# LANGUAGE TEACHER IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

*Research Article*

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## Abstract

Language teacher identity has been studied in several contexts in English Language Teaching (ELT) field; however, looking at language teacher identity in a United States context in which teachers from other countries teach their native languages as a foreign language has been a rare topic so far. Therefore, this phenomenological qualitative study investigated the lived experiences of four foreign language teaching assistants who lived and taught in the United States through Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) Program. The findings indicated four main emerging themes: (a) pedagogical shift, (b) cross-cultural awareness, (c) challenges, and (d) goals and expectations. These dynamic components shaped language teachers' identity in this context. The results are presented under the framework of language teacher identity. Implications as a guide for future FLTA teachers and for teacher exchange programs are provided.

*Keywords:* language teacher identity, pedagogical shift, challenges, goals and expectations

## 1. Introduction

The initial concept of identity dates back to the Greek philosopher Socrates and his advice to the citizens of Greece "know thyself" to urge them to reflect on themselves (Rowe, 1999). As the concept has been studied for a long time, there are many explanatory definitions going beyond merely knowing oneself. For instance, Norton (2013) defined identity as "the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 4). For

decades, scholars have been investigating numerous aspects of identity including education, which takes us to the concept of teacher identity. Duru (2006) highlights the necessity of examining teacher identity to gain an impression of traditional teaching and "to create, and reconstruct the possibilities for the new educational reforms, programs, paradigms, and change educational processes for a better life" (p. 121).

The concept of teacher identity is worth studying in multicultural contexts and some exchange programs such as Fulbright Foreign Language Teacher Assistant (FLTA) Program or Erasmus and Comenius teacher exchange programs are important sources providing language teachers with reflecting on their teacher identity in multicultural contexts. Being one of these important programs, the Fulbright FLTA Program is sponsored by the United States government and binational partnerships with foreign governments. Within this program, foreign participants exchange in various areas, "including the sciences, business, academe, public service, government, and the arts and continue to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries" (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2019). FLTAs are the participants who teach their native language in a foreign context. For example, Turkish teachers whose expertise is teaching English and whose native language is Turkish are chosen by the Fulbright FLTA committees and teach Turkish in the United States. In the context of the present study, FLTAs refer to the instructors who taught their native languages at tertiary level in the United States. These instructors stayed in the US for about nine to 10 months in the 2016-2017 academic year.

The present study is a small-scale phenomenological study investigating the professional identity (re)formations of four non-native FLTAs through academic and social challenges they experienced while teaching their first languages (L1s) in an English-speaking country. The purpose of this exploratory study is to have a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of FLTAs by delving into their socialization processes and challenges both common and unique to each participant. In the field of applied linguistics, it would not be difficult to find studies on teacher identities, yet there is scarcity in research on teachers of foreign languages teaching their L1s without specific training (Ghanem, 2018).

This current study might be useful for prospective teacher candidates, especially the ones who are planning to become FLTAs and teach their L1s abroad. The study may also contribute to foreign language teaching by offering a perspective on teaching practices along with socialization issues. Additionally, the findings of the study might lead to further research focusing on the lived experiences of teachers of their native languages and "NonNative" English Speaker Teachers (NNEST). The present study addresses the following research questions:

1.   What are the lived experiences of FLTAs during their stay in the United States?

2.   How does knowing how to teach a language (e.g., knowing how to teach English) influence teaching another language (i.e., native language)?

3.   How does the change in the environment (students, colleagues, and socialization and adaptation processes) affect teachers' professional identity?

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Teacher identity is a dynamic phenomenon that teacher candidates start to develop while they study in teacher education programs. The process of teacher identity development continues throughout a teacher's career. In other words, as Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) state, "identity shifts may occur throughout a teacher's career as a result of interactions within schools and in broader communities" (p. 175). Internal factors such as emotions (Rodgers &

Scott, 2008; Van Veen & Sleegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2003), and external factors such as job and life experiences in particular contexts (Flores & Day, 2006; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Sachs, 2005), and changes in the environment (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Wu, 2003) have great influence on teacher identity shifts.

There are some research studies focusing on the effects of the social, cultural and professional changes on language teachers' identity (e.g., Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Duru, 2006; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005; Hong, 2010; Rogers & Scott, 2008; Uzum, 2015). Yazan (2018) also examined teacher identity and defined it from five points of views:

> (1) teachers' own beliefs and perceptions of themselves as teachers; (2) others' expectations and social positioning; (3) its dynamic and evolving nature; (4) (re)construction of identity in social contexts and interactions; (5) teachers' commitment to, participation and investment in the profession. (p. 27)

