

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND TRANSITIONS OF ENGLISH PRE-SERVICE TEACHER ALUMNI IN RPL MASTER'S PROGRAM FOR SUSTAINABLE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study investigates the professional identity and transitional learning experiences of English pre-service teacher alumni enrolled in a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)-based master's program, with particular attention to its implications for sustainable teacher development as lifelong learning. Framed within the perspectives of sustainable teacher development and lifelong learning, the study examines how these individuals navigate the transition from prior learning experiences to more academically demanding environments, and how this process shapes their evolving professional identities. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, this study collected data through semi-structured interviews, written narratives, and supporting documents. It was analyzed using thematic analysis alongside Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional framework. The findings indicate that professional identity is dynamic and continuously reconstructed across professional, academic, and personal domains. Participants' prior experiences provided confidence and practical knowledge, while the academic context repositioned them as evolving learners, encouraging reflexivity and deeper engagement with teaching theory. Furthermore, the study highlights the mediating role of contextual and personal resources. Institutional support, supervision, and peer collaboration facilitated the transformation of experiential knowledge into academically valued forms. Concurrently, participants developed adaptive strategies, such as reflective practice and self-regulated learning, to navigate academic expectations. Overall, the study demonstrates that sustainable EFL teacher development extends beyond skill acquisition, encompassing an ongoing, identity-driven process shaped by continuous negotiation, adaptation, and engagement with new learning contexts.

Keywords – Professional identity; Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL); Narrative inquiry; Lifelong learning; Teacher transition

Introduction

Teacher professionalism and competence are shaped not only by initial certification but also by sustained engagement in continuous learning across the career span. In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, teachers are required to respond to shifting pedagogical approaches, technological advancements, and complex societal demands (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Consequently, lifelong learning has become a central foundation for maintaining and enhancing teaching quality, enabling teachers to deepen subject knowledge, refine instructional

practices, and engage in reflective inquiry (Avalos, 2011). Building on these perspectives, teacher learning is increasingly framed as part of sustainable teacher development, which emphasizes continuous, adaptive, and long-term professional growth (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Apriliyanti, 2020).

In Indonesia, efforts to strengthen the quality of pre-service teachers have been institutionalized through the Teacher Professional Education Program (PPG), which provides structured preparation through coursework, workshops, microteaching, and field experience. These initiatives reflect national priorities

that position competent teachers as central to educational improvement. In this context, PPG functions not only as a certification pathway but also as a foundation for shaping teachers' professional competence and identity. National policies further reinforce this by requiring teachers to demonstrate pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies (Apriliyanti, 2020). However, while such programs establish foundational competencies, less attention has been given to how teachers continue to develop their professional identity beyond initial certification, particularly in advanced academic contexts.

While teacher education programs bridge theory and practice (Zeichner, 2010), sustaining professional growth requires extended learning opportunities that support teachers in making sense of their evolving roles (Day, 2017). One such pathway is the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which acknowledges knowledge gained through formal and experiential learning (Garrett & Cavaye, 2015). Grounded in experiential learning (Kolb, 2005), RPL enables teachers to translate practice-based knowledge into academically recognized competencies (Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Cooper et al., 2017). More recently, RPL has been implemented in postgraduate programs, including master's degrees in English language education, offering opportunities for academic advancement.

However, participation in RPL-based postgraduate programs also involves significant transitional challenges as learners move from practice-oriented contexts into academically demanding environments. Despite facilitating access, RPL does not eliminate the need to adapt to new epistemological expectations, particularly in academic writing, research, and theoretical engagement. As a result, learners often experience uncertainty, identity negotiation, and shifts in their

ways of knowing (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Gale & Parker, 2014).

Transition theory provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. Transition refers to changes that alter individuals' roles, routines, and assumptions (Schlossberg, 2011). In this context, English pre-service teacher alumni entering RPL-based master's programs navigate complex transitions across professional and academic domains, often experiencing tensions between prior expertise and new academic demands (Illeris, 2014).

