions of identity, a teacher's professional identity is not static, but rather a dynamic one that is formed as a teacher works in the teaching profession. Previous studies have reported that factors affecting the development of a teacher's professional identity include teachers' competence in their subjects, their self-image, job motivation, and satisfaction, their perception of their own jobs, their expectation for future job prospects, and so on (Clandinin et al., 2009; Lee, 2013; Liu & Xu, 2011). According to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), exploring a teacher's professional identity within these explicit contextual factors would help us understand the teaching profession in its social, cultural, and political contexts.

The literature review shows that many scholars have noted conflicting features of professional identity formation. They explain that professional identity may be constructed as teachers confront threats in their professional roles or expertise, and view it as a struggle not be marginalized (Roberts, 2000; Samuel & Stephens, 2000; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Despite increasing interest in this research topic, a clear definition of teachers' professional identity has rarely been addressed in previous studies, as Varghese et al. (2005) pointed out. Mentioning a lack of theoretical foundations in the field of identity study, they attempted to list major features of the theoretical understanding of language teacher identity by reviewing predominant themes appearing in recent studies. Varghese et al. (2005) summed up three most important features of the theoretical understanding of language identity as follows:

> Identity as multiple, shifting, and in conflict;
> Identity as crucially related to the social, cultural, and political context;
> Identity as being constructed, maintained, and negotiated primarily through discourse. (35)

2.2. Previous Studies of Non-Native English Teachers' Professional Identity

Among the topics concerning teachers' professional identity, studies of nonnative

English-speaking teachers' professional identity formation－how they construct their identity while positioning themselves as English teachers－have been consistently pursued due to their unique position as language teachers and their challenges in their classroom (Varghese et al., 2005). Recently, the number of nonnative English-speaking teachers has been steadily increasing and they face a variety of difficulties in their teaching. Therefore, understanding their identity development is regarded as a major issue to be addressed in the area of teacher education in the ELT.

Medgyes (1994, 2001) suggested that nonnative English teachers can fill positive roles in teaching English when they have good language competence. According to him, they can thrive in the language teaching profession in that they can 1) provide a good learner model for the students, 2) teach foreign language learning strategies effectively, 3) offer more information about the language, 4) understand students' needs or difficulties in their learning, 5) predict possible problems in learning a language, and 6) use their mother tongue efficiently in the EFL setting. Barrtt and Kontra (2000) also supported these advantages of nonnative English teachers, mentioning that the relative weaknesses of native language teachers in their explanation of complex concepts and empathy with students going through the learning process.

Cook (2005) explains that nonnative language teachers can provide their students with proficient L2 user examples and serve as good models of successful language learners. Lee (2000) shows that nonnative English teachers can empathize very well with their students' learning difficulties in both the linguistic and cultural aspects, and furthermore better motivate their students to learn the language enthusiastically. These studies suggest that language teachers' competence should be dealt with in terms of their professional expertise and encourage nonnative teachers to legitimately claim their professional identities.

Even though the literature review shows that the advantages of nonnative English teachers are valued by others, nonnative teachers themselves do not seem to concede

them readily. Previous studies of nonnative English teachers' perceptions of their professional identity report that quite many of them tend to have low self-esteem in their career mainly due to their deficient language competence. For example, Reves and Medgyes (1994) asked nonnative teachers directly for their self-perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses as English teachers. They found them to be greatly concerned with their students' judgment and felt uneasy about making mistakes, which led to a negative self-image.

Kim (2011) conducted research on nonnative language teachers' professional identity and showed that they experienced mismatches between their own expectations and teaching experiences, and reported low professional self-esteem from their lack of language proficiency. Morita (2004) also reported that nonnative language teachers' language proficiency was the major factor of identity conflicts among socially imposed or self-imposed marginalized identities. However, she noted that nonnative teachers attempted to overcome their difficulties by positioning themselves as teachers with legitimate teaching expertise and language proficiency. This reflects how nonnative teachers position themselves in their profession and how they negotiate among their multiple identities.

Review of previous studies shows that nonnative English teachers experience identity conflicts in their perceptions of teaching expertise, most of which derive from their low self-esteem or negative self-image. The researchers analyze the main reason for this as probably being caused by the factor of language proficiency－nonnative teachers felt the burden of not having native-like fluency, and some of them imposed upon themselves the role of input provider based on native-speakerism too strictly (Kim, 2011; Rajagopalan, 2005).

