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Exploring English Language Teacher Identity Construction in Disadvantaged Chilean Schools through Textbook Usage¹

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Abstract

Although the notion of English language teacher identity has drawn increasing interest in the literature, little is known about how teachers of English construct identities in disadvantaged settings. This study explored how three teachers of English in disadvantaged Chilean public schools construct identities and exercise agency while using prescribed textbooks. The investigation used a narrative inquiry methodology and was positioned within a sociocultural paradigm. Based on semi-structured online interviews, thematic narrative analysis was used to analyze the data collected. The findings suggest that teachers construct various identities as textbook users depending on their previous experience, level of professional development, and interactions with textbooks. According to the research, teachers exercise agency to construct new identities as textbook users by drawing on two temporal aspects that include prior experiences as English language learners and a mental image of the kind of teacher they want to become. Professional development and textbook interaction may also influence the construction of identities regarding textbook use. The article concludes with suggestions for language teachers and English language teacher education.

Keywords: agency, English language teacher identity, marginalization, professional development, textbooks

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Explorando la construcción de la identidad del profesor de inglés en escuelas chilenas desfavorecidas a través del uso de libros de texto

Resumen

Aunque la noción de identidad de los profesores de inglés ha suscitado un creciente interés en la literatura, se sabe poco sobre cómo los profesores de inglés construyen identidades en entornos desfavorecidos. Este estudio exploró cómo tres profesores de inglés de escuelas públicas chilenas desfavorecidas construyen identidades y ejercen su agencia mientras utilizan libros de texto prescritos. La investigación utilizó una metodología de indagación narrativa y se situó dentro de un paradigma sociocultural. A partir de entrevistas semiestructuradas en línea, se utilizó el análisis narrativo temático para analizar los datos recogidos. Los resultados sugieren que los profesores construyen diversas identidades como usuarios de libros de texto en función de su experiencia previa, su nivel de desarrollo profesional y sus interacciones con los libros de texto. Según la investigación, los profesores actúan para construir nuevas identidades como usuarios de libros de texto basándose en dos aspectos temporales que incluyen experiencias previas como estudiantes de inglés y una imagen mental del tipo de profesor en el que quieren convertirse. La construcción de identidades en relación con el uso de libros de texto también puede verse influida por el desarrollo profesional y la interacción con los libros de texto. El artículo concluye con algunas sugerencias para los profesores de idiomas y para la formación de profesores de inglés.

Palabras clave: agencia, desarrollo profesional, identidad del profesor de inglés, libros de texto, marginación

Introduction

This study explores how Chilean English teachers construct identities as users of prescribed textbooks in disadvantaged public schools. More specifically, it identifies the challenges encountered by English teachers in making sense of themselves while interacting with prescribed textbooks.

In Chile, textbooks are among the primary resources frequently used by teachers to deliver their lessons. Every year, students in disadvantaged public schools receive copies of textbooks prescribed by the State. Although these instructional materials serve as the cornerstone of every English classroom ([Sheldon, 1988](#)), they have both advantages and disadvantages. Regarding the advantages, they provide essential input into the classroom through exercises, readings, and explanations ([Hutchinson & Torres, 1994](#)). They also offer a structure that facilitates the incorporation of linguistic and cultural components into the official curriculum ([Alptekin, 1993](#); [Prodromou, 2008](#)).

While textbooks can be helpful, it is important to note that they may not cater to the learners' needs. They frequently provide a distorted view of the target language for students to work with and fall short of meeting many of their communication needs ([Gilmore, 2007](#)). Moreover, prominent scholars argue that textbooks promote ideologies and sociocultural values of the Global North that have little or nothing to do with the context of disadvantaged schools ([Gray, 2010](#); [Keles & Yazan, 2020](#)). Thus, if teachers let books determine what to teach, they risk becoming mere servants who follow instructions mindlessly. As [Richards \(1998\)](#) argues, over-reliance on textbooks deteriorates teachers' critical thinking, a central aspect involved in the construction of professional identities. Hence, it is highly recommended that English teachers concede that decisions regarding teaching materials should be considered within the broader discourse of identity, as they will ultimately affect their own identity construction and that of their students ([Duff & Uchida, 1997](#); [Kullman, 2013](#)).

In the same vein, [Edge and Garton \(2009\)](#) posit that teachers' primary responsibility extends beyond the transmission of knowledge from the instructional materials; instead, their core role involves educating and guiding learners, with these materials serving as a tool to facilitate achieving this goal. This responsibility presents a major challenge for teachers in terms of constructing their own identities, as they must first change themselves before they can effect change within their schools ([Banks, 1999](#), p. xi).