In addition, teacher identity refers to how teachers perceive themselves, including their beliefs, values, and professional self-conceptions that shape their practice (Ge et al., 2025). It is a dynamic and relational process, continuously constructed through social, institutional, and cultural interactions (Beijaard et al., 2004; Tsui, 2007; Yazan, 2019), and strengthened through reflection and professional engagement (Tsung-Jui & Ya-Chun, 2015; Bergmark, 2023). In transitional contexts, identity becomes particularly salient as teachers renegotiate their roles and reconstruct their sense of self in response to new academic expectations. These processes involve tensions between prior experience and emerging demands, creating both challenges and opportunities for growth (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Trent, 2016). From this perspective, transitional experiences play a central role in shaping professional identity as part of sustainable teacher development (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Day & Gu, 2007).

Despite the expanding implementation of PPG and RPL, research examining their intersection remains limited, particularly in English language education contexts. Existing studies have predominantly focused on the procedural and institutional dimensions of RPL, overlooking how teachers experience and interpret their transition into academically oriented

learning environments. More importantly, limited attention has been given to how these transitional experiences shape the development of professional identity, especially among pre-service teachers who re-enter higher education through non-traditional pathways such as RPL. This indicates a critical gap in understanding the dynamic relationship between transition, experiential learning pathways, and identity reconstruction within postgraduate contexts.

Addressing this gap is essential for advancing the discourse on sustainable teacher development, particularly in EFL settings where professional, academic, and contextual demands intersect. To address this gap, this study explores the professional identity development and transitional experiences of PPG English alumni in an RPL-based master's program. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do English pre-service teachers alumni experience transitions when entering an RPL-based master's program?
2. How do these transitional experiences shape their professional identity development and sustainable growth as English teachers?

The significance of this study lies in its theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it highlights how professional identity is reconstructed through transitional experiences in RPL-based postgraduate contexts, extending the discourse on sustainable teacher development. Practically, it offers insights for policymakers and educators in designing RPL and postgraduate programs that better support academic and identity transitions, particularly within the Indonesian context.

Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative Narrative Inquiry design based on Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000), which explores human experience through stories within the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place. This approach was suitable for examining how PPG English alumni interpreted their transitional experiences and reconstructed their professional identities in an RPL-based master's program.

The participants were two PPG English alumni enrolled in an RPL-based master's program at Universitas Negeri Semarang during the 2025/2026 academic year. They were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience with both PPG and the RPL program (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journal diaries. Interviews served as the primary source of data, while journal diaries complemented the interviews by providing additional reflections on participants' experiences (Wei, 2023; Creswell, 2023). The data collection process included participant consent, audio-recorded interviews, verbatim transcription, and member checking to ensure credibility (Mertova & Webster, 2020). Trustworthiness was maintained through triangulation, thick description, audit trails, and researcher reflexivity based on the criteria proposed by Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). The analysis involved familiarizing with the data, generating codes, identifying themes, and refining themes related to participants' transitional experiences, academic adaptation, and professional identity development.

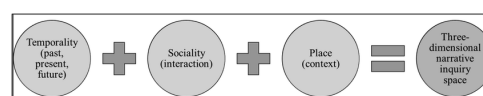


Figure 1. Narrative Inquiry's Three-Dimensional Inquiry Space (adapted from Craig et al., 2024, based on Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Participant Code	Gender	Age	PPG Program Year	RPL-Based Master's Program Enrollment	Prior Teaching Experience (Years)	Notes / Relevant Info
P1	Female	23	2024	Universitas Negeri Semarang, 2025/2026, Semester 1	2	Received credit recognition from teaching certificate
P2	Male	31	2022	Universitas Negeri Semarang, 2025/2026, Semester 1	5	Received credit recognition from teaching certificate

Figure 2. Demographic and Professional Background of Participants Enrolled in an RPL-Based Master's Program