However, quite a number of studies of language teachers' professional identity have examined the cases of nonnative English-speaking teachers working in inner circle countries, not expanding circle countries. Unlike these teachers, Korean EFL teachers working in the academic high school setting have another major role of preparing their students for college entrance exams, of which grammar and reading

comprehension take up a large proportion, which means their speaking or writing fluency might be exempted in certain circumstances. In that sense, it is of interest how Korean EFL teachers perceive their professional identity in the high school setting and how they position themselves in the middle of innovative changes in educational policies.

Lee (2013) mentioned in a study of L2 writing teachers' development of professional identity that understanding nonnative English teachers' professional identity would help identify connections between subject matter knowledge and teacher identity. Knowledge of teachers' professional identity is expected to suggest useful guidance for nonnative English teachers to cope with educational challenges (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000).

III. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were nine Korean EFL teachers working at a high school in Jeonbuk Province. They were purposely chosen according to their age to represent Korean EFL teachers of each generation. They studied EFL under different curricula and were recruited as EFL teachers under varied teacher employment systems. By adopting purposive sampling according to age distribution, the interviews with the participants are expected to reveal a wide range of data reflecting various perspectives of Korean high school EFL teachers. Detailed information on the nine interview participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Interview Participants

Code	Age	Gender	Teaching Experience	Education	Study Abroad (more than 6 months)
T1	40s	f	20 years	B.A.	N
T2	30s	f	6 years	M.A.	N
T3	20s	f	4 years	B.A.	N
T4	40s	f	15 years	M.A.	N
T5	50s	m	24 years	B.A.	N
T6	20s	f	3 years	B.A.	Y
T7	30s	m	8 years	B.A.	Y
T8	50s	m	16 years	B.A.	N
T9	30s	f	7 years	M.A.	N

3.2. Data Collection

The data were collected from interviews, which were the sole instrument used in this study. The interviews were semi-structured: The participants were asked a prepared set of interview questions but the interviewer was open to new questions and ideas. In this study, seven interview questions were prepared in advance based on the literature review (see the Appendix). According to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), teacher identity can be better examined when explicit contextual factors are considered, in that they reflect the social and cultural environments where teaching takes place. They listed "teachers' competence in their subjects," "job motivation and satisfaction," "their perception of their own jobs," and "their expectations for future job prospects," and so on as factors that affect teachers' professional identity construction and negotiation. Therefore, these factors were carefully reviewed in the process of creating interview questions so that the participants' responses were in line with them.

The responses from the extended conversations out of the prepared set of interview questions were also included for analysis to investigate the cases from more diverse angles. All the interviews with the nine participants were conducted in Korean, their native language, over two weeks. Because it is one of the main

purpose of this study to investigate how Korean high school teachers position themselves in an EFL classroom, interviews in their native language were thought to be more suitable to elicit data reflecting their inner identity by allowing for more in-depth and profound self-expression. The data from the interviews were recorded by the researcher. The data were transcribed in Korean by a Korean EFL teacher, and then were translated into English with the help of a native speaker teacher. The Korean EFL teacher and the native English teacher collaborated to create transcription data. The finalized transcripts of the interviews were cross-checked by the interview participants so that their messages were delivered as correctly as possible.

3.3. Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. As mentioned above, the interview questions were designed to include the participants' responses about how they related to the factors that were reported to affect teachers' professional identity in previous studies. Thematic analysis, one of the most common forms of analysis in qualitative research, was used to analyze the collected data. It typically proceeds through six phases of coding－familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among the codes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this procedure, the transcriptions of their responses were repeatedly read and coded initially into meaning nodes. The patterns noticed across the data sets were recorded and grouped thematically to identify relevant topics and examine how they are associated with the research questions. Frequency analysis of the meaning nodes was additionally conducted to view the relationships among thematic patterns more systematically. Finally, the meaningful patterns of the identified categories were carefully reviewed for the final interpretation.

IV. Results and Discussions

In the analysis, a total of 145 meaning nodes were coded and categorized under four themes－"job attraction," "teacher role," "teacher expertise," and "ideal English education"－and the patterns among the categories were carefully reviewed and interpreted to address the research questions. In the process, the key pattern "identity conflict" was noticed by comparing and contrasting the gap between the participants' desired and realistic perceptions of teachers' professional identity issues. For the meaning nodes of the emergent categories, word frequency analysis was additionally conducted to weigh the relationships among them and provide more valid interpretations of the results. The categories that emerged from the analysis and finalized interpretations of the results are discussed below.