In Chile, very little attention has been given to how English language teachers construct identities through textbooks in disadvantaged schools. These contexts are unique due to the "lack of qualified teachers, lack of resources, an inappropriate ELT curriculum, overcrowded classrooms, stratification and the inequalities of the educational system" ([Barahona, 2015](#), p. 16). Moreover, prescribed textbooks are usually the only teaching materials available for English instruction in these schools. Due to several factors that include lack of resources, experience, and time ([Ball y Feiman-Nemser, 1988](#); [Gray, 2000](#); [Humphries & Burns, 2015](#); [Seferaj, 2014](#)), teachers might feel pressure to adopt an imposed identity that involves using prescribed textbooks faithfully, especially when they must be accountable for their decisions ([Snyder et al., 1992](#)).

Although educational policies promote the use of prescribed textbooks, it is not guaranteed that all teachers will follow them as expected. As [Kilpatrick \(2003\)](#) contends, teachers often make individual decisions regarding the use of textbooks, even within the same school and with the same materials. However, when their decisions face substantial challenges, they are likely to collectively resist, as indicated by previous research ([Goldenberg, 1998](#); [Lloyd & Wilson, 1998](#)).

The literature indicates that teachers' decision-making processes are intertwined with their identities ([Farrell, 2011](#); [Varghese et al., 2005](#)). An essential element in this regard is the concept of teachers' agency (e.g., [Buchanan, 2015](#); [Sloan, 2006](#)), which encompasses their actions and responses to educational challenges ([Priestley et al., 2013](#)). It is also characterized as temporal and context-dependent, involving a range of reactions such as negotiation and resistance ([Priestley et al., 2015](#)).

Although the relationship between agency and identity construction is closely related, most studies focus just on teacher identity ([Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009](#); [Duff & Uchida, 1997](#); [Farrell, 2011](#); [Trent, 2012](#)) or teacher agency

([Campbell, 2007](#); [Priestley et al., 2012](#)). The present study seeks to bridge this gap by examining both facets to offer a more profound insight into the intricate dynamics and challenges faced by English teachers in disadvantaged contexts. In such settings, educational policies often impose various constraints on their identity construction, including the use of prescribed textbooks. Recognizing how teachers of English construct identities in disadvantaged contexts is of paramount importance for enhancing educational standards ([Bargers, 2022](#); [Day et al., 2006](#)). Consequently, the findings of this study can serve as valuable insights for informing professional development initiatives and English teaching programs that aim to foster equitable, empowering, and effective language instruction.

The questions that guide this study are:

1. What are the experiences of English teachers who construct identities by using prescribed textbooks in disadvantaged schools?
2. How do teachers exercise agency to construct their identities as textbook users?

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated at the crossroads of identity, agency, textbook use, and adopts a sociocultural framework. From this perspective, identity is seen as unstable, multifaceted, and constructed through self-reflection and interactions with others ([Baxter, 2016](#); [Norton, 2006](#)). In this context, identity construction involves identification and meaning negotiation within a community of practice ([Wenger, 1998](#)). [Lasky \(2005\)](#) defines teacher identity as the perception teachers have of themselves as educators. Several factors contribute to constructing this identity, including self-reflection, emotions, previous teaching experiences, perceptions of others, and school contexts ([Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009](#); [Lasky, 2005](#)). Thus, teacher identity is not fixed but keeps changing as these factors interact. [Beijaard et al. \(2004\)](#) argue that teacher identity has social and personal dimensions and evolves over time as teachers gain more experience in school contexts. One critical aspect that has emerged in relation to identity is the concept of teacher agency.

Several authors agree that teacher identity does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it is constructed by teachers exercising agency ([Beijaard et al. 2000](#); [Tao & Gao, 2017](#)). In other words, agency serves as a mediating tool for teachers to put their ideas into action, achieve goals, or even reconstruct the conditions of the context ([Sfard & Prusak, 2005](#)). The interplay between identity and agency is well-documented in the field of education, with various authors contending that teachers construct identities in school contexts ([Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009](#); [Day et al., 2006](#)), where teachers have to deal with educational policies ([Priestley et al., 2015](#)). Despite this, not many studies in the field of TESOL have examined both concepts together.