Finding and Discussion

Transitional Expectations and Early Adjustment

Participants entered the RPL-based master's program with strong professional backgrounds, yet their expectations did not fully align with the realities of postgraduate study. P1's early perceptions were strongly shaped by social media narratives portraying master's study as highly demanding, leading to anxiety about balancing work and academic responsibilities. As P1 explained, *"I honestly expected it to be super intense and heavy... I was worried, like, 'Uhh... am I even gonna survive this?'"* (P1). These concerns continued during the admission process, as P1 imagined *"this super strict schedule and piles of assignments"* (P1). However, direct engagement with the program gradually changed these assumptions. P1 later realized that *"the curriculum and the RPL learning system feels flexible"* (P1), particularly through the hybrid learning format that allowed a balance between work and study. Nevertheless, the participant still experienced challenges in the form of *"mental adjustment at the beginning"* because of previously constructed beliefs about postgraduate difficulty (P1).

In contrast, P2 entered the program with pragmatic optimism, expecting a shorter study duration due to credit recognition and hoping to deepen

theoretical understanding in English Language Teaching. P2 stated, *"I really hoped I could finish everything in just two semesters"* (P2), while also aiming *"to grow professionally as an English teacher"* (P2). However, these expectations were challenged by curricular and structural realities, particularly the extension of the study period from two to three semesters, which *"really threw me off"* (P2). P2 also found research-oriented coursework difficult, describing the transition into postgraduate research classes as *"a whole different level"* (P2). Overall, the participants' early transition experiences reflected a process of expectation renegotiation, in which initial assumptions about the RPL-based master's program were gradually reconstructed through direct academic experience.

Academic, Personal, and Social Adjustments

Participants' experiences revealed that adjustment to the RPL program occurred across interconnected academic, personal, and social dimensions. Academically, both participants were generally able to manage coursework demands due to credit recognition and reduced course loads. P1 explained that *"with good planning, I can finish everything without feeling too overwhelmed"* (P1), while P2 similarly perceived the workload as manageable because *"the number of courses is lower than regular students"* (P2).

Nevertheless, balancing academic responsibilities with professional commitments required continuous time management and adaptation. The hybrid learning system also shaped participants' adjustment experiences. P1 viewed online learning positively because *"the hybrid and online system really help me balance everything"* (P1), whereas P2 initially struggled with schedule changes before gradually learning *"to be more flexible and always have a backup plan"* (P2).

On a personal level, emotional responses differed between participants. P1 described becoming *“more motivated”* and did not experience significant stress during the transition process (P1). In contrast, P2 experienced fluctuating motivation and early stress, particularly when expectations toward classroom dynamics and group work did not align with reality. As P2 reflected, *“I did feel stressed, especially in the beginning”* (P2).

Despite these challenges, both participants reported increased self-confidence over time. P1 felt more comfortable expressing ideas in online settings, while P2 stated that the experience *“boosted my confidence as both a teacher and a student”* (P2). Socially, adjustment remained a persistent challenge shaped by the learning environment. P1 experienced limited social connection because *“that sense of belonging hasn’t developed yet”* in fully online classes (P1). Meanwhile, P2 navigated diverse peer interactions in mixed classes, acknowledging that *“group work can be tricky”* and sometimes required taking initiative (P2). In both cases, support systems played an important role in sustaining adjustment, with P1 relying on family support and P2 receiving encouragement from former lecturers. These findings indicate that postgraduate transition within an RPL context is a multidimensional process requiring continuous negotiation across academic, emotional, and social domains.

Professional Identity Prior to Program Entry

Prior to entering the program, both participants demonstrated well-established professional identities grounded in teaching experience and PPG training. Their identities were characterized by confidence, practical competence, and familiarity with classroom realities. P1 described being *“strong in practical teaching-like*

designing creative lessons and using interactive teaching media” (P1), reflecting confidence developed through school-based teaching experiences. However, P1 also acknowledged that *“theoretical understanding still needed improvement”* because pedagogical decisions were not always supported by sufficient academic explanation (P1).