4.1. Emergent Categories

4.1.1. Job Attraction

One of the themes categorized through the analysis concerns teachers' descriptions of their job choice, that is, why they decided to become an English teacher. From the analysis, four main reasons were subcategorized under the theme of "job attraction." The results of frequency analysis of the nodes are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Code Frequencies of the Category of Job Attraction

Category	Subcategories	Weighted Percentage
Job Attraction	Interest in the English language	42.9%
	Practicality of the English language	39.2%
	Educational value of teaching	10.7%
	Job stability	7.2%

The most frequently appearing subcategory was "interest in the English language," which means the participants chose the job of English teacher because they have an interest in the English language itself. Many of them liked learning English from

their early school days and showed a preference for the cultures of English-speaking countries. This seems to lead to present job satisfaction as an English teacher. One teacher describes the reason he wanted to be an English teacher as follows:

> I just had greater interest in learning English. I liked reading books and listening to pop songs in English. When I had to choose my career, I wanted to do something related to the English language. Thinking about my interests and aptitudes, I thought being an English teacher would be the right choice for me. [T3]

The meaning nodes about "practicality of English language" also frequently appeared in the interview transcripts. The interview participants regarded English as a useful tool that affords greater access to information and allows greater opportunities to meet or communicate with many people.

Some listed "educational value of teaching" as the main reason why they wanted to be an English teacher, and a few others mentioned that the "job stability" of teachers greatly affected their choice of job. Being a teacher is one of the preferred job choices in South Korea and people generally assume that being a teacher would assure job stability. It is interesting, however, that many interview participants put a greater priority on their interests in or curiosity about a different language and culture. To them, English represents an open window to the wider world, leading them to new learning experiences.

4.1.2. Teacher Role

To address the research questions, the participants were asked questions about their teaching experiences. Their present teaching styles along with their strengths and weaknesses in teaching were reviewed to understand how they perceive themselves as English teachers and what professional role identities they perceive themselves to have. Under the thematic category of "teacher role," the participants' self-perceived roles as nonnative English teachers were listed and various roles

related to their teaching were identified as in Table 3.

Table 3. Code Frequencies of the Categories of Teacher Role

Category		Subcategories	Weighted Percentage
Teacher Role	proficient	Foreign language learner model	35.2%
		Instructor of CSAT prep classes	32.4%
		Designer of various activities	18.9%
		Subject matter expert	8.1%
		Emotional empathizer & counselor	5.4%
	deficient	English input provider	88.9%
		Others (e.g. discipline issues)	11.1%

The most frequently appeared meaning nodes concerned the role of a "foreign language learner model." They answered that they can provide the students with their own learning experiences as foreign language learners.

> My strength as an EFL teacher is that I myself am a learner of the English language. I understand why Korean students make certain types of errors because I myself experienced the same thing. So I can help the students correct them and learn more effectively. I can also explain some difficult concepts in Korean more easily. [T6]

In the position of foreign language learners themselves, they experienced similar difficulties in learning English, and they think this would help them understand their students' learning difficulties and further contribute to more effective and efficient teaching. Also, they think they can explain complicated concepts easily using their mother tongue and assume this would greatly contribute to language learning. These perceptions are consistent with previous studies suggesting the advantages of nonnative language teachers (Cook, 2005; Lee, 2000; Medgyes, 1994, 2001). By positioning themselves as good models of English language learners, culturally informed, and empathic to learners' needs, it seems that they provide themselves with legitimate professionality as EFL teachers.

The role of "instructor of CSAT prep classes" was as frequently mentioned as that of a "foreign language learner model." The participants perceived that their major role in the high school EFL classroom is to prepare their students successfully for the college entrance exams by having them practice test questions. They focused their teaching on helping students learn vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills to get high scores on the exams, and they believed the entrance exams should have the greatest priority in their teaching to meet the needs of their students.

> I would define myself as an instructor who teaches third graders. From my teaching experiences I came to have the know-how to make them better CSAT takers. I'm really good at teaching them key points which they would need for their exams. [T4]

The third major role that appeared in the interview transcripts is that of their professionality as an instructional designer. The participants used various teaching and learning activities to help their students learn more effectively. The key words of their activities include "group work," "cooperative learning," "project based learning," "interesting activities," and so on.

> I am doing my best to design student-centered lessons. I try to use a variety of interesting activities that will help the students learn English better. I want them to be more participative in their learning process. [T9]

It seems that the participants think designing meaningful teaching and learning activities is one of their basic duties as professional EFL teachers, and they want their students to be more participative and self-directed in their learning through those activities. Some teachers mentioned they changed their teaching style from instruction for prep class to activity-based learning. It is assumed that the application of criterion-referenced evaluation made them free from the burden of CSAT scores.