These all are intertwined in shaping the professional identities of teachers. Language teachers' identity, on the other hand, are also affected by the language they use in teaching the subject area, and by being a native or non-native speaker of it. Synthesizing this information, Yazan introduced a conceptual framework for language teachers' identity that is comprised of six main components: teacher's learning, teacher's cognition (i.e., beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes about teaching), teacher's participation in communities of practice, contextual factors, teacher biographies (i.e., background), and teacher emotions.
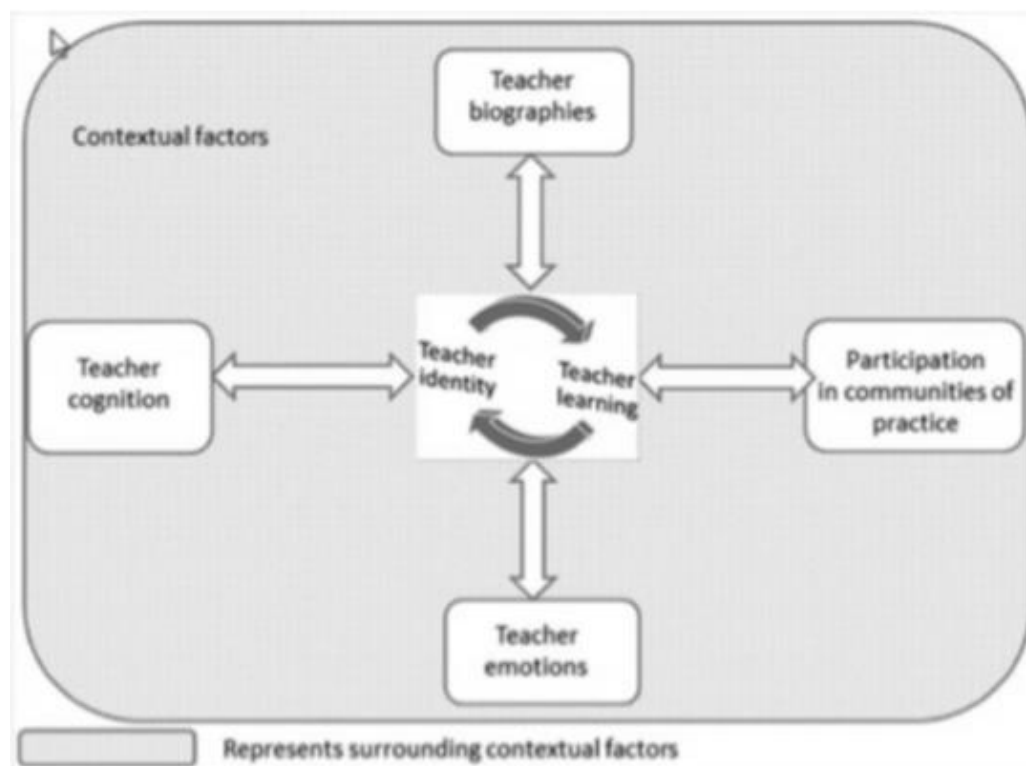


*Figure 1:* Yazan's (2018) illustration of his conceptual framework for language teacher identity.

In this regard, teacher learning refers to a type of learning that is socially constructed and emerges as a result of teachers' including themselves as the members of a learning community that includes students, curriculum, teacher educators, colleagues as well as the

tasks and activities that teachers create. Teachers are a part of this dynamic system and learning is continuous. In this continuum, teachers adapt and adopt different roles, negotiate with other teachers and their students and find and use resources that they could help both themselves and their students.

On the other hand, teacher cognition refers to teachers' systematic patterns in their "beliefs, knowledge, theories, attitudes, images, assumptions, metaphors, conceptions, perspectives about teaching, teachers, learning, students, subject matter, curricula, materials, instructional activities, self" (Borg, 2003, p. 82). According to Yazan (2018), teacher cognition covers most of the learning and teaching forms. These forms are mainly "unobservable mental dimensions" (Borg, 2009, p. 163). As teachers are involved in more teaching practices and negotiate with others around them, including students, colleagues and mentors, what they do in class is shaped by what they believe and know, and what they negotiate with others around them. This is similar to a recycling procedure.

Furthermore, "participation in communities of practice" component of the language teacher identity framework originates from Lave and Wenger's (1998) "communities of practice." It refers to teachers' practices within the community that they construct with their students and their mentors. In these communities, language teachers actively participate in the socially constructed activities, and as a result, their identity and the values they assign to the tools (e.g., language) change dynamically. In addition, contextual factors in language teacher identity framework act as an encapsulating element for the other components because context in which teachers teach languages may change the materials they use, the way they teach, the values they assign to objects. Regarding this component, Yazan (2018) stated, "teacher identities are configured and reconfigured as they utilize the resources and discourses in these contexts, interact with their colleagues and students, and navigate the system of activities."

Teacher biographies are also important in the construction of language teacher identities. Teachers' past experiences and their preconceived ideas about the culture they will be teaching or about the people of that culture affect teachers' future acts while teaching. Teachers' past experiences cannot be separated from the language they teach, use and learn. According to Yazan (2018), "the interaction between teachers' biographical trajectories and their current self-images illuminates our understanding of how L2 teachers develop and enact their identities as they traverse the activities of initial teacher education." Last, teacher emotions are as important as other components because learning how to manage a variety of emotions help teachers manage the situations they encounter while teaching. They may encounter serious emotional incidents in class and knowing what to do in each situation helps them develop their teacher identity.

Overall, being a language teacher who teaches his/her native language in another culture or country is directly related to language teacher identity shifts and challenges experienced in that culture. These shifts are dynamic and can be considered under language teacher identity framework that puts teachers in the middle of the components mentioned earlier. Language teacher identities are (re)constructed based on many factors and interactions or negotiations. Thus, with the guidance of the previous studies to be mentioned in this section, and within the framework by Yazan (2018), this paper aims to investigate how the changes in the environment (students, colleagues, socialization process, and adaptation process) and the challenges they pose affect a teacher's identity in an FLTA context.

