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## ESP Teachers' Transitional Experiences in the Third Space: A Double-Edged Sword

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### ABSTRACT

This study was an inquiry to investigate English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers' transitional experiences in the third space. To that end, 17 ESP teachers wrote autobiographical narratives focusing on their critical challenges in the third space and their approaches to dealing with them. The narratives were analyzed using Creswell's (2007) procedures to analyze the narratives, including managing the data, reading and memoing, describing the memos, classifying, and interpreting. The findings showed that ESP teachers' main challenges in the third space were negotiation tensions, identity struggles, the inefficiency of their previous experiences, and institutional barriers to change. Furthermore, ESP teachers' approaches to evolving their professional identity in the third space encompassed addressing reflective teaching and criticality, seeking external support, and creating a third space community of practice. It can be concluded from the findings of the current study that the third space can be a double-edged sword for ESP teachers since, on the one hand, some tensions in the third space create some problems for their professional identity development. On the other hand, ESP teachers need to take some approaches to address the third space tensions, helping them evolve their professional identity.

**Keywords:** autobiographical narratives; ESP teachers; professional identity; third space; transitional experiences

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## Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers are regarded as "language practitioners" (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998) since the scope of ESP is far beyond the limits of teaching English (Fălăuș, 2017). Teaching in the ESP context requires ESP teachers to have different layers of competencies, especially those to design a course, develop materials, collaborate with others, and evaluate the students (Górska-Poręcka, 2013). Thus, ESP teachers need to obtain the required knowledge and reconstruct their identity (Tao & Gao, 2018). It is not straightforward and without complexity for the ESP teachers to work in the ESP context when the instructors move from the English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL) context to the ESP context. This is because of a hypothetical space between the EFL/ESL contexts and the ESP context, called the third space (Beck, 2020), which has its characteristics and poses some demands on the ESP teachers when transitioning from EFL/ESL spaces to the ESP space to become ESP teachers.

The third space is a place of hybridity and threshold, which is neither this nor that. The main feature of such a space is individuals' lack of clarity about where they belong and what they should do to move through it. Working in the third space is demanding for ESP teachers with an EFL/ESL background. Although researchers (e.g., Tao & Gao, 2017; Tao & Gao, 2018; Rashidi & Meihami, 2019) have addressed the ESP teachers' identity development, there is a lack of research concerning the experiences of ESP teachers in the third space. Working in-between spaces emphasizes teachers' crossing and re-crossing identities to construct and reconstruct their identities (Engeström, 2004). Thus, it is a challenging space in which ESP teachers should work in different contexts, most notably the EFL/ESL and the ESP ones, to obtain hybrid resolutions for their problems. Such hybrid resolutions can help ESP teachers in the third space to construct a hybrid professional identity (Ai & Wang, 2017) to overcome their pedagogical problems. Developing a hybrid professional identity is of utmost importance in the EFL context, where EFL teachers simultaneously work as ESP teachers.

In EFL contexts, such as Iran or Poland, EFL teachers are most often responsible for teaching in the ESP contexts (Mostafaei & Ershadi, 2016). Consequently, EFL teachers working in ESP classrooms may confront problems while working with students whose subject-matter knowledge is wider than theirs (Tsou & Chen, 2014). The third space created by the professional practices in-between the EFL and ESP contexts may reveal how EFL teachers' transition to the ESP teaching context happens. Given the importance of the imbalance of professional practices that may occur in the third space while EFL teachers are in transition to become ESP teachers, it is necessary to examine the "dialogical problem-solving" (Engeström et al., 1995, p. 319) of the ESP teachers in the third space to find a comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face. Moreover, ESP teachers' evolving professional identity can be investigated (Williams, 2013) by examining the transitional experiences and challenges of the ESP teachers in the third space. This can lead to a comprehensive understanding of the ESP teachers' professional identity development in the ESP context.

In the current study, the researchers were prompted to investigate the transitional experiences of the ESP teachers in the third space, between EFL and ESP contexts, to address the challenges ESP teachers face while negotiating between the two contexts. Thus, the present study examines how teachers make a transition between EFL and ESL contexts to understand their evolving professional identity in the third space. It, therefore, addresses the following research questions:

1. What challenges do ESP teachers encounter in the third space, i.e., the space between EFL and ESP contexts?
2. What are the main approaches used by ESP teachers to shape their professional identity in the third space?