Finding a working definition of teacher agency in English language teaching is difficult, as it has rarely been conceptualized explicitly despite becoming a trendy topic ([Huang & Benson, 2013](#)). One of the significant issues that has led to misunderstanding is the unclear boundaries that separate agency from autonomy ([Tao & Gao, 2021](#)). Some scholars, in their efforts to provide a clear definition of agency, equate it with autonomy ([Toohey, 2007](#); [Toohey & Norton, 2003](#)). Although closely related, each concept refers to different aspects ([Tao & Gao, 2021](#)). Agency refers to the “capacity to act” ([Ahearn, 2001](#), p. 112), whereas autonomy is defined as the “capacity to exercise control over their lives” ([Benson, 2016](#), p. 18). [Tao and Gao \(2021\)](#) clarify even further this distinction by claiming that “agency provides a more powerful and encompassing lens than autonomy in examining language teachers’ varying perceptions, decisions, and actions in the shifting educational landscape” (p. 4).

[Priestley et al. \(2013\)](#) developed an approach to examining teacher agency and identity in contexts where educational policies dictate what to teach and which materials to use, as is the case in this study. The authors propose that agency is not an innate human capacity but rather something achieved through engagement with specific contextual conditions. According to this conceptualization, teachers are influenced by structural pressures that try to impose identities on them. However, they can exercise agency to resist these pressures through creative and reflexive responses that arise from the interplay between three temporal dimensions: iterational, practical-evaluative,

and projective ([Priestley et al., 2015](#)). The iterational dimension deals with doing something, thinking about it, and then making changes based on the insights gained. The practical-evaluative dimension refers to assessing the effectiveness of specific actions and decisions at work. On the other hand, the projective dimension is about looking ahead and preparing. It involves forming a vision, setting goals, and tactically placing oneself within a wider scene. By considering the interplay of these three dimensions, this study aims at understanding how teachers of English exercise agency to construct identities by interacting with prescribed textbooks in disadvantaged public schools.

Methodology

The present study used narrative inquiry as outlined by [Clandinin and Connelly \(2000\)](#) to explore how three English teachers exercise agency to construct identities as users of prescribed textbooks in Chilean disadvantaged public schools. According to [Clandinin and Connelly \(2000\)](#), narrative inquiry represents the most direct approach to studying human experiences. Firstly, it allows researchers to explore how participants make sense of their past experiences and actions by sharing their personal narratives ([Riessman, 2008](#)). Secondly, it offers a means to uncover teachers' knowledge and how they apply it within the sociocultural contexts of teaching and learning ([Golombek & Johnson, 2004](#)). Thirdly, narrative inquiry is grounded in the idea that individuals attribute meaning to their experiences in relation to their specific contexts ([Clandinin & Connelly, 2000](#)). This notion implies that understanding these meanings requires considering the contextual factors in which they unfolded. Fundamentally, from a narrative perspective, individuals are best understood within the "temporal contexts, spatial contexts, and the context of other people" ([Clandinin & Connelly, 2000](#), p. 32).

In alignment with this approach, this study applied the three-dimensional narrative space metaphor encompassing interaction (social and personal dimensions), continuity (past, present, and future events), and situation (place) to explore the meanings teachers attribute to their experiences ([Clandinin & Connelly, 2000](#)). As suggested by [Clandinin and Connelly \(2000\)](#), comprehending teachers' narratives is pivotal to gaining insight into how they think, act, and engage with the world.

Participants

For this study, three novice teachers of English were selected, each with an average of four years of experience working in disadvantaged public schools. The selection process involved a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods, commonly used in narrative research ([Merriam & Tisdell, 2015](#)). Initially, I reached out to former colleagues who met specific criteria: they worked in disadvantaged public schools, used prescribed textbooks in their teaching, and were willing to participate in the study. Once the first participant was identified, I asked him to recommend other teachers who met the study's requirements.

After identifying and gaining acceptance from the three participants, I asked them to review and sign an informed consent form that outlined the study's purpose, data collection methods, funding sources, and dissemination. The informed consent explicitly stated that participants' identities and data provided would remain confidential, and that they had the option to withdraw from the study without providing an explanation. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants, who were referred to as Miguel, Claudio, and Jorge.

Miguel, aged 29, attended a semi-private school and then a private University to study English Teaching Pedagogy. He had an intermediate level of English proficiency and four years of teaching experience working with primary school students in disadvantaged public schools. His involvement in the Teacher Evaluation Process resulted in a basic rating. He was an active member of the district's teachers of English network.

Claudio, aged 28, graduated from a semi-private school and pursued English Teaching Pedagogy at a private University. He completed a Master's Degree in Education and had an upper-intermediate level of English proficiency. Claudio taught children and adolescents on a fixed-term contract in various settings, including public, semi-private, and rural schools, for five years. He received an exceptional rating in the Teacher Evaluation Process.