Regarding teachers' professional identities, Song and Gonzales Del Castillo (2015) investigated the professional identities of five NNESTs as classroom teachers in the U.S. The framework for this study included three areas of professional identity formation that are

linguistic competence, cross-cultural competence and pedagogical competence (Varghese et al., 2005). The researchers empowered the NNESTs by enabling them to reflect on their professional identities. The participants were from different countries such as Bosnia, China, Korea, and Russia. They all came to the U.S. as adults and had accents. The interviews showed that the participants' perceived linguistic strengths were being bilingual and/or multilingual, their ability to use L1 for explanations, being able to understand various accents, and having cognitive intellectuality. However, academic writing, colloquial language, fluency in speaking, their accents, and intonation were the linguistic challenges for them. For cross-cultural competence, their perceived strengths were being open-minded to other cultures, establishing a better rapport with learners, and being a role model for them. The main challenges were being self-conscious about mistakes, teaching native speaking students, and having limited resources and exposure to English language and culture. For pedagogical competence, NNESTs and NESTs do not differ much in terms of instructional strategies, according to the participants. However, preparing contextual resources relevant to the local culture might be a challenge for NNESTs.

Furthermore, Ghanem (2018), in her study, delved into the identity construction of eight German language assistants at a southwestern university in the United States. The main investigation was on how they developed their identities, how the developed identities impacted their actual teaching, and how they identified themselves as teachers of German. Descriptive and qualitative designs were employed. And the data were collected through three questionnaires, field notes of classroom observations, three self-reflective journal entries, focus-group interviews, and semi guided interviews with each participant. After the data analysis, several themes emerged including self-image, role of students, function of instructional context, and motivation for teaching. These themes were categorized in three emergent themes, instructional content, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal factors. Regarding the instructional content, the main findings were that being a teacher is more than just explaining what is written in textbooks. Language instructors should be aware of the news, and the culture in its current form to talk about them. The culture is vivid and staying informed is necessary to convey it as its true form. Emergent terms, in terms of their self-images, were working relationship with the learners, reaching, and interaction. Their learners' progress in the subject matter was central to their work. Mostly, they described their duty as being a facilitator and mediator of information. The last theme, intrapersonal factors, included motivation for teaching and their self-perceived roles as teachers. Despite the variety, mainly motivation theme was connected to excitement shown by the students and participation in the classroom. The latter was associated with the responsibilities, staying current with the culture, and the level of formality in the classroom. The study suggested that the identities of foreign language graduate teaching assistants should not be ignored in their education, including confidence and authority. Along with the identities, other concerns have focused on departmental expectations, continuous teacher training in their departments, and collaboration with fellow teachers.

Furthermore, Mutlu and Ortaçtepe (2016) investigated the identity (re)construction of five foreign language assistants who attended FLTA program. They focused on the shift from being a non-native English language instructor to being a native Turkish instructor in accordance with their image of themselves and their beliefs about teaching/learning a language. In the data collection process, the participants were asked to write journals on a regular basis and semi-structured interviews were employed for further investigation. The findings of the study shed light on how the shift in the role of being a teacher affected teacher identity and native versus non-native teacher dichotomy. First, while teaching Turkish as a native speaker had a positive influence on the participants' self-image, their self-efficacy was

found to be higher when teaching English as a non-native speaker. The reason behind this finding was teachers' "idealization of native speaker norms" (Mutlu & Ortaçtepe, 2016, p. 566), which means that being a native speaker teacher is considered an asset in teaching a language. Second, it was revealed that teacher identity is in flux, and there is a continuous interaction between the participants' native Turkish teacher identity and non-native English teacher identity. Last, their beliefs about teaching/learning a language played an important role in their identity (re)construction. Although they believed that being a native speaker or having a native-like proficiency was a desired feature, they emphasized the necessity of being trained to teach the language more efficiently because they found the experience of teaching their native language challenging due to lack of training; that is, they did not know how to teach Turkish although they are proficient users of the language. The results of the study revealed the necessity of teacher training in language teaching programs to eliminate some of the challenges encountered by both native and non-native teachers.

In another context, Trent (2014) investigated how a group of teaching assistants in Hong Kong schools build their identities, what limits and allows them in these processes, and how the variety of beholders would support this work of identity. The framework adopted in the study (Varghese et al., 2005) concentrated on the role of practice, language and discourse while investigating identity. The participants were nine English Language Teaching Assistants (ELTAs) from different schools in Hong Kong; 18 students of these ELTAs, and nine English language teachers working with these ELTAs. The data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with ELTAs and other participants in the study. The findings indicated that the participants mostly considered ELTA program as a transition process towards being a 'full teacher' (Trent, 2014), yet some of the participants critically questioned their future decisions in becoming a teacher. The author emphasized that the authorities are supposed to reconsider the identity positions of these teachers to continue to appeal them within Hong Kong schools.

