An Autoethnographic Study on Balancing the Dualities of EFL Instruction and Ph.D. Studies

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic study explores my intricate balance between dual roles of being an EFL instructor and a PhD student. I, a 27-year-old language instructor in Istanbul, try to delve into the personal and professional challenges which I encounter while pursuing doctoral studies. The narrative reflects the sense of in-betweenness and identity reconstruction as I navigate through teaching responsibilities and academic demands. By employing a qualitative autoethnographic approach, the study provides a personalized account of my experiences, offering insights into the identity formation process. The research highlights the transformative impact of the PhD journey on both teaching and research identities, emphasizing the need for further studies on the dual roles of PhD students to better understand their complexities and benefits.

KEYWORDS: Autoethnography; Personal narratives; EFL teaching; Doctoral studies

1. Introduction

The idea of writing about my experiences as a 27-year-old language instructor and a PhD student in Istanbul at first was scary as I could never talk about myself even on a daily basis. I could never talk about myself more than just a few sentences so writing about my personal experiences is a challenge for me. I decided to write about my experiences as I know that there are many PhD students, candidates and teachers who are going through similar experiences. I wanted to reflect upon my thoughts and my lived experiences in order to find myself as a novice researcher and a language teacher in these challenging times of my life. This paper, therefore, reflects my sense of in-betweenness as a teacher and a researcher.

As a language teacher at a prep school of a foundation university in Istanbul, I face challenges every day. One of them is balancing the workload and the new life of mine as a PhD student while the next is not pushing myself to burnout. At times, I wonder if I ever wanted to be a language teacher or did fate lead me here. I question my existence. Finding myself as a person is the main challenge and the goal of this paper. When I decided to write an autoethnography to share my insights, I did not know where to begin my story. I thought maybe writing about my work would help me find myself as a teacher. Then I thought about reflecting on my PhD journey to see how it helped me as a novice researcher in the field of ELT. But neither of these identities would describe who I was so I decided that I would write about it all. I will write about myself. Me. Seçil.

I was first introduced to autoethnography by an instructor during my master's courses. My professor who was enthusiastic about autoethnographies talked about how fascinating it was to write about his experiences in a research paper. I was impressed. As a course assignment and a final project paper, we were asked to write a duoethnography on our language learning experiences.

I remember that the writing process was strange because I was writing about *my* experiences and who would have wanted to read MY experiences as a language learner from Turkey? But I liked writing about my experiences and connecting my experiences with literature seemed legitimate. It was a research paper. It was an academic work. Then, I started reading more about autoethnographies and duoethnographies. I wrote my master's thesis based on a topic from a duoethnographic paper. Therefore, writing an autoethnography was expected from me - at least I was expecting it. With autoethnographies, the researcher is the phenomenon that is written about (Ellis, 2004) so I wanted to be the phenomenon this time. I wanted people to read my experiences and see that they are not alone in this identity search.

2. Where do I begin?

Reading, reading more, planning, teaching, discussions, reflections, presentations, writing, article submissions, courses, gradings, studying, no social life, why did I do this? What was my problem? Wasn't I happy the way things were? No, I wasn't. I was bored. I did not have anything to do all summer (3 weeks actually) … I did not have a purpose. Now I do. I have a purpose. What is it? I don't know. But what I know is that I don't have time for boredom. I have work. I have a PhD. I have lessons to give and courses to pass. Feedback to give and grades to get. Who was I? A teacher? A student? A researcher? I didn't know. I couldn't find myself. I didn't have time to question. When talking about my thoughts, and sharing how I feel with my colleagues and PhD friends, I realized that I wasn't alone. Everyone was feeling similar things. I started writing about how I felt during certain times such as before the finals or before certain deadlines, or before meetings at my work. I realized that I was stuck between teaching and researching. I was either too focused on teaching or studying. I couldn't balance the workload. I could not identify myself as a teacher or as a researcher. My in-betweenness led me here and in this paper, I reflect upon my identity development with a particular question in mind. Through my reflections, my observations, and my feelings, you, my readers are going to witness how I try to find an answer to this question: How has pursuing a PhD helped me (re)construct my identity as a teacher and a researcher? To address this research question, I delve into the literature on teacher identity and researcher identity along with employing an autoethnographic approach in applied linguistics.