Jorge, aged 26, attended one of the best public schools and pursued English Teaching Pedagogy at a private university. He received a scholarship to study in the United States for a semester. After earning a Master's Degree in Neuroscience, Jorge delivered presentations both in Chile and abroad, which contributed to his fluent, native-like English proficiency. He had four years of teaching experience, mainly working with primary and secondary school students on fixed-term contracts in the same public school. Like the other participants, Jorge was actively engaged in his district's teacher network and received an exceptional rating in the Teacher Evaluation Process.

Data collection

As I was in the UK and the participants were in Chile, I conducted semi-structured online interviews to investigate how teachers use prescribed textbooks to construct identities in disadvantaged schools. This strategy enabled me to collect comprehensible narratives from individuals, allowing for an understanding of their identity construction processes as advocated by scholars such as [Gubrium and Holstein \(1997\)](#) and [Riessman \(2008\)](#).

Each participant engaged in a series of four 90-minute interviews conducted online within a month from the comfort of their homes to minimize disruptions. Prior to the interviews, participants granted explicit consent for audio recording. To ensure confidence and obtain rich data, two participants were allowed to conduct the interview in Spanish (L1), while the other decided to do it in English (L2), following the recommendations of [Lincoln and Guba \(1985\)](#).

To establish rapport, I invited the participants to have a pre-interview online chat. During this interaction, I thanked them for their interest and reaffirmed the study's objective. Subsequently, we engaged in casual conversation to break the ice.

The first interview delved into the participants' backgrounds and their experiences learning English at school, exploring their interactions with English teachers and the role of textbooks in shaping these experiences. During the second interview, the participants reflected on their teaching careers and the challenges they faced with prescribed textbooks. The third interview focused on their career aspirations and concerns as English teachers, while the fourth interview examined the Teacher Evaluation as a control mechanism.

Through the interviews, I alternated between full and partial engagement with participants. The nature of my questions and the participants' responses guided this variation. I used thematic questions to introduce new topics in line with the interview's flow, ensuring a balanced conversation. Continuous probing and follow-up questions encouraged the participants to reflect and demonstrate empathy. Techniques such as repetition, nodding, and strategic silences allowed the participants to express their thoughts openly ([Kvale, 2008](#)). At the conclusion of each interview, I invited the participants to share any additional insights or thoughts they wished to contribute. Occasionally, these contributions provided valuable data for the study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out through a thematic narrative approach, which involves examining the data as a cohesive whole rather than breaking it down and decontextualizing it, as commonly seen in other qualitative methods ([McAllum et al., 2019](#); [Riessman, 2008](#)). The process began with listening and transcribing the interviews, resulting in one transcript in English and two in Spanish. To facilitate the analysis, the Spanish transcripts were translated into English, and each participant received an electronic copy for verification to ensure the faithful representation of their intended meanings.

Following confirmation, I proceed to analyze the data by reading the transcripts multiple times and noting critical events that encompassed the participants' personal, social, and contextual experiences ([Clandinin & Connelly, 2000](#); [Webster & Mertova, 2007](#)). The data was then organized chronologically from the past to the future to grasp identity continuity ([Clandinin & Connelly, 2000](#)). This chronological understanding served as the basis for crafting narratives

that conveyed each participant's experiences, incorporating direct quotes from their thoughts, uncertainties, reflections, decisions, and agency, along with my own insights.

Subsequently, I shared the narrative reports with the participants for their evaluation and confirmation of message conveyance. Once confirmation was received, I conducted a thematic analysis ([Braun & Clark, 2006](#)) to uncover common themes within the narratives ([Riessman, 2008](#)). The analysis unfolded in several stages. Firstly, I employed deductive analysis by referring to the research questions. Carefully reading the stories several times carefully, I identified segments containing key ideas and color-code them. Secondly, I used open coding to generate new codes or modify existing codes on the basis of the meaning that emerged from the data. Thirdly, I grouped the codes together in a table according to the color under specific themes to have a visual representation ([Miles et al., 2014](#)). Fourthly, I reviewed and modified the initial themes identified in the previous stage. Revisiting the stories, I assessed to what extent the data supported each theme. As a result, I discarded the ones that did not make sense or were not supported. Fifthly, I refined the themes to "identify the essence of what each theme is about" ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#), p. 92). At this stage, I reviewed each theme in relation to the research questions to make sure they were consistent with the story they were supposed to tell and to see how they relate to each other. Then, I gave the themes definite names that clearly described what they referred to. I concluded the analysis when I noticed that the refinements were "...not adding anything substantial" ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#), p. 92).