## Literature Review

### *The Third Space*

It was Bhabha (1994) who coined the concept of third space as an equalizer that "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force" (p. 37). The third space was coined to break down the boundaries (Beck, 2020) and address the dynamicity of systems, including educational systems. The third space is a space of imbuing creativity in which everybody's voice is acknowledged. Rubin (2020, p. 5) described it as "a space of in-betweenness, a borderzone, neither here nor there" whose main features are individuals' instability and lack of clarity about where one belongs and what one should be doing" (Barlow, 2007, p. 244). Thus, being in the third space is a paradoxical liminal state in which individuals are simultaneously both *this* and *that*. Consequently, participating in this space prevents individuals from settling their identities at either end (Bhabha, 2004).

The third space has many features that can contribute to commencing "new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 1-2). When starting their work as ESP teachers, English language teachers are in the third space, a space of tension between recognizing themselves as either EFL or ESP teachers. Thus, they experience neither *this* (ESP) nor *that* (EFL), full of ambivalence. Thus, investigating the third space can reveal the intersections and interstices between the EFL and ESP contexts in which ESP teachers are involved.

The third space is a discursive space (Gutiérrez, 2008) in which the individuals negotiate between their first and second spaces. However, Bhabha (1994) pointed out negotiation tensions between the two spaces due to the incommensurable tensions between the first and second spaces. The ability to inhabit the third space can help individuals negotiate tensions to make it easier to go through this transitional space. One can imagine three spaces in which ESP teachers function. The first is the EFL setting in which the ESP teachers obtain their English language knowledge and teaching skills. The second space, the ESP context, is where the teachers encounter the subject-matter knowledge and practice. The third is the in-between space in which the ESP teachers are crossing and re-crossing borders between the first and second spaces by carrying knowledge, practices, and discourses between these two settings. Thus, the third space bridges the first and second spaces where ESP teachers participate in a network of relationships, exercise professional practices, and negotiate professional discourses. Consequently, the third space may allow ESP teachers to construct and reconstruct their professional identity.

### *Empirical Studies on Third Space in Education*

Although the third space has been the subject of many investigations across different educational fields, there is a paucity of research in L2 pedagogy, especially in the ESP context. In the following paragraphs, three categories of studies are reviewed: studies in which the third space was examined in EFL/ESL teacher education, investigations addressing the third space among EFL/ESL learners, and teacher education studies in which the third space was examined in other disciplines apart from EFL/ESL teacher education.

Zhang and Yuan (2019) addressed the uncertain identities of non-higher-education-based EFL teacher educators through the third space theory. They used a metaphor analysis to investigate 139 non-higher-education-based EFL teacher educators' identities. Their primary aim was to examine the challenges and needs of these teacher educators. The results indicated four identity types: the willing communicators, the discontented jack-of-all-trades and master of none, the struggling professional leaders, and the caring supporters. Ai and Wang (2017) conducted a

narrative inquiry to examine EFL teaching in an imagined third space. The main purpose of their study was to reflect on the experiences of teaching EFL at a Chinese university. To do so, they examined the personal narratives of one of the researchers who experienced different teaching contexts. Their study's findings illustrated that the traditional EFL teacher-centered methods were the most critical issue in identity construction in the third space.

Moreover, Dobinson (2014) studied how Asian English language teachers occupy the third space of working in Western discourses while working with Western teachers. Dobinson's semi-structured interviews with 20 Asian EFL teachers aimed at examining how theories of teaching and learning, established mostly in the West, influenced Asian EFL teachers' perspectives concerning teaching and learning. The findings revealed that Asian EFL teachers perceived inferiority, disruption, and frustration when working in the Western context.

The third space has been the subject of various studies in which EFL students were focused. Liaw (2007) conducted a study investigating the effectiveness of constructing a third space for EFL learners to meet language and culture simultaneously. The EFL learners participated in a web-based learning environment in which they had intercultural conversation partners. The analysis of the learners' comments in the forum showed that the complexity and correctness of their writing developed. Moreover, it was revealed that EFL learners' intercultural competence developed through participating in the third space, namely the web-based learning environment.

Furthermore, Yan-ling (2018) investigated a Chinese EFL learner's identity development engaging in the third space, structured as an online intercultural writing exchange. Yan-ling conducted a series of in-depth interviews. The findings indicated that the learner became cooperative and used English as a global language by participating in the third space. Yan-ling (2018) claimed that EFL learners could have more opportunities to explore language in linguistic and sociocultural practices by participating in third spaces.

Moreover, Awada et al. (2021) conducted a study to describe an intercultural model of