2.1. Conceptual Framework

In this paper, I aim to set off and take you, my readers, with me on a journey of self-discovery of my identity as a teacher and a researcher. I started questioning my identity as a language teacher before I started my PhD studies. I adopt the concept of teacher identity development, which involves a dual process of meaning negotiation and identification (Wenger, 1999), to frame this journey. In this context, identification refers to participation in the teaching profession and incorporation into the teaching community, where individuals develop a feeling of self and purpose. According to Sachs (2005), teacher identity is something that is shaped by experience. My experience when I started teaching was that I loved the job. I loved my students, my curriculum, my colleagues, and my institution. I was happy and passionate, and I wanted to improve myself as a teacher. This passion led me to pursue a master's degree, where I discovered a new love—academia. I loved my master's courses. I fell in love with academia. However, falling in love with academia made me ignore my responsibilities as a teacher. Before I started my academic journey, I used to make sure that I enjoyed my lessons before my students did by preparing useful and fun activities. Then I started neglecting my lessons in order to pass my courses as a master's student. I was losing my identity as a teacher and gaining a researcher identity. The transition was difficult for me because my identity as a language teacher was evolving (Huang & Varghese, 2015; Morgan, 2007; Pavlenko, 2012) into something more fluid in line with my goals of becoming a researcher and pursuing an academic career. Retrospectively speaking, I was not making meaning, nor I was engaged in my teaching community because I knew I needed to achieve more in my academic career. I was overwhelmed because I was a language instructor at a prep school and my students were not motivated to learn English because I was not motivated enough to teach English anymore.

When I graduated from master's degree and submitted my thesis, I had 3 weeks of free time. This free time was for me to relax, not think about research or any PhD related things. I was determined to take a year off before I started my PhD, but I was bored. In these three weeks of free time, I did not know what to do. My colleague and a close friend had applied for a PhD program and encouraged me to do so by saying that we were bored by not doing anything all summer (three weeks) and we did not want to come to a deadlock by just teaching at the same institution. We had to pursue an academic career because that was who we were. Academicians. She was accepted to the PhD program she applied to, so it was my turn to apply and get accepted. I got in. Little did I know that this was going to be the most challenging year of my life both personally and professionally. I needed to form another identity. I could no longer rely on my teacher identity because I was not just a teacher anymore. I was also a PhD student. In the context of PhD, doctoral education student's identity is formed as they negotiate their multiple identities through the research process (Hoang & Pretorius, 2019). I was (re)forming my identity as a language instructor to become a researcher. As Goode (2010) stated identity is a "product of participation in communities", I as a PhD student needed to actively participate in the community in order to construct my identity as a researcher. I did not know which community I belonged to as I was stuck in between teaching and learning. I was either too focused on teaching and neglecting my PhD courses or the other way around. When I wanted to focus on my PhD courses, I felt as if I was neglecting my job, my students, and my identity as a teacher. But if I focused on teaching, I was neglecting my researcher self which I chose to create in the first place. Therefore, trying to balance these two distinct, complex, and demanding career paths became my goal in this evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 2009).