Furthermore, Saraç (2010) focused on Turkish FLTAs' experiences in teaching their native language in the United States, especially dwelling upon their knowledge of how to teach Turkish grammar. For this purpose, Saraç (2010) collected data by employing semi-structured interviews with five alumni language assistants. The results revealed that there is a consensus among participants about the 'ideal way' to teach grammar. All the participants stated that authentic and meaningful language input need to be given to the learners while presenting the target structures, and the input should be as communicative as possible for teaching the language efficiently. Besides, four themes emerged as features of how to teach grammar more effectively, namely being "communicative, interactive, task-based, and learner-centered" (p. 75). However, the participants claimed that lack of enough reference materials for teaching Turkish as a foreign language was one of the most challenging part of their experience as a language assistant.

## 2. Methodology

A phenomenological research design is employed to depict the original lived experiences of participants while conducting this current study. The main perspective feeding phenomenological research is that our experiences hold our true knowledge of the environment surrounding us because delineating and interpreting these experiences is the main duty of a researcher (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). To be able to touch upon the shared essence of several individuals commenting on one shared phenomenon, Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data was used. As suggested by Moustakas (1994), to avoid bias and prejudice, the 'Epoche', freedom from suppositions, was adopted. Phenomenological reduction provided the

researchers with the perspective to see the phenomenon through the eyes of the participants, along with bracketing, which indicates mere focus on the research, and horizontalizing and deeming initially each statement as equal. And as imaginative variation suggests, possible meanings were sought. While analyzing the data, each statement weighed for their significance, and non-overlapping statements were listed. Individual statements were synthesized and combined as the themes emerged. As stated by Creswell (2007), breaking down the experiences of several participants and combining them in a single phenomenon by their universal themes is what phenomenological research design aims at.

## 2.1. Setting and Sampling

The participants in the current study were four non-native EFL teachers from different countries who participated in FLTA program funded by Fulbright Commission in 2016-2017 academic year (see Table 1). The participants worked as language assistants at various universities in the United States, teaching their native languages to the students for almost a year. Then, they returned to their home countries. Convenience and purposive sampling were used while choosing the participants. All four participants attended the program in the same year and returned to their home countries in 2017. The rationale for choosing participants who attended the program in the same year is to minimize potential recall bias as different timeframes after the program might cause issues with recalling the events, and history effect such as political factors as there was election rally in that specific period. Furthermore, the participants were chosen from different countries in order to see similarities and differences in their perspectives.

Table 1. *Participant Descriptions*

| | Age, Gender | Ethnicity & Country | L1 | Degree | Role | Teaching Style | Data Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | 28, M | Turkish & Turkey | Turkish | BA in ELT | Primary teacher | Flipped classroom, online and face-to-face teaching & primary teacher | Unstructured Observation Semi-structured Interview (20 + 30 min. face-to-face) |
| Participant 2 | 28, F | Russian & Russia | Russian | BA in Linguistics | Assisting teacher | Face-to-face teaching | Semi-structured Interview (30 + 25 min. Skype) |
| Participant 3 | 30, F | Filipino & Philippines | Tagalog | BA in English MA in ELT | Assisting teacher | Face-to-face teaching | Semi-structured Interview (45 + 20 min. Skype) |
| Participant 4 | 40, F | Vietnamese & Vietnam | Vietnamese | BA in ELT MA in Applied Linguistics | Primary teacher | Flipped classroom, online and face-to-face teaching & primary teacher | Semi-structured Interview (40 + 20 min. Skype) |

Participant 1 and Participant 4 worked as the main language teachers at the host institutions because there were no other teachers teaching their L1s. However, Participant 2 and Participant 3 assisted the main language teachers as language assistant to teach their L1s (see Table 1). As a primary teacher, Participant 1 taught Turkish to five first-year students two hours a week online and one $3_{rd}$-year student one hour a week face-to-face. He held four hours of office-hours weekly for his students so that his students could come to his office to ask questions and get any help with Turkish. He mostly used flipped classroom style and also developed online materials. On the other hand, Participant 2 taught Russian as a language assistant because there was already one Russian teacher in her host institution. She had one $1_{st}$-year student and one $2_{nd}$-year student in her classes. Both students learned Russian separately for one hour a week. Besides these, she held weekly conversation club hours and study sessions besides four hours of office-hours every week. She gave importance to the connection between culture and language, and therefore, organized cultural events that focused on Russian holidays.

Furthermore, Participant 3 taught Tagalog to two students three hours a week as a language assistant. She held conversation hours for two hours a week. She did not have any online classes but she developed online materials based on the request from the host institution. In addition, she held four hours of office hours every week to help her students. Lastly, as a primary teacher, Participant 4 taught Vietnamese to 21 $1_{st}$-year students and 2 $2_{nd}$-year students in a flipped classroom style. She developed online materials and held one hour of virtual classes a week for both of her classes. Besides these, she held four hours of office hours a week to help her students outside the class.