Finally, having identified and compared the themes with the research questions, I could relive the participants' stories and retell them into a new story that may allow us "to begin to shift the institutional, social, and cultural narratives in which we are embedded" ([Clandinin, 2016](#), p. 34).

Findings

This section presents the study's findings, which aim to explore how three teachers of English construct identities as users of prescribed textbooks in disadvantaged schools in Chile. Through the analysis, three main themes emerged: teachers' previous experience, entering the teaching career, and the future.

This report uncovers the findings of this narrative study, taking us on a journey through the experiences of three teachers —Jorge, Miguel, and Claudio—, who call themselves "missionaries," "agents of change," and "challengers". Their narratives recount the challenges they faced in constructing new identities in disadvantaged settings characterized by traditional teaching practices and the reliance on prescribed textbooks.

Through their experiences, they offer a source of inspiration for English teachers to adopt a more flexible approach with textbooks to meet students' needs and advance the cause of social justice in education.

Setting the Scene

At the heart of Santiago de Chile, three novice English teachers navigate the complexities of their profession in disadvantaged public schools. Despite facing socioeconomic inequalities, Jorge, Miguel, and Claudio struggle to construct their identities as English teachers while interacting with prescribed textbooks. Although much work lies ahead, they believe the effort worthwhile. Each of these teachers comes from a different background in the Chilean school system, and their unparalleled histories shape distinct obstacles and ambitions as English teachers. Jorge defines himself as a challenger who strives "to change the way students see English". On the other hand, Miguel sees himself as a missionary, with his mission being "to tell the students that they can achieve many goals, but only through studies." Claudio sees himself as an agent of change who "can change the lives of the students. English is highly needed nowadays; it is critical to motivate students to learn it and see it as useful". Their experience confronting the scarcity of resources in the schools where they work implies that each one shares a personal struggle, while collectively, they represent diverse views gained from teaching experiences, as described in the following story.

Previous Experience

At school

Their story begins with their experiences as students in traditional educational settings. They all shared the perception that their teachers primarily used textbooks to teach grammar, vocabulary, or translation, resulting in boredom and disengagement. Jorge vividly recalls, “The teacher would just read from the textbook. It was so boring.” He acknowledges that feelings of frustration influenced his decision to make a change, “I want to become a teacher; I don’t like this. The bad teachers inspired me to become a good teacher”.

Miguel remembers that “[he] had English lessons in Spanish, never in English at school. The teacher asked us to translate texts in pairs.” On the other hand, Claudio underscores that teachers were often constrained by the textbook and “The formal classes were focused on grammar.”

At university

As they transitioned to university, they discovered that little had changed. Textbooks and lectures still dominated the classroom, leaving them longing for more practical and engaging teaching methods. However, their true journey as teachers began during their practicum, a daunting and eye-opening experience. Jorge remembers a moment of crisis during his practicum when his carefully planned lesson unraveled before his eyes. The students outpaced his textbook-based activities, and he realized the need for adaptability. “You have to adapt at the moment,” he learned, emphasizing the importance of having backup plans.

During Miguel’s practicum, he noticed the limitations of textbooks when inadvertently using an outdated edition that differed from the student’s book. This experience prompted him to create custom worksheets to bridge the gaps. Reflecting on this, he states, “I used a textbook with sixth graders during my practicum. I thought I knew that book, but it was another edition, so I had to start from scratch. I remember it didn’t agree with the formal curriculum, so I designed my worksheets.”

Claudio, faced with complex students and challenging classroom dynamics, learned the art of spontaneous improvisation crafting activities on the spot for primary school students. He recalls, “My major focused on secondary school students; I had never worked with those books. Primary school books contain a lot of pictures, colors and songs, while secondary contain many readings texts and comprehension exercises.”

Through these shared trials, the teachers discovered the essence of using textbooks: adaptability. Their practicum experiences had transformed them from textbook-dependent teachers into flexible users, ready to adjust their methods to meet students’ needs.

Entering the Teaching Career

Jorge, Claudio, and Miguel faced a formidable challenge as novice teachers. Their prior experiences as students and pre-service educators had been marked by uninspiring, textbook-dominated teaching methods. Determined to break free from this monotony and offer their students something different, they recognized the crucial role of professional development in reshaping their teaching identities.

Interacting with prescribed textbooks

In a world dominated by prescribed textbooks, Jorge, Claudio, and Miguel embarked on a challenging quest to understand and harness the influence of these materials on their teaching identities. In their school community, textbooks were often dismissed and seen as ineffective; as Jorge highlighted, “teachers’ narratives spread the rumor “that textbooks are bad.” Surprisingly, school administrators seemed apathetic about textbook usage, focusing more on adhering to the formal Curriculum than how textbooks were utilized.