3. Autoethnography as a methodological approach

Because autoethnography enables a thorough, personalized inquiry into my identity transformation (Keleş, 2022), I chose it as the methodological technique for this study. Traditional scientific approaches claim that the researcher should put aside their subjectivity and voice in order to obtain and share the knowledge (Neuman, 1994). However, with the rise of postmodernism, inquiring knowledge has many ways and researchers could share their interpretation of the knowledge (Neuman, 1994). In this paper, I plan to derive meaning from my experiences by reflecting upon them in a personalized and individual narrative. To achieve this goal, I employed a qualitative autoethnographic approach rather than a quantitative approach as I thought it would allow me to be my own narrative of my life. An autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that enables the authors to explore, interpret, and share knowledge by being the subject of the study and make meaning of their lived experiences in their cultural and social contexts (Creswell, 2013; Ellis, 2004; Keleş, 2022; Sparkes, 2000). According to Wall (2006) an autoethnography is exploring oneself in a personalized manner about a phenomenon. While it does not suit the traditional and conventional writing method, autoethnography is an established qualitative method in educational research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Instead of working on a researched phenomenon, I choose to understand myself as a researcher and a language teacher, find myself as a person, and realize my "self" as an individual. My aim for this paper is to engage readers not as a passive reader but in a more relational manner in understanding the challenges I am going through as a PhD student and a language teacher. There are other PhD students who may be experiencing life and their PhDs differently, but this is a highly personal account as I am reflecting upon my experiences. As Ellis et al. (2011) stated, autoethnographies are epiphanies, moments that have significantly affected one's trajectory of life which may be chosen to write about. I choose to "collect my data" from my memories, my observations, thoughts, and memories as Keleş (2022) stated memories and recollections of thoughts are crucial in autoethnographies as the researchers focus on their lives and their stories.

As Keleş (2022) stated, personal memory, recollections, and thoughts are central parts of autoethnographies as the researcher is the phenomenon in this paper. I used my self-reflections as a form of data for this paper. According to Chang et al (2013), self-reflections are created by the researcher in the form of free writing regarding their experiences. While I was collecting my data from my self-reflections and my notes for this paper, I (re)organized them in a systematic and a purposeful approach. However, rather than employing a 'traditional' data analysis method to create themes and codes, I put the data in a chronological order to point out how my identity has remained constant and changed over time. This methodology aligns with Ellis's (2009) position that autoethnography is intended to be an introspective and expressive process, one that embodies the essence of experienced life in a way that is both systematic and highly subjective.

4. I am a teacher

Since the beginning of my career, I have always considered myself an ambitious language teacher who works to facilitate a welcoming environment where my students can feel safe to communicate in the target language without any hesitation to make mistakes. With this in mind, I have always tried to incorporate some communicative activities in the lessons or simply ask them about their personal lives in order to get them to speak, and participate in the lessons more. My approach to teaching, which is grounded in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology (Brown, 2014), has always involved communicative activities for my students to make connections between their language learning experiences with the outside world. I initially thought that I tried to be a fun teacher who could understand her students, and connect with them on a personal level since there wouldn't be a big age difference between my students and I however, my approach was not just about being a fun teacher but creating a safe and welcoming environment for my students where they could feel valued and understood. Connecting with my students, spending time with them in break time, and asking and talking about their interests have always been one of my priorities in teaching as I was feeling connected and motivated when I felt close to my students. Learning about their interests has helped me plan my lessons accordingly and asking them to participate in an activity because they are 'experts' on the topic has been a driving motivation source in my teaching. I have always found ways to encourage my students to relate to my lessons on a personal level so that they would be motivated. Hence, my motivation. I was devoted to my profession, my students, and the institution that I work at. Within this context, when looked through an ethnographic lens, in my early teaching years, I viewed my classroom as a mirror of larger social and cultural dynamics.

5. My Ph.D. journey

Why did you start doing Ph.D.?

What is the point…

Do you want to be an academician?

You won't earn a lot of money. I think it's a waste of time…

Are you going to be a doctor? Aren't you just a teacher?

These were the questions that I heard when I told people that I was accepted to a PhD program. My not so close family members asked me what a PhD is and why I started doing it. There are two answers to this question actually, a funny one and the real reason. I always tell the funny one. So, here's it is. I am from a small town in Aydın which is in the Aegean part of Turkey. My family has a certain way of doing things like buying prescription drugs from a certain pharmacist who doesn't always have these pills, so I have to visit the pharmacist sometimes twice a week when the pills have arrived. The lady who runs the pharmacy knows all about my family, except me. Here's the fun part. The lady knows my mom and every time I go there, she asks me are you …(my mother's name)'s daughter? I say yes, I am. She proceeds with THE question. Are you the doctor or the other one? I tell her I am the OTHER one, not the doctor daughter of my mother. She then never asked me what I do, never said sorry because she could not remember my job, but she said say hi to your mother from me, then turned her back to do her job. So, I tell people that I started doing a PhD because one day I will go to the pharmacy and the lady will ask me the same question. Are you the doctor or the other one and I will say now I AM also a doctor… Although it's humorous, as this story reveals how social norms can have a significant impact on a person's identity, both personally and professionally.