## 2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Before the actual data collection process, doing field observations is usually useful to become familiarized with the research setting and participants (Creswell, 2007). However, in this specific context, conducting field observations for each participant was not feasible because the participants reside in distant countries and they already returned to their home countries. For this reason, the researchers first had a short informal chat with one participant, which enabled them to further refine their interview questions. After getting the Institutional Review Board (IRB) permissions and informed consent of the participants, the semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, and all interviews were video-recorded (see Appendix A). In total, two interviews were conducted with each participant. In other words, since the data did not reach the saturation level, the second interviews were conducted with each participant after the first ones. The second interviews were 3 weeks apart from the first ones. Each interview took approximately 30-40 minutes, and each was conducted by two researchers from the research team (see Table 1). After each session, the researchers transcribed and crosschecked the data. The participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity in reporting findings.

In order to ensure trustworthiness during the data collection and analysis stages, several methods were utilized. First, after each interview, the emerging themes and findings were compared with the previous ones so that the data were constantly compared, and themes were reorganized when necessary. In order to make sure that the data were accurate, the transcriptions were checked by the participants and the researchers. With the help of this overview process, the imprecise or inaccurate pieces of data were corrected. Furthermore, to increase reliability and objectivity even further, the analyzed data and findings were crosschecked by another researcher; consequently, the researcher bias threat was eliminated as much as possible. Making use of constant comparison, member checking and external audit, the trustworthiness of the study was guaranteed.

**3. Findings**

At the end of the analysis, the findings were categorized under four emerging themes, which will be explained in detail below. These themes are (a) pedagogical shift, (b) cross-cultural awareness, (c) challenges, and (d) goals and expectations. The themes were elaborated with various sub-categories as demonstrated in the following diagram:
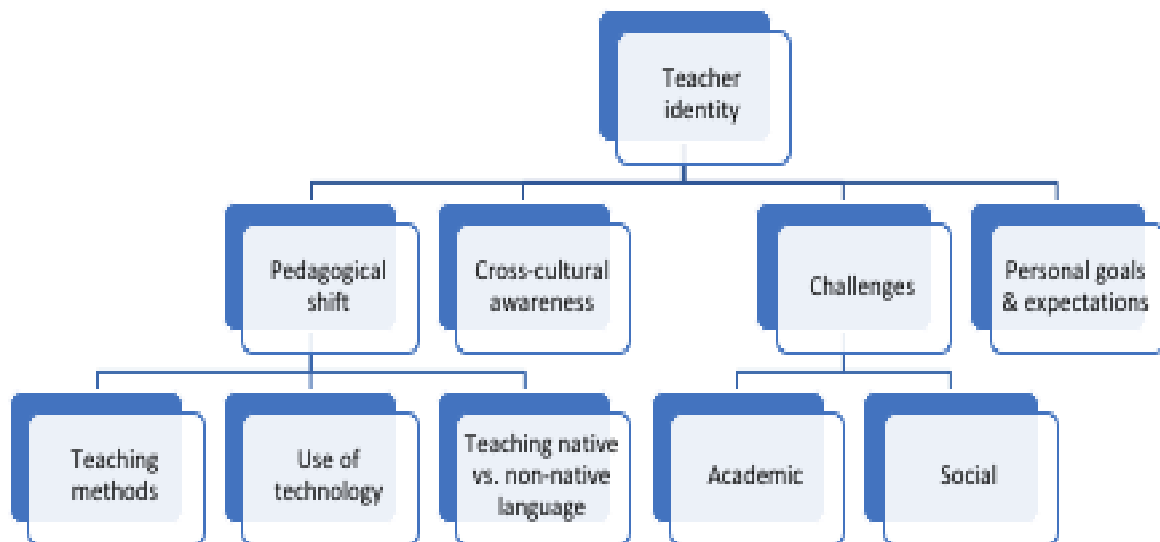


*Figure 2:* Components of FLTA Program Teacher Identity

**3.1. Pedagogical Shift**

3.1.1. Teaching native language vs. non-native language

The similarities considering the shift in the language taught are usually related to emotions in the classroom regarding both contexts. Only one participant did not mention her affective state, yet the rest of the participants stated that their attitudes in the classroom were one of the elements they brought with them. One of the participants stated that he was cheerful in both contexts, and another two mentioned their supportive nature and good rapport that they could provide while teaching both languages. Participant 2 suggested that her rapport resulted in learners' feeling more confident while asking questions. In addition, Participant 4 was always a dedicated and supportive teacher along with her adaptive nature towards learners' needs. Nevertheless, she added that she felt the urge to become more serious while in American context. As seen in the examples, the teachers' affective states have been reported as the main trait they keep in both teaching contexts with little exception.

The linguistic competence as a result of being native speakers of the language they were supposed to teach was a bit more intriguing. Although they are native speakers in the FLTA context, most participants stated that they had to study the linguistic forms beforehand so that they would be more competent while answering learners' potential questions. Participant 4, on the other hand, indicated that she did not have any problems while teaching her native language since she was an expert in that language. She could also focus on the advantageous

sides of being a non-native English teacher. She mentioned that her non-native pronunciation actually helped her since she could understand the potential problems her students may encounter. Moreover, she suggested that learning grammar from a native English speaker could be difficult for the students, and she could present grammar rules in Vietnamese if the learners keep having difficulties. However, she stated that she had problems while teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) courses for Vietnamese medicine students while the other participants had little or no problems in teaching English. It can be inferred that the effect of being a native speaker might not always yield positive consequences in different contexts as seen in the comments of the participants.