Claudio and Miguel, however, discovered a unique freedom in adapting these textbooks. They revealed their autonomy, with Claudio stating, “I had not had any pressure [to use textbooks],” and Miguel explaining how he used them as a foundation for designing his worksheets. Jorge, although encouraged to use prescribed textbooks to meet ministry regulations, found his school head relatively unconcerned about the specifics of their use, saying, “What was important for my bosses was that the books had to be used. In which way? It didn’t matter.” Yet, the freedom to adapt came with a cost - the teachers struggled to align these textbooks with their students’ needs and the Curriculum’s objectives. The adaptation process demanded significant time and effort, with Miguel acknowledging, “Designing worksheets is time-consuming. Actually, I’m preparing worksheets all the time.” Driven by his commitment to achieving results, Claudio made sacrifices, even at the expense of his own well-being. He emphasizes, “People will not care if you go to bed at 5 or 7 a.m. preparing material. They don’t care about teachers’ mental health.”

Despite the frustrations, they persevered in adapting these textbooks, considering them as pedagogical tools with the potential to meet curriculum goals and students’ needs. Disheartened by the textbooks’ limitations, they chose adaptation over abandonment, adjusting the materials to suit their teaching objectives.

Professional development

Jorge, Claudio, and Miguel recognized the necessity of evolving as educators to make a real impact. While Jorge and Claudio had already pursued master’s degrees, Miguel was resolute in following suit. Their transformative journey began with the wisdom they gathered from their professional development experiences. Miguel, through attending workshops, learned innovative vocabulary teaching strategies. He skillfully integrated these techniques with textbook activities, resulting in engaging and effective lessons. Miguel’s newfound knowledge breathed life into his teaching as he explained, “I teach vocabulary and how to say tall or short, then I use an activity from the book that deals with physical descriptions.”

Claudio, drawing from his master’s degree in thematic classrooms, boldly questioned the limitations of prescribed textbooks. He advocated for flexibility, proposing alternative materials to the school administration. Gradually, his peers and superiors recognized the value of his approach. “Thematic classrooms involve dividing the classroom into different skills. For example, in the reading corner, the students have an area with books for reading and comfortable chairs to sit and work. In the listening corner, they work with headphones and MP3 players. In the end, everyone works toward the same goal but with different activities and skills. The students have a favorable view compared to traditional teaching.”

Inspired by his master’s degree in neuroscience, Jorge placed emotions at the core of his teaching. He transformed his classroom into a dynamic space with games, songs, PowerPoint presentations, and colorful flashcards. This innovative approach ignited his students’ enthusiasm for learning. The transformation in their classrooms was remarkable. What were once stale and monotonous environments now buzzed with enthusiasm and creativity. Their students thrived, and their love for learning flourished. He remarks, “I use neuroscience to develop techniques or strategies to improve my classes.”

Their successes resonated with their colleagues, sparking a wave of change within the school. Textbooks were no longer seen as the sole source of knowledge but as one tool among many.

Adapting prescribed textbooks

Jorge, Claudio, and Miguel embarked on a profound journey of textbook adaptation. They recognized the limitations of prescribed textbooks in meeting the diverse needs of their students. Miguel, motivated by a desire to align teaching with his students’ context, cleverly repurposed textbooks as a foundation for crafting bespoke worksheets. He found empowerment in this, stating, “It is better for all the students to follow me,” while gravitating toward grammar-focused lessons for control and discipline. Claudio, championing the importance of English for modern interaction, saw textbooks as tools for communicative learning. Fearlessly, he reshaped them, employing strategies of change and addition. His mission was clear: “to further develop oral skills and vocabulary.”

Jorge, driven by a vision of social justice, sought to foster learner autonomy. His adaptation process, incorporating personalization, individualization, and more, reshaped textbooks to align with students' interests. He noted, "They like not talking about John and Mary at the bus station," describing innovative activities like creating audiobooks.

Yet, their journey was not without trials. Balancing textbooks with ambitious goals, they toiled tirelessly. Claudio's pursuit of results led to sleepless nights, with little regard for his own well-being. Miguel grappled with the constraints of traditional methodologies despite attending workshops on modern techniques. Nevertheless, their perseverance yielded vibrant classrooms where students actively engaged in learning. Jorge, Claudio, and Miguel transformed from educators into editors and designers, crafting unique educational experiences. Their story epitomized determination, innovation, and an unwavering commitment to education that surpassed the boundaries of prescribed textbooks.