But the real reason why I started doing a PhD was that I did not want to be just an English teacher at a prep school of a university. I wanted to achieve more. Pursuing an academic career, specifically, pursuing a PhD, marked an important turning point in my personal and professional life. My desire to achieve more than my position as an English teacher at a university preparatory school led me to make this decision. I wanted to be the best version of myself in terms of my education. I always wanted to pursue a PhD degree even when I knew that I only studied just enough to pass my courses. There has always been a pursuit of the best I could be in my life. I was raised like this. Be the best at what you do. It doesn't matter what you do but be the best at it. When I started my master's degree, I quite enjoyed the courses, literature, research, and the pursuit of knowing more in my field. After submitting my master's thesis, I felt an emptiness in my life. I knew I had to pursue an academic career, there wasn't, hasn't been a doubt in my mind on why I started doing my PhD. I knew and I was aware that everybody who is doing a PhD while working was feeling similar emotions such as burnout, exhaustion, and satisfaction at the same time. Adaptation to having these dual identities has not been an easy journey for me. The responsibilities of academic study gradually took in the time and energy I had spent creating engaging lessons for my students when I started my PhD. It quickly became too much to handle trying to balance my teaching duties and the demands of my PhD program. I began to question my identity as a teacher, which is the central topic in this autoethnographic study. During this time, from my teaching logs which were used to gather data, I noticed a decrease in the additional materials I prepared for my students and a change to a more cursory approach to lesson planning. As I got more and more focused on my academic work, the quality of my interactions and relationships with my students started to decline.

While questioning myself and my identity, I received an email from the vice principal of our institution asking to talk to me about the following year. As soon as I received that email, I started panicking as I was sure that they wanted to fire me because I was not meeting the expectations. I was not preparing extra materials, I was not putting extra effort in my lessons, and I was only following the coursebook. I somehow convinced myself that I was the worst instructor of all time even though I was meeting the deadlines for the feedback sessions and grade entries. I convinced myself that meeting the deadlines, entering the grades, attending the meetings, or participating in the professional development sessions were not enough to keep my job. That night, I could not sleep. There was something wrong because deep down I knew that I was not demonstrating my best teaching performance. When the time came for the meeting with the vice principal, I was trying to assure myself that I could be able to find another job soon. When I walked into the room, the principal and the vice principal were waiting for me. On the outside, I looked cool (*I mean, I hoped so...*) but on the inside, I was shaking. After a small talk on how the day was going, the vice principal asked me about my plans for the following year. (*Well, I was hoping to keep my job here...*). I told her that I was happy working there, and that I enjoyed teaching a lot (*maybe not at that exact moment but you know what I mean*). Then she asked me if I would be interested in the curriculum advisor position for the following year. (*WHAT??!! – I thought you were firing me*). Even today, while I am writing this autoethnography, I don't know why I thought they were firing me. I was a tenure, and it was a secured job. I guess my anxiety mode was on that day. They asked me to think about this offer. I was excited but nervous as well. The position entitled the duties of writing a curriculum for Track 2 students. We might need to change the books, so I was responsible for choosing the books, justifying my choice, and creating a plan with those books. Moreover, there was going to be a task group that would create another curriculum for 'true beginners' to help them catch up with their peers. I couldn't sleep that night either. I was thinking if I could be able to handle the workload. This decision-making process, which was documented in my reflective journals, involved assessing the role's possible advantages against the likelihood that it may increase my burnout. However, in the end, I accepted the Curriculum Advisor position for the following year at my institution. Taking on this role marked an additional turning point in my autoethnographic narrative since it gave me a chance to get back in touch with my teaching practice and strengthen my devotion to it. I was also going to be in a task group of 6 instructors, 3 future curriculum advisors, 2 future assessment team members, and the principal of the institution to create a curriculum. The main objective of this task group was to create a curriculum that would be based on the lexical approach by Michael Lewis (1993). When we started the meetings for this task group, we read books about the approach, had discussions on the chapters and prepared materials. This task group felt as if I was taking another PhD course and I loved it. I was excited to attend these meetings as I was studying for them just like I did for my PhD courses. With this job offer and task group meetings, I was motivated and connected to my institution and teaching practices. I was also learning to become a curriculum advisor while taking part in assessment training, professional development training and curriculum meetings. Even though I was motivated to take on these responsibilities, I was exhausted.