Confidence is another component that teaching one's native language brings along. Participant 4 reported, "I have resources and necessary knowledge of Vietnamese," indicating that she had no problems in Vietnamese language. Also, she added that she represented the current state of the language and she could teach idioms and colloquial language more effectively. Participant 2 demonstrated her confidence by saying:

> *But, of course, when I am producing any texts in English, there is a certain level of insecurity as I am not a native speaker and even if it sounds right to me it might be wrong. And in Russian well still can be wrong but most probably if I think it's right, it is right.*

Participant 1 indicated some issues regarding the order of structure while teaching, yet he implied the expertise which originated by being a native speaker of the language that is being taught. Participant 3 slightly differs in the competence since her context synthesizes both languages. She mentioned that English was not considered as a foreign language and used as medium of instruction in schools, along with constant code-switches between English and Filipino. Unlike the previous statements, however, Participant 2 claimed to be more confident in teaching English since she learnt the rules, but acquired her native language. This particular finding is also parallel with Mutlu and Ortaçtepe's (2016) findings on teacher identity.

### 3.1.2. Teaching methods

The FLTA experience left both similar and different traces in the participants in pedagogical sense. Although they mostly stated that teaching their native and nonnative language do not differ in pedagogy, and that they could apply the training they had in English to the new context, all participants agreed that FLTA influenced their teaching style and helped them refine their methods. Before starting the program, the FLTAs got an orientation training, which helped them adapt to the new students in the US context. What is more, for Participant 4, the program enabled her to conduct more communicative and interactive classes in her home country, where grammar translation method is more common. In a similar vein, Participant 1 also claimed that teaching in a different context helped him be more inclusive with his students. For Participant 1 and 3, teaching their native language to beginner level students also raised their awareness on the importance of diversifying their teaching methods and adapting their technique to the level of students.

### 3.1.3. Use of technology

Another emerging theme was related to the familiarity with technological tools in teaching practice. Participant 4 improved her technology skills by getting familiar with flipped classroom and other online tools for teaching and learning. She had to learn everything about it from scratch because they did not have that technology in Vietnam. She spent some weeks to figure out the details of the online system and how to support students in case of a technical problem. Even though technological facilities were limited in her home institution,

she now engages her students in online platforms more, such as Edmodo, so that her students could come to class prepared in advance. Participant 1 also had some new experience in online teaching through Learning Management Systems (LMS) because most courses were conducted online during his teaching practice in the United States, and he still uses them.

### 3.2. Cross-cultural vs. Intracultural Awareness

None of the participants had lived abroad for nearly a year before the FLTA program; therefore, they had a chance to experience the target culture and to learn more about the lifestyle there while introducing their own through extracurricular activities. Participant 2 encountered different understandings of privacy and student-teacher relationship while living in a tight community in the US. In her home country, privacy was more important and teachers' relationship with students was more formal and distant. However, it was the opposite for the place she lived in during FLTA. On the other hand, Participant 4 claimed that living in the United States helped her to act as a bridge between the Vietnamese students and American culture, and to inspire them for studying abroad. She also ended up changing some of her views on American people. To illustrate, she stated that Vietnamese people generally think that the American look down on the Vietnamese because of the history between the two countries. However, during her stay in the US, she realized that it is not true. Another surprising cultural aspect for her was the experience with heritage learners:

> *Actually, at first, I thought that the Vietnamese are the same everywhere. But then I found out that, for the Vietnamese people living in America, they are just like American. They are not Vietnamese anymore because they were born in America and grew up there... then they have the way of thinking and lifestyle just like an American.*

The only similarity between Participant 4 and her Vietnamese heritage learners in the United States seemed to be the language they speak, and almost nothing else.

However, one common point with the heritage learners in the United States and the Vietnamese was the political aspect of the north and south relationships in Vietnam. Her heritage learners are from the south while Participant 4 is from the north, and the two regions have distinct accents. According to Participant 4, "Southern people often blame northern people for destroying their lives during the war. They didn't want a teacher from the north." She thinks political reasons were the underlying reason for the learners' resistance to her teaching. The issues in the home country could be brought up in a completely different context. In that sense, Participant 4's specific experience with these learners might have raised her intracultural awareness, as well.

### 3.3. Challenges

3.3.1. Social challenges

The first social challenge experienced by Participant 1 is the adaptation problem. He thinks that it is mostly because of the ideas of a wide variety of people living there. Before moving to the United States, he had felt that he would blend in easily. However, afterward, he felt a lack of confidence and thought that he was not very developed, both socially and professionally. The second challenge was understanding different behaviors in daily life. He clarified the situation by giving a specific example: "I had problems meeting people after about two or three months. They do not insist as Turkish people do, so it was challenging to understand that".