Similarly, P2 entered the program with *“a pretty strong sense of confidence as an English teacher”* and a clear understanding of teacher competencies (P2). At the same time, P2 believed that classroom challenges *“cannot be solved through practice alone”* and viewed further education as necessary for strengthening professional identity (P2). Thus, both participants entered the program with established professional identities while recognizing the need to strengthen the theoretical and analytical foundations underlying their teaching practices.

Professional Identity Reconstruction

Engagement with the RPL master’s program facilitated the reconstruction of professional identity, although the nature of this process differed between participants. For P1, identity reconstruction was more transformative, involving a shift from a predominantly practice-oriented perspective toward a more reflective and theoretically grounded understanding of teaching.

Initially, P1 viewed personal strengths as lying mainly in *“practical teaching and lesson design”* developed through PPG training (P1), while recognizing weaknesses in *“the theoretical and analytical side”* (P1). Through coursework and academic engagement, P1 gradually realized that *“a teacher isn’t just someone who delivers material but someone who must justify every teaching decision with theory and academic evidence”* (P1). This experience strengthened conceptual

understanding and encouraged a more reflective professional identity. P1 eventually described becoming *“not only a practically skilled teacher but also a more reflective and theoretically grounded one”* (P1). Lecturer feedback and collaborative learning further supported this development by fostering critical thinking, professionalism, and leadership skills.

In contrast, P2’s identity development was characterized more by continuity and refinement than by major transformation. P2 explained that professional identity had already been shaped through awareness of personal strengths, weaknesses, and teaching style during the PPG experience (P2). Engagement with the master’s program broadened perspectives, particularly through technology-oriented and research-based courses that reinforced adaptability and continuous professional growth. As P2 reflected, *“technology and innovation can support learning, which made me see myself as a teacher who is committed to growing and adapting”* (P2). Nevertheless, P2 emphasized that *“not much changed in the core of how I see myself as a teacher”* because the program mainly deepened existing understanding rather than redefining professional identity (P2). Research courses, lecturer feedback, and collaborative learning further strengthened analytical, communication, and teamwork skills. P2 described this process not as *“one big turning point”* but as *“a series of gradual shifts shaping how I think and teach”* (P2).

Furthermore, this findings suggest that professional identity development within the RPL context may involve either substantial transformation or gradual refinement, depending on participants’ prior experiences, self-awareness, and engagement with academic learning.

Future Professional Identity Development

Participants’ future professional identity orientations reflected the integration of practical experience from PPG and theoretical insights gained through the master’s program. For P1, this integration created a more balanced understanding of teaching, where PPG strengthened *“practical teaching”* while the master’s program enhanced *“the theoretical and analytical parts”* (P1). As a result, P1 described becoming more reflective and evidence-oriented in designing learning materials, explaining, *“I’ve become more careful and critical when designing materials”* (P1). Looking ahead, P1 envisioned a professional identity that combines practical expertise with theoretical grounding, aspiring to become *“a teacher who’s strong in practice and grounded in theory”* while remaining committed to continuous learning and possible academic pathways such as becoming a lecturer (P1).

Similarly, P2 viewed the integration of PPG and postgraduate study as complementary, explaining that PPG provided practical classroom experience, whereas the master’s program offered *“theories and research tools to analyze those experiences”* (P2). This combination encouraged a more evidence-based and learner-responsive approach to teaching. However, unlike P1, P2 oriented future professional identity beyond traditional classroom teaching. P2 expressed greater interest in developing *“English learning programs, training models, or educational products”* aimed at broader and underserved communities (P2). This reflects an expanded professional identity focused on educational innovation and wider social contribution.

Despite these different trajectories, both participants demonstrated a shared commitment to lifelong learning and meaningful engagement in English language

education. Their narratives suggest that RPL-based postgraduate study contributes not only to immediate academic development but also to the long-term shaping of future professional identity.