I kept remembering the teacher education courses that I took in the first semester of my PhD. We read lots of articles on how language teacher education should be, what kind of qualities language teachers should possess, and what are the roles of the institutions for their teachers to be able to feel secure, supported, and satisfied in their professions. I remember that in order to function well, I needed to feel satisfaction, security, and support, but something was missing as I was feeling burnout. I could feel that I wasn't able to handle the workload. At the beginning of my PhD, I was questioning my teacher identity as it overlapped with my researcher identity. But now, I had all these responsibilities, meetings to attend presentations to give, and papers to write and I realized that having a dual identity conflict was just the tip of the iceberg. I took on these roles, I applied for a PhD, and I accepted the curriculum advisor job offer but I could not manage the workload. I felt as if I had to be in many places, but I could not. This identity search became a part of me, and I could not stop thinking about the emptiness that I felt because of questioning myself a lot.

During one of the conversations that I was having with my PhD peers, I realized that we were experiencing the same emotions, we were going through the same experiences in different contexts. One of them was trying to balance motherhood, her job, and her PhD and the other two started working at new institutions so they were trying to adjust to their new workplaces. So, having these feelings of anxiety, tiredness, overwhelm and vacancy did not seem to be individual but rather collective feelings among PhD students. On the one hand, yes, I was overwhelmed, exhausted, and disengaged, but on the other hand, there were a lot of things that I was grateful for. Firstly, I was grateful that I could get to do my PhD, and that I was accepted to the ELT PhD program with a full scholarship, I was grateful that I had a job that paid well, I was grateful that my work was appreciated, I was grateful that I was asked to take on the curriculum advisor position, I was grateful that my students liked me. I realized that I should be focusing on these very important things in my life rather than dwelling on the negative feelings. My wonderful friends from the PhD courses and I would talk every day and share what was going on in our lives, how far we got with our research projects, and how we prepared for the courses. We would help each other share our notes, and remind each other about the task requirements, assignments, and deadlines. One day, as we were talking about our experiences with doing PhD while working, one of my friends said that she was overwhelmed and was considering taking a year off. We started talking about how every one of us were feeling the same things, we were also overwhelmed but we assured her that we would work together, help each other out and we would come through this journey together. That day I realized how lucky I was. We formed a unity and I strongly believe that my friends are the reason how I started to feel motivated again. Almost every day, we would motivate each other, help each other, and we would give each other reassurance that we were in this together and we would achieve our goals. Even on the days that one of us did not prepare well for a course, we would still assure each other that the others could take the lead during the class discussions, or we would make sure that we shared our notes beforehand. I had my wonderful friends with me during this exhausting and challenging journey, and I was not alone. I was only feeling lost because I did not know that others were experiencing the same feelings. Therefore, I am certain that you, my readers, will find something to relate to in this paper. I felt lost, you may feel lost. I felt exhausted, you may feel exhausted. I felt as if I could not manage the workload, you may feel as if you cannot manage the workload. However, I was not alone, and you are not alone. I did not need to decide if I was a teacher or a researcher, nor should you. I did not need to force myself to choose one, nor should you. I did not need to experience only the positive emotions, nor should you.