According to participant 2, there were some cultural differences between Russia and the United States, but nothing was a big problem for her. It could be inferred from her statements that privacy is the most apparent social challenge she faced:

> *I think we have a higher level of privacy here in Russia. I don't know, I've never been to any professors' house, or none of my students' have visited my apartment. And students live in a dorm and also Moscow is such a huge city so like you have a certain level of privacy and anonymity here. School life and private life are separated.*

Participant 3 and 4 found cultural differences challenging, as well. Participant 3 reported that straightforwardness of Americans was challenging. She also added that she had difficulties in meeting her boss's expectations and figuring out how to approach her. As for participant 4, she uttered a similar social challenge to the one Participant 1 faced, which is understanding different behaviors in society. She thinks that she had this problem because of her age. She was forty when she moved to the United States. She stated that she had some preconceived ideas and thoughts in her mind, and American people did not behave in the way she thought. For instance, once, she got into trouble with one of her students and her supervisor because of a joke she made because making jokes about people is very common in Vietnam, but American students might get offended.

3.3.2. Academic challenges

The typical academic challenge that participant 1 and 2 faced was the linguistic characteristics of the native language. Participant 1 specified his thoughts on it as:

> *I had not thought Turkish before, I thought it would be much difficult, but in the end, even though I had to work more before the classes to understand how it worked because I did not know grammatical rules, and semantics, the suffixes, and morphology is also another problem. I had problems with those, but I had to work more before, and I could deal. I applied the training I had in English.*

Although participant 2 has an education in teaching Russian as a foreign language, she stated that she still had difficulties in explaining the questions students asked her. Participant 3 claimed that her native language Tagalog has many accents, and teaching them was challenging. On the other hand, Participant 4 reported that she had no problem with Vietnamese linguistic features.

Even though technology use was mentioned earlier as a theme from the perspective of pedagogy, it was also one of the challenges that FLTAs encountered. Developing online materials was an academic challenge for Participant 3. She always taught face-to-face before moving to the United States. She was happy that she was supposed to teach face-to-face in the United States; however, she was told to develop online materials for using them later on. This caused stress on Participant 3 and she felt that she lacked the skills to create online materials that she was not going to use. Those materials were supposed to be uploaded on the learning management system that her host university was developing. This was because there were no materials for Tagalog available online, and they needed to be made from scratch. Creating these materials was an academic challenge for her.

Differences in American and Vietnamese education system were challenging for Participant 4. These differences were technology use and flipped classrooms. She claimed that she had to become familiar with the latest technology that she does not have in her country. Beside this, when she moved to the United States, she had no idea about flipped classrooms. Thus, preparing classes through the flipped classroom was a prominent academic challenge for her.

### 3.4. Personal Goals and Expectations

3.4.1. Self-improvement

Professional development is defined by Day (1999) as "all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school, which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom" (p. 4). Participant 1 stated that attending professional development activities provided in the host university was appealing. Although education is a global phenomenon, an education system differs from country to country. Thus, to see another education system was a noteworthy reason for participant 2. She mentioned that she wanted "to see other professors' teaching and to learn something from them".

Similar to what Participant 1 stated, growing professionally was also appealing to Participant 3:

> *That time I did not have that desire to pursue my Ph.D. yet. I told myself I want to grow more professionally, but I do not want to pursue a Ph.D. yet, so I might apply to a short-term program.*

In terms of self-improvement, Participant 4, who is from Vietnam, had a different reason from other participants to attend this program. She reported that she studied English with mostly Vietnamese teachers who focused on grammar, rather than speaking, listening, and other communication skills. She also mentioned that she still does not have much chance to communicate with foreigners in Vietnam. Thus, one of the reasons that made her apply to this program was to improve her pronunciation practicing English with native speakers.

3.4.2. Personal goals

Findings showed that participants had similar personal goals to attend the program. Participant 1 claimed that one of his reasons to participate in the program was to live somewhere else. Similarly, Participant 2, 3, and 4 wanted to see another culture. However, Participant 4 was the only participant who clarified why she wanted to know the target culture. She wanted to be a bridge between the Vietnamese students and American culture and to inspire them to study abroad. Apart from these personal goals, Participant 4 also had an exciting expectation from living in the United States, and it is possible to say that her expectation is based on her country's history with the United States. She saw the program as a chance to learn more about American people and culture:

> *In history, America was used to be our enemy. Many people still think that the Americans would look down on Vietnamese people. Vietnamese people do not understand American people or vice versa. I think that would be a perfect chance for me to learn everything about those.*

## 4. Discussion

In this phenomenological study, we investigated the lived experiences if four language assistants (i.e., FLTAs) and how the experience of teaching their native language in the United States affected their identity positioning from different aspects. The findings of this study will be discussed in line with the components of the theoretical framework and the findings of the previous studies in the field, broadening the context simultaneously.

The pedagogical and contextual shift induced by the FLTA experience enabled the participants to shape and refine their teaching methods and techno-pedagogical knowledge as Burns and Richards (2009) claimed. FLTAs reflected on their practices and revised their own personal pedagogy in teaching languages. What is more, they had the chance to experience

being both a native and a nonnative teacher in two different contexts, which helped them realize the similarities and differences, or advantages and disadvantages between two teacher identities. For them, the pedagogy for teaching their native language or English did not make much difference overall. Still, they felt the need to revise their linguistic knowledge on their native languages. This finding aligns with Martel's (2015) finding in that teachers learned teaching a foreign language by negotiating their teacher identities.