> After I transferred to this school where most students are pretty good at English, I

tried to apply more various activities into my class. Before, my teaching focus was teaching important grammar points or reading skills for the CSAT, but now I try different things like doing theme-based projects. With the implementation of criterion-reference evaluation in CSAT English subjects, I feel less burden about trying all these. [T1]

Other roles followed after these major three roles with much lower weighed percentages. The participants do not seem to put much priority on emotionally interacting with their students about their life problems or disciplining students when describing their careers as English teachers.

With regard to their deficient roles, a large number of participants mentioned their lack of English proficiency. As Kim (2011) pointed out, these teachers seem to lean toward the native speaker model in their classroom. In particular, they perceive themselves as poor at productive skills like speaking and writing. They do not think they can provide desirable input for their students in the classroom and that this would eventually hamper their professional teaching as English teachers.

What I worry about is that I don't have enough English proficiency to teach my class in English. I cannot provide students with perfect input like a native speaker. I feel less confident when I have to lead a conversation class. I'm afraid I can't teach them authentic use of English. [T5]

4.1.3. Teacher Expertise

The participants were asked in the interview to describe how they define English teachers' expertise. The meaning nodes related to the participants' perceptions of professionality as EFL teachers were listed under the category of "teacher expertise" and subcategorized by repeated readings and careful review of the interview transcripts. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4. Code Frequencies of the Category of Teacher Expertise

Category	Subcategories	Weighted Percentage
Teacher Expertise	English proficiency	31.1%
	Knowledge of teaching methods	24.1%
	Extensive knowledge of subject matter	17.2%
	Understanding of learners' traits	13.8%
	Good personality as a teacher	6.9%
	Life-long learning attitude	6.9%

The most frequently appearing meaning nodes concerned "English language proficiency," which means that the participants listed English proficiency as the main component of English teachers' expertise. Next was the knowledge of teaching methods. These are two major components that the participants think represent the professionality of English teachers.

> I think English proficiency should be the priority in defining English teachers' professional expertise. EFL teachers should be fluent in English. They need to have advanced knowledge of grammar and excellent communicative competence. And then, they are going to need the know-how to teach well. [T6]

Besides English language skills, extensive knowledge of the subject matter and understanding of learner characteristics were also regarded as qualities that English teachers should have as professional teachers. Even though very few did so, teachers' personality traits were also mentioned under professionality. Specifically, the participants mentioned that professional English teachers basically should have an affection for students and enjoy life-long learning themselves.

> I know English ability is important in teaching; however, I think an English teacher who likes students and makes good relationships with students and colleague teachers is the most qualified. [T9]

Overall, in their own definitions of English teachers' professionality, the participants turned out to value knowledge and skills in regard to the subject of English.

4.1.4. Ideal Education

In the analysis of the interview transcripts, the meaning nodes for what the participants' saw as desirable for EFL education were addressed to understand how they perceive their job prospects and how they would position themselves as EFL teachers in the future when educational reformation is strongly encouraged. Table 5 shows the results.

Table 5. Code Frequencies of the Category of Ideal Education

Category	Subcategories	Weighted Percentage
Ideal Education	Communicative skill based English education	40.0%
	Content based English education	36.0%
	Individualized learning for all	16.0%
	Fun and interesting learning	8.0%

Under the thematic category of "ideal education," four ways of conducting future education that the participants think are desirable were subcategorized. According to the frequency analysis, the meaning nodes about the category of "communicative-skill-based English education" most frequently appeared in the transcripts.

> I basically think English education should be for the purpose of communication. The subject of English does not need to be academically challenging. What our students will need in the future is to have good communicative competence. So I think the goal of high school English classes should be more practical. [T3]

The participants tend to agree that English classes need to be conducted for

communicative purposes and the direction of future English education should be focused on improving communicative competence at a more practical and basic level. This is consistent with the current policy promoted by the government. For the participants, where not so closely related to college entrance exams, the goal of English education in high schools also needs to be set for practical purposes as communication as world citizens.

Another major subcategory concerned "content-based English education." The participants mentioned that future English education should include contents that allow the students to learn more about various topics. They proposed that English education should expand subject matter knowledge and cultivate a higher level of thinking skills, such as creativity and synthesis ability.