The Future

Shaping the Future: Educators on the Path to Change

This story culminates in a powerful revelation of the profound transformation that unfolds as educators construct their identities as textbook users. Throughout this intricate journey, they exercise their agency, meticulously assessing their current identities against the backdrop of their ideal selves. This concept of agency encompasses "iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions."

Their current identity serves as a guiding compass, directing them toward their desired ideal identity. In their narratives, they adopt titles like "missionaries," "agents of change," and "challengers." These descriptors encapsulate their stories of resilience and their profound understanding of the challenges faced in vulnerable educational settings. With this profound experience, they embrace a deep social responsibility to uplift their students' socioeconomic conditions. Peering into the future, these educators aspire to advance in their careers, ultimately seizing positions of influence and authority. Their mission is clear: to magnify the impact of their teaching, extending their reach to effect positive change on a broader scale. Their ideal identity crystallizes as "agents for social justice."

In these words, we bear witness to the triumphant conclusion of their transformative odyssey. They have evolved into more than educators; they are now beacons of change, unwavering in their commitment to empower the next generation and champion the cause of social justice. Their narrative is a testament to the boundless potential of teachers to shape not only the minds but also the futures of their students and the world they inhabit.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how three English teachers construct identities as textbook users in Chilean disadvantaged public schools. The findings show that constructing teachers' identities as textbook users is not a spontaneous process but rather a complex one involving current events, previous experiences, and future expectations. According to the analysis, novice teachers facing new challenges on how to use prescribed textbooks in disadvantaged schools draw simultaneously on their previous experiences as learners and a projective identity of the teacher they want to become. For example, the participants of this study reported spending several years as students observing how teachers used textbooks prescriptively, often neglecting students' needs. Jorge remembers that "the teacher would just read from the textbook. It was so boring." Miguel asserts that the English lessons were "in Spanish, never in English at school. The teacher asked us to translate texts in pairs." On the other hand, Claudio reports that teachers were often constrained by the textbook and "the formal classes were focused on grammar." Those experiences were a turning point for the participants to project an ideal identity as a teacher of English. Jorge declares that "the bad teachers inspired me to become a good teacher". Jorge aims to become a challenger "to change the way students see English". Miguel wants to become a missionary "to tell the students that they can achieve many goals, but only through studies." On the other hand, Claudio wants to develop as an agent of change to "change the lives of the students. English is highly needed nowadays; it is critical to motivate students to learn it and see it as useful". From the school experience, the participants might have internalized unwittingly that this is the standard way a teacher

interacts with teaching materials. According to [Beijaard et al. \(2000\)](#), the culture of the school serves as a prescriptive script that directs thought and behavior, which is consistent with the supposition.

The analysis supports the idea proposed by [Varghese et al. \(2005\)](#), who postulate that teachers construct identities in the classroom through a variety of tasks and activities. The study shows that it was not until the practicum that the participants became aware that textbooks could be used differently. Previously, they judged textbooks from the perspective of students, but at the practicum, they had the opportunity to see the other side as pre-service teachers. At that moment, they could move forward in their identity construction as teachers in general and textbook users in particular, as they had the opportunity to use textbooks with actual students in actual classrooms and become better familiar with the school's culture.

For instance, the study's participants observed that while lesson plans and textbooks might offer direction, they are prone to failure since unexpected events can happen in every lesson. This idea aligns well with the assumption of a strong relationship between teacher agency and identity construction ([Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009](#); [Day et al., 2006](#); [Priestley et al., 2013](#)). The three participants had almost similar challenges while doing their practicum. Miguel had to "have to adapt [the lesson] at the moment". The same thing happened to Miguel, who recognized that he "had to start from scratch." On the other hand, Claudio recalls that he "had never worked with those [primary school] books". He asked his colleagues for orientation. In other words, they used their agency to create an improviser's identity after their practicum, especially when it came to textbooks. This assumption supports [Shawer's \(2010\)](#) findings, which show that there are instances where teachers must make quick judgements. In this respect, [Thornbury and Meddings \(2001\)](#) recommend that teachers replace textbooks with classroom supplies and engage with the students in naturally occurring interactions to develop an improviser's identity. Participants in this study came to the realization that using textbooks requires flexibility so that students' needs are at the forefront of the lesson.

The same agentic strategy was used when the participants opened the prescribed book for a general inspection and realized that the contents did not completely agree with the National Curriculum. The Ministry of Education demanded that teachers use the books to comply with the National Curriculum even if the school heads gave the participants some freedom or were apathetic.