In addition, as native teachers, they were confident in teaching the colloquial or idiomatic expressions and they trusted their expertise in their mother tongue, while one participant explicitly claimed that she was more confident in teaching English rather than her native language. Both common and differing experiences of the participants supported their teacher learning and teacher cognition, which are important factors in (re)constructing teacher identity (Yazan, 2018). As Miller (2009) also mentioned, teacher identity depends on the thoughts, knowledge, beliefs, and activities of teachers. Therefore, they are "part of teachers' identity work which is continuously performed and transformed through interaction in classrooms" (Miller, 2009, p. 175).

In a similar vein, cultural encounters were also important in shaping and changing the assumptions and perspectives, or cognitions of the participants. Our findings suggest that these changes in cognition might stem from both one's own culture and another culture, as well. Being in direct contact with native English speakers made the participants reflect on their own teaching and conversational skills. As mentioned by Varghese et al. (2005), teacher identity depends on the interlocutors and the context in which teachers teach languages and interact with their learners and others around them. Norton (2010) emphasized, "we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space" (p. 350). In other words, language assistants in FLTA context in the present study continuously reflected on their language teacher identities that emerged as a result of living in two different cultures. In addition to this, for example, one participant changed her assumptions or misconceptions related to heritage learners. What is more, traces of the social and political climate in her home country were also reflected into her teaching environment in another country. Therefore, constructing language teacher identities depends on both contextual and personal factors, including preconceptions about certain values.

The findings also suggest that teacher biographies also have a role in shaping teacher cognition and learning, and teacher identity, in turn. Coming from different backgrounds or bringing different past experiences sometimes led the participants to differ in their views on teaching their native language. Participant 4 had previous experience in teaching Vietnamese, so she clearly expressed her confidence in teaching Vietnamese, while it took some time for Participant 1 and Participant 2 to feel the same way about teaching their own native languages.

Teacher emotions, on the other hand, did not show much difference in the native and nonnative contexts for the participants. Their attitude towards the classroom and their practice were mostly the same. The participants stated that they showed the same enthusiasm and positivity towards their students in the United States, trying to be supportive, fun and dedicated. Having a good rapport with their students helped them be more motivated. This finding aligns with Benesch's (2017) and Yazan and Peercy's (2016) findings in that teachers had to manage their varying emotional feelings while they were teaching in class to be able to have good rapport with their students. However, one participant claimed she felt the need to act more serious with American students because of the nature of their interactions with each

other in that particular context. This specific case could also be considered as a way of positioning the teacher's identity based on learner characteristics.

## 5. Limitations and Implications

One limitation of the study is the physical distance between the participants and the researchers. Except Participant 1, the other participants lived in different countries, which hindered face-to-face communication. The researchers both observed and interviewed Participant 1, but they only had online interviews with the other participants. In order to compensate this limitation, the strategy of member checking was employed. By asking the participants to check the researchers' interpretations, this limitation was tried to be eliminated. Besides, due to being in different time zones, the number of interviews was limited to two.

Another limitation is that the researchers had access to the information about the language assistants who attended the program only in 2016-2017 academic year, which led to recall bias because all the participants chosen returned to their home countries about 1.5 years ago at the time the data were collected. The participants had difficulty remembering some details, especially about the challenges they experienced. To overcome that limitation, the participants were provided with some further questions and those questions helped them elaborate their answers.

The findings of the study might shed light on future studies in the field. The study can easily be replicated with more participants in multicultural contexts as it is in this study or monocultural contexts. The study may also be considered as guidance for the FLTA candidates, as it provides insights on the socialization and adaptation processes of non-native language assistants in addition to the possible challenges they may encounter. Furthermore, the current study raises awareness in that a teacher who is trained in teaching an L2 but is supposed to teach their L1 may have difficulty or experience identity shifts in teaching their L1. Such possibilities should be considered before the FLTAs start their journey. For instance, there are very few programs in Turkey that focuses on teaching Turkish as a foreign language. Considering the lived experiences of FLTAs in this study, trainers aiming to train teachers to teach their L1s could ponder upon the themes examined in the current study to design their curriculum and train teachers who are supposed to teach their L1s.

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**Appendix A**

Interview Questions

1.  Can you provide some information about your teaching experience in Turkey (years of experience, in which institutions did you work, student profile….)?
2.  Can you provide some information about your current working conditions (the student profile, your class hours…)?
3.  For what reasons did you choose to attend the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistantship (FLTA) program in the US?
4.  To what extent did the FLTA program meet your expectations?
5.  What sorts of socio-cultural challenges did you face during your stay in the US? How did you cope with them? To what extent did you manage to cope with them?
6.  Do you feel that your language teaching practice has changed after your FLTA experience? If yes, please explain how.
7.  What sorts of social and academic challenges did you face while teaching your native language? How did you cope with them? To what extent did you manage to cope with them?
8.  How is your current teaching practice in English similar to or different from your teaching practice in your native language?
9.  Do you think "you" as a non-native teacher and "you" as a native teacher are similar to or different from each other?
10. How did your training as an EFL teacher affect your practice in teaching your native language?
11. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a non-native English teacher?
12. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a native (Turkish/ Russian/ …) teacher?
13. How has your experience in FLTA contributed to your teaching practices as an English teacher/instructor?
14. How do you feel about your teaching ability (as a native /non-native teacher)? How does it affect your stance (or your relationship with your students) in the classroom ?