> High school English classes need to include academic content as well as motivating lesson activities to cultivate students' thinking skills. They need to expand their knowledge on subject matters through English class. [T2]

> Why not have our students learn subjects like geography or social studies in English? By taking English classes, they learn to improve their academic knowledge as well. [T7]

The other subcategories concerned teaching methodologies that would meet individual students' needs. The participants mentioned that English classes need to be designed for individualized learning so all the students in the classroom can achieve their goals. They also mentioned that to make the students participate more in classes, English classes also need to include interesting activities.

4.2. Identity Conflicts

The emergent categories and subcategories were revisited several times and the patterns revealed among them were carefully analyzed. In the analysis, gaps between the participants' present perceptions and ideal desires were revealed. These were

compared and contrasted to examine their conflicting identities in more detail. Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002) pointed out that professional identity may be constructed through identity conflicts in which traditional identity is threatened by the perceived risk of the marginalization or devaluation of one's professional role or expertise. By exploring the participants' conflicting identities in their perceptions of professional roles and expertise, this study attempts to delineate the professional identity of EFL teachers working in a high school setting.

4.2.1. Conflicts in Professional Roles as an EFL Teacher

One feature distinctly noted in the analysis of the participants' perceptions of their professional roles is that the role they perceive they are filling proficiently conflicts with their value of professional expertise, which possibly leads them to experience professional identity conflicts. One of the professional roles the participants in this study listed as their strengths was that of a "foreign language learner model." They described themselves as learners of English who had experienced learning difficulties with the students. By positioning themselves as foreign language learners, they attempted to emphasize their strengths in the teaching profession－they expected that they would be able to understand their students' learning difficulties better and help them overcome them more effectively.

However, it is ironic that they valued nativelike English proficiency most in their own definition of professional expertise. This suggests that they are very likely to struggle with conflicting professional identities as EFL teachers, i.e., between the roles of foreign language learner and proficient English master. This is well represented by the participants' descriptions of their deficiencies. As their deficient role, most of the teachers mentioned their lack of language proficiency. This is consistent with previous studies (Kim, 2011; Reves & Medgyes, 1994). These researchers pointed out that these negative perceptions of their professional role hamper EFL teachers' teaching and lead to low self-esteem. While they perceive their positive roles as EFL teachers, the Korean EFL teachers in high school also

seem to be greatly affected by their obsession with the native speaker model. On the other hand, Korean EFL teachers at high schools seem to overcome their challenging situation by positioning themselves as proficient instructors of CSAT prep class. Despite such an attempt, however, the teachers could hardly avoid current changes in their profession. They observe that the educational policies of the Korean government have become more communication-centered, easing the students' academic burden of the CSAT. Teacher education programs that would help them construct their healthy professional identities by valuing their professional strengths and complementing their deficient roles would be more needed than ever by Korean EFL teachers in high schools. The following suggestion of one participant seems to imply what this would be like.

> I think it's desirable to best make use of teachers' strengths. Their expertise needs to be valued. For example, teachers who are good at reading can take reading-focused classes, and those good at speaking can make it professionalized by opening speaking classes. We usually think a lot about the students' position when we talk about what our education should be like in the future. However, I think teachers are the ones who should be considered more importantly in our discussion of educational reform. [T7]

4.2.2. Conflicts in the Direction of Future EFL Education

Korean EFL teachers in high schools are the group of teachers who struggle the most with uncertainty in their teaching. They often claim their professionality as instructors for CSAT prep classes. However, high school EFL classrooms are currently facing a new wave of English education as exemplified by the attempts to renovate college entrance exams. To EFL teachers in high school, the matters of how to teach and what to teach in their classrooms have become more significant than ever. Moreover, this would be a matter closely related to how their professional identities are constructed and how they position themselves as professional language teachers. In that sense, the results of the analysis seem to imply possible conflicts that the Korean EFL teachers in high schools will face in the near future.

What will be the goals of the high school EFL classroom? In this regard, the answers of the Korean EFL teachers seem to vary. One of the conflicting issues revealed in the analysis was the future of EFL education in high schools－whether it would be content-based or skill-based. These two major subcategories of the theme of ideal education seem to represent what high school EFL teachers are concerned about in their teaching. While they concede the necessity of a balanced development of receptive and productive skills in learning English, these do not seem to go together regarding the goal of education in teaching the English language.

Some teachers focus on the role of English as a practical tool for communication and insist that it does not have to be academically challenging. Their main goal is to equip their students with sufficient English fluency to communicate with people from other cultures. Other teachers, however, think they should teach content necessary for developing their higher-level thinking and understanding of the world in the English language. They teach the students in English, but English alone is not their main goal of teaching.