Temporality: Professional Identity Across Past, Present, and Future

Participants' narratives reveal that professional identity developed as a dynamic process across past experiences, present challenges, and future orientations. In the past dimension, both participants entered the RPL-based master's program with strong practical teaching foundations developed through PPG, while also recognizing limitations in theoretical knowledge. P1 explained that *"my strength is mainly in practical teaching and lesson design... my theoretical foundation needed strengthening"* (P1), whereas P2 described already having *"a pretty strong sense of confidence as an English teacher"* but realizing that *"many challenges in real classrooms cannot be solved through practice alone"* (P2). These experiences became an important motivation for pursuing postgraduate study.

In the present dimension, participants encountered transitional challenges related to research expectations, hybrid learning systems, and balancing professional responsibilities with academic demands. P2 described entering research-oriented courses as *"a whole different level"* (P2), while P1 identified *"balancing work with assignments"* as a major challenge (P1). At the same time, these experiences contributed to the refinement of professional identity through greater exposure to theory and critical reflection. P1 realized that *"teaching materials must have a clear scientific basis"* (P1), while P2 explained that concepts such as *"MOC and ICT in ELT opened my eyes to different learning formats"* (P2). These experiences encouraged participants to

move beyond intuitive teaching practices toward more theoretically informed decision-making.

Looking toward the future, participants articulated expanded professional aspirations shaped by the integration of theory and practice. P1 envisioned becoming *"a teacher who's strong in practice and grounded in theory"* and even considered the possibility of becoming a lecturer (P1). Meanwhile, P2 expressed greater interest in developing *"English learning programs, training models, or educational products"* for broader educational contexts in Indonesia (P2). These narratives suggest that professional identity within the RPL context is continuously reconstructed through the interaction between prior experiences, present academic challenges, and future-oriented professional goals.

Sociality: Personal and Social Conditions Shaping Identity

Participants' transitional experiences and identity development were shaped by both personal feelings and social relationships throughout the RPL master's program. At the personal level, participants initially experienced anxiety and uncertainty during the early stages of adjustment. P1 admitted feeling *"really worried"* because *"all the stories on social media scared me"* (P1). However, these emotional responses gradually developed into greater confidence and motivation as participants became more engaged in academic life. P2 explained that recognition from colleagues *"boosted my confidence"* as both a teacher and postgraduate student (P2). Lecturer influence also played an important role in sustaining motivation, with P1 describing how lecturers' academic backgrounds *"inspire me a lot"* (P1).

At the social level, interactions with peers and learning communities created both challenges and support. P1 found it difficult to establish interpersonal

closeness because *“everything is online”* (P1), highlighting the limitations of virtual learning environments in fostering social connection. Similarly, P2 described collaborative work as challenging because *“not everyone is used to collaborating”* (P2). Despite these difficulties, participants also experienced meaningful peer relationships that supported their academic journey. P2 reflected positively on meeting classmates who *“share the same vision and motivation”* (P2), which contributed to a stronger sense of engagement and belonging.

These findings shows that professional identity development was shaped through continuous emotional adaptation and interaction within academic and professional communities.

Place: Learning Environments and Their Influence on Transition

Participants’ experiences were shaped by the interaction between physical, institutional, and virtual learning environments throughout the RPL master’s program. In terms of physical context, balancing workplace responsibilities with academic demands became a major challenge for both participants. P1 explained that *“balancing work with assignments was the biggest challenge”* (P1), while P2 similarly described moments when *“work and school collided”* (P2). These experiences illustrate how professional and academic spaces frequently overlapped during the transition process.

At the institutional level, the RPL system and hybrid learning structure functioned as both support and challenge. P1 viewed the hybrid system positively because *“the hybrid and online system really help me balance everything”* (P1), highlighting the flexibility provided by the program. In contrast, P2 experienced disruption due to curriculum changes, explaining that the extension from two semesters to three *“really threw me off”* (P2). These institutional conditions

influenced participants’ expectations, adjustment processes, and overall academic experiences.

Virtual learning spaces also shaped participants’ social and academic engagement. P1 perceived online communication as challenging because *“we can’t see expressions... misunderstandings happen easily”* (P1), reflecting the limitations of digital interaction in fostering interpersonal connection and clarity.

Taken together, participants’ narratives demonstrate that professional identity development was closely connected to the environments in which learning occurred. Workplace demands, institutional structures, and virtual learning spaces continuously influenced how participants negotiated their academic, professional, and social experiences throughout the RPL program.

Integration of Journal Diary Reflections with Interview Findings

Journal diary reflections substantively reinforced and extended the interview findings on participants’ professional development within the RPL-based master’s program. Across data sources, consistent patterns emerged in the development of pedagogical knowledge, research literacy, reflective practice, and professional adaptability. The reflections indicate increasing pedagogical coherence, particularly in the alignment of learning objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment, alongside more systematic and intentional lesson planning.

The data further reveal a clear developmental trajectory in research literacy and reflective practice. Initial difficulties in academic reading and research engagement gradually evolved into greater confidence in interpreting scholarly literature and applying theoretical insights to teaching. Reflective practice was consistently demonstrated through ongoing evaluation of

instructional effectiveness, responsiveness to student needs, and adaptive use of strategies in hybrid learning contexts.

Moreover, the convergence of interview and journal data underscores that while RPL effectively recognises prior professional experience, successful academic transition and ongoing professional identity development depend on targeted and sustained institutional support.

Discussions

The findings indicate that transition into an RPL-based master's program is a complex and multidimensional process involving academic, emotional, and social adjustment. This aligns with Nancy K. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2011), particularly the 4S framework (situation, self, support, and strategies), which explains how individuals navigate transitions. In this study, participants entered with strong professional identities but experienced misalignment between expectations and actual academic demands. These tensions manifested as anxiety (P1) and structural surprises (P2), which functioned as productive challenges that initiated adjustment and identity negotiation. This finding resonates with broader research on postgraduate transition, which suggests that prior academic success does not necessarily guarantee readiness for more complex and demanding forms of learning, thereby requiring continued support during the transition process (White, 2024).

A central challenge in the transition process was the shift from practice-based expertise to academic discourse, particularly in research and academic writing. Despite extensive teaching experience, participants encountered uncertainty when engaging with unfamiliar academic conventions. This supports findings by Zotzmann dan

Sheldrake (2021) who argue that postgraduate students' writing confidence is influenced more by beliefs about effort and ability than by prior experience alone. In line with this, students transitioning into higher-degree research often struggle to adapt to more independent forms of learning after being accustomed to structured coursework environments, highlighting the challenges of engaging in autonomous academic practices (Liardet, 2024). These findings reinforce that academic adjustment involves both cognitive and identity-related transformation, as learners reposition themselves from experienced practitioners to novice academic writers.

Moreover, support systems played a crucial role in mediating this transition. Consistent with the findings, supervision, lecturer guidance, and peer interaction functioned as enabling conditions that facilitated both academic engagement and emotional stability. This is supported by Serkan Canbulat (2025), who demonstrates that academic supervision significantly influences self-regulated writing, motivation, and self-efficacy. Such support is particularly important given that postgraduate students often continue to require structured academic guidance despite assumptions of independence at this level (White, 2024). Furthermore, adaptive strategies such as time management, metacognitive planning, and self-regulated learning were essential in sustaining engagement. These strategies align with research on EFL postgraduate writers, which shows that writing self-efficacy is closely linked to research literacy, motivation, and adaptive learning practices.

From a learning perspective, participants' experiences reflect David A. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2015), where learning occurs through cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application. Participants drew on prior teaching experience as a foundation

for engaging with academic tasks, but importantly, this experience was not merely transferred; it was reinterpreted and transformed through theoretical engagement. This process was evident in both transformative (P1) and developmental (P2) identity trajectories, suggesting that experiential learning within RPL contexts supports deeper meaning-making and adaptation.

These processes are further illuminated by D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly's Narrative Inquiry framework (2000). The findings demonstrate that participants' learning and identity development were temporally situated, socially mediated, and contextually embedded. This reinforces the view that professional identity is constructed through ongoing interaction between experience, context, and future orientation.

From an RPL perspective, the findings highlight both affordances and constraints. Recognition of prior learning functioned as a source of confidence and motivation by legitimizing professional experience. However, tensions emerged in translating experiential knowledge into academically acceptable forms, particularly in research-oriented tasks. This supports arguments by Widiyanti et al. (2025) and Wong (2014), who emphasize that RPL requires structured scaffolding to bridge experiential and academic knowledge. Without such support, learners may struggle to articulate tacit knowledge, as noted by Elana Michelson (2015) and Judy Harris (2018). More recent studies by Linda Cooper, Sara Ralphs, and Judy Harris (2021), as well as Louis Volante et al. (2023), further highlight that effective RPL pedagogy must be relational, context-sensitive, and supportive of both academic development and identity reconstruction.

Professional identity development, as reflected in the findings, was dynamic, situated, and continuously negotiated.

This is consistent with Douwe Beijaard (2017) and Judyth Sachs (2005). Importantly, this process is also shaped by teachers' beliefs about their own abilities, as growth-oriented mindsets and self-efficacy have been shown to positively influence the development of teacher identity (Zarrinabadi et al., 2023). Together with Geert Kelchtermans (2009), these perspectives suggest that identity development involves both stability and change. In this study, participants did not replace their identities as English teachers; rather, they reconstructed and extended them through academic engagement and reflective practice.

From a sustainability perspective, these findings resonate with Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012), who argue that sustainable teacher development involves the integration of personal capacity, social support, and professional judgment. Participants' ability to adapt to academic challenges, regulate their learning, and integrate theory with practice reflects the development of long-term professional capacity rather than short-term competence.

Finally, reflective practice and adult learning principles played a central role in supporting this process. Drawing on Donald Schön (1983) and Malcolm Knowles (1980), the findings show that participants engaged in self-directed, reflective learning to manage challenges and construct meaning from their experiences.

In sum, the transition into an RPL-based master's program is not merely an academic adjustment but a process of professional identity negotiation and reconstruction. The interplay between prior experience, academic demands, and contextual support generates both challenges and opportunities, ultimately fostering adaptive, reflective, and resilient EFL

teachers capable of sustaining professional growth.

Conclusions

This study investigated the transitional learning experiences and professional identity development of PPG English alumni in an RPL-based master's program, with a focus on sustainable teacher development. The findings indicate that transition into postgraduate study is a multidimensional process involving academic, emotional, and social adjustments. In line with Schlossberg's Transition Theory, participants navigated challenges related to research-oriented tasks, academic writing, and hybrid learning environments, supported by interpersonal and institutional resources as well as self-regulated strategies.

Learning was predominantly experiential and reflective, consistent with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, as participants integrated prior teaching experience with theoretical engagement through iterative cycles of reflection and application. From a narrative perspective, learning and identity development were shaped across temporal, social, and contextual dimensions, as conceptualized by Clandinin and Connelly. While RPL effectively validated prior professional experience and facilitated access, it did not eliminate the need for academic adaptation. Instead, professional identity emerged as dynamic and continuously reconstructed, supporting the development of reflective, research-informed, and adaptable educators.

These findings carry important implications. Theoretically, the study contributes to the integration of transition theory, experiential learning, and narrative inquiry within RPL contexts, while extending the concept of sustainable teacher development as an ongoing, adaptive process. Practically, the

results highlight the necessity of structured academic scaffolding particularly in research and academic writing alongside flexible learning design, sustained mentoring, and explicit integration between professional and academic knowledge. Such support is critical to enable RPL students to successfully navigate academic demands while sustaining long-term professional growth.

However, this study is limited by its small sample size, context-specific focus, and reliance on self-reported data, which may constrain the transferability of findings. In addition, the study captures experiences within a limited timeframe and does not fully address long-term developmental trajectories.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine sustained professional identity development beyond program completion and include larger, more diverse samples across institutional contexts. Comparative studies between RPL and non-RPL pathways, as well as research incorporating multiple stakeholders, would further deepen understanding of how RPL can effectively support academic transition and sustainable teacher development.

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