In the midst of the lessons, meetings, and training, I conducted a study on the sustainability of teacher research as I knew that research was a way of improving our teacher identity as well. I gave a presentation on the findings and even though it is a challenging process, it is very rewarding in improving our agency. I received good feedback from my colleagues, but they raised their concerns about not having the time (*tell me about it...*) or not being knowledgeable enough to conduct research. I answered their questions and tried to assure them that there was nothing to be afraid of as if I knew anything about balancing the workload or finding time. However, it boosted my confidence as I was the teacher and the researcher while presenting my research. Despite considering that I could be either a teacher or a researcher, starting with the idea of finding my identity, I realized pursuing a PhD helped me understand that I did not lose my teacher identity. In contrast, I noticed that, as I was taking my PhD courses, such as teacher education, I was aware of the teacher competencies thus, I could better act on the needs of the students and the curriculum with this awareness. During another course, through research, I realized that I could implement some theories or practices into my teaching context. With research methods courses, both qualitative and quantitative, I noticed that I could conduct research in my teaching context, and it could be beneficial for me, my students, and my institution. I did not lose my teacher identity but rather I was improving it by becoming a researcher.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this autoethnography, I tried to delve into the goals, challenges, accomplishments, and failures of my identity search journey while pursuing a PhD in English Language Teaching (ELT) and teaching at the same time. This journey helped me (re)construct my identity as a teacher and a researcher. Before starting to pursue an academic career, I considered myself a language teacher who was motivated and enthusiastic about her job. That was the reason why I started doing my PhD actually, I wanted to increase this motivation and enthusiasm by developing professionally. However, the opposite happened as I realized that being an academician and pursuing a PhD was more rewarding. As Wenger (1999) stated, teacher identity was a form of meaning-making or creating ownership which I enjoyed doing at the beginning of my teaching career. I was motivated to teach; I knew I belonged

to my teaching community. In time, on the other hand, while pursuing a PhD, I was feeling as if I did not belong to teaching but to researching. I faced some challenges while teaching and doing my PhD. I could not balance the workload and that's why I felt demotivated towards teaching. I could not balance the workload that's why I could not prepare well enough for my courses. However, my wonderful PhD friends helped me through this challenging journey. They were the ones who felt the same, they were experiencing the same emotions, and they were the ones who made me realize that I was not alone in this journey. This realization led me throughout the rest of the academic year. By writing about my experiences, I realized that I was doing something more than just teaching or just being a PhD student. I was fulfilling my goals, and I was where I dreamt of being five years ago. The feelings of exhaustion, tiredness, and anxiety seemed normal, and I was not alone. When I was first introduced to autoethnographies by one of my professors during my master's degree, I did not like writing about my experiences, but I loved reading others'. I realized that those autoethnographies were relatable. As Wall (2006) stated, writing an autoethnography is self-exploration in a personalized manner, and I noticed that every PhD student was going through the same experiences, and was feeling burnout, anxiety, exhaustion, and accomplishment. I started writing about my experiences as I was willing to explore myself and share my vulnerabilities with whoever was willing to read my story, but I did not consider that I would benefit from it as much as I have. Therefore, this autoethnographic study is my self-expression of my self-realization and I know that if I am going through this experience as a PhD student, others are too. Maybe other PhD students will connect to my experiences or react differently to their experiences, but I believe autoethnographies especially evocative ethnographies (Ellis, 2009) will awake a feeling in someone.

Overall, as I have sought an answer to my research question; "How has pursuing a PhD helped me (re)construct my identity as a teacher and a researcher?", I have certainly taken some liberties with descriptive narratives to express my experiences in my own style and I have shared my vulnerabilities with you by presenting each decision and its rationale. This identity search has been a challenging journey for me as I have experienced a lack of and abundant emotions at the same time. I felt alone, empty, unsuccessful, and ineffective because I was stuck in between teaching and being a student; but I also felt powerful, united, sophisticated, successful, and effective thanks to my dearest PhD friends. I was able to overcome these challenges of my identity search through reflection, collaboration, and integration. In conclusion, I recommend further autoethnographic studies to focus on the in-betweenness of PhD students to understand the benefits and challenges of this difficult journey.

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