Their concerns, in a sense, are in line with our discussion of future education. What the educational goals for our future generation should be needs more in-depth discussion. In any case, whether they aim at building language skills or cultivating academic knowledge, the results of the current analysis show conflicting features of Korean EFL teachers' professional identity formation in the high school setting, and change in educational policies might be one of the important factors affecting their identity formation.

V. Conclusion

This study aims to explore the professional identity of Korean EFL teachers in high schools. Specifically, it examines how they position themselves as EFL teachers

in high schools using a thematic analysis of the transcripts of their interviews about their perceptions of professional identity roles and their own definitions of professional expertise. The patterns among the thematic categories were also carefully reviewed to observe whether there are any characteristic features of the teachers' professional identity formation. A total of nine teachers working in an academic high school setting in Korea were interviewed and their responses were transcribed for analysis and further interpretations. Major findings of the current study are summarized in the following.

Firstly, the professional roles that mainly appeared in the analysis were those of "a foreign language learner" (35.2%), "an instructor for pre-CSAT classes" (32.4%), and "a designer of teaching and learning activities" (18.9%).   The results of the analysis indicate that Korean EFL teachers in high schools perceive themselves as proficiently taking these roles. Regarding their deficient professional roles, the thematic category of "nativelike input provider" was the one that appeared most frequently in the analysis. The Korean EFL teachers thought their lack of English proficiency negatively influenced their professionality.

Secondly, in regard to their perceptions of professional expertise as an EFL teacher, the meaning nodes appearing most frequently concerned "English proficiency" (31.1%). Most of the teachers listed language proficiency as the most significant component in defining a language teacher's professional identity. The meaning nodes under the category of "knowledge of teaching methods" (24.1%) also frequently appeared in the transcripts. Korean EFL teachers in high schools seem to believe professional EFL teachers have to be equipped with linguistic competency and teaching skills.

Thirdly, analysis of the patterns of the relationships among the thematic categories shows conflicting features in the Korean EFL teachers' perceptions of professional roles. The results show that they are very likely to struggle with their conflicting professional identities as EFL teachers, experiencing identity conflicts between the role of foreign language learner and the role of proficient English master. While

they position themselves as professional EFL teachers able to provide their students with a role model of a foreign language learner, which they think will help them understand their students' learning difficulties and deal with them effectively, they seem to feel pressure from not giving them nativelike English input. Considering that they regard high English proficiency as the most important component defining an EFL teacher's professional expertise, they do not seem to accept their present roles as EFL teachers as those that would meet their own standards of professionality. It may be assumed from the analysis that this would be a major reason for their professional identity conflicts.

Lastly, the Korean EFL teachers in high schools also showed conflicts in regard to their desire for ideal English education. The two major subcategories from the analysis, skill-based English education (40.0%) and content-based English education (36.0%), seem to be contradictory in a sense, by implying possible conflicts in the teachers' construction of their professional identity. While they concede the necessity of practical education for communication purposes, the Korean EFL teachers in high schools are also concerned about the educational content that should be taught in English in their classrooms. There needs to be further discussion of what the main goal of English education should be in the future.

The present study yielded results consistent with those of previous studies that had addressed the issue of nonnative English teachers' professional identity. Korean EFL teachers' perceptions of their professional identity support theoretical understandings of the characteristics of identity formation: The main features of language teachers' professional identity are multiple, shifting, and in conflict. Conflicting identity values of Korean EFL teachers also confirm the results of previous studies (Roberts, 2000; Samuel & Stephens, 2000) that interpreted professional identity formation as a struggle. Korean EFL teachers in high schools have to confront and adapt to their varied and sometimes conflicting professional roles and expectations. Even though the present study assumes that a few factors like changes in educational policies might affect the teachers' negotiation and formation of professional identities, the

relationships between them were not addressed clearly. Further studies of the specific factors affecting teachers' professional identity need to be conducted to better understand how Korean EFL teachers construct and negotiate their professional identity in the high school EFL classroom.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Q1. How did you start your job as an EFL teacher?

Q2. Tell me about your educational backgrounds and teaching experiences.

Q3. Tell me about your current English class. How do you teach students?

Q4. Describe your professional role in your EFL class.

Q5. What are your strengths and weaknesses as an EFL teacher?

Q6. How would you define professional expertise of an EFL teacher? What qualities does an EFL teacher have to be a professional teacher?

Q7. What are your ideal English classes? Describe your desired direction of EFL education.