To cope with this disparity, the participants exercised agency by drawing on previous experience and the projective teacher identity ([Beijaard et al., 2000](#); [Priestley et al., 2013](#)). In order to cope with the disagreement between textbooks and the Curriculum, the participants put students' needs at the center of their decisions. They negotiated their identities as textbook users with the school authorities, who tended to see the English subject with disdain and did not care much for prescribed textbooks. From this critical incident, the participants were likely to construct a censor's identity to evaluate both the National Curriculum and the prescribed textbooks. They decided to adapt textbooks to meet the Curriculum's demands as much as possible while prioritizing the students' needs. As Jorge emphasizes, "What was important for my bosses was that the books had to be used. In which way? It didn't matter." Similarly, Claudio and Miguel were also encouraged to use the textbooks but were allowed to make adaptations, although it implies a big effort. Claudio complains, "People will not care if you go to bed at 5 or 7 a.m. preparing class materials. They don't care about teachers' mental health." On the other hand, Miguel asserts that he designs worksheets to complement the textbooks. While he likes it, he also acknowledges that "Designing worksheets is time-consuming. Actually, I'm preparing worksheets all the time." These findings support the idea that teacher agency can take creative and reflexive forms of reaction to structural pressures ([Priestley et al., 2013](#)).

The participants realized that adapting textbooks demands considerable time and particular knowledge to construct specific identities, including those of an editor, researcher, writer, and entertainer. Inspired by their projective identities, they decided to get involved in professional development in order to construct such identities. The knowledge they gained improved their skills as textbook users. For example, Jorge and Claudio adopted a more flexible approach to using textbooks. Claudio applied what he learned from a master's program to teach beyond the textbook. He implemented "thematic classrooms [which] involve[s] dividing the classroom into different skills. For example, in the reading corner, the students have an area with books for reading and comfortable chairs to sit and work. Jorge reports, "I use neuroscience to develop techniques or strategies to improve my classes."

On the other hand, Miguel, who attended workshops, asserts that he incorporated what he learned into his lessons, yet the impact was limited as it just focused on specific content. He reports, “I teach vocabulary and how to say tall or short, then I use an activity from the book that deals with physical descriptions.” These seem to indicate that the quality and length of the teacher development programs affect the teachers’ identity construction. With these results in mind, it is advisable to ensure that teacher development programs are well designed so that what teachers learn from them can be adapted to diverse contexts.

The analysis seems to indicate that teachers’ self-definition is another dimension that activates agentic decisions in terms of teacher identity construction. How teachers define themselves likely reveals the current state of the process of identity construction in their way of becoming the teachers they want to be. The participants self-identify as “missionaries,” “agents of change,” and “challengers,” indicating their strong determination to comprehend and address vulnerable situations as well as their unwavering commitment to improving the social conditions of students.

The participants expressed a shared aspiration to become agents for social justice, albeit with varying individual understandings and interpretations of the concept. This assumption agrees with the proposals of [Farrell \(2011\)](#), who assume that by examining current identities in contrast to projective identities, teachers can detect the gaps between both and take agentic actions for improvement. These findings offer invaluable evidence for educational programs to prepare new generations of teachers equipped with methodological knowledge to achieve their projective identities seamlessly, especially when they must adapt textbooks and teaching materials to meet the student’s needs.

Conclusion

This investigation explored the identity construction of three English teachers in disadvantaged schools as textbook users. The study posed two central questions:

1. What are the experiences of English teachers who construct identities by using prescribed textbooks in disadvantaged schools?
2. How do teachers exercise agency to construct their identities as textbook users?

The findings confirmed that the three teachers in this study confronted serious challenges, including limited resources, mismatch of prescribed textbooks with the national curriculum, and the need to make adaptations to meet students’ needs. Despite these challenges, these teachers strove to impact their students’ learning positively.

The study emphasized that these teachers exercised agency to challenge the educational policy associated with textbook usage. They prioritize their students’ needs over faithfully following the prescribed books. They also seek professional development to improve their teaching practices and use textbooks more efficiently.

This research has implications for English language teachers and language teacher education. Regarding language teachers, the study recommends regular self-assessment and flexible use of textbooks to meet students’ and curriculum needs. For language teacher education, the study suggests that student teachers start practicum training as early as possible to gain experience using teaching materials in the real world under the guidance of qualified mentors.

In essence, the study suggests that teachers of English in disadvantaged schools dynamically construct their identities as textbook users. They do so by challenging norms, prioritizing students’ needs, and proactively seeking professional development. This process is not static; it involves continuous reflection, adaptation, and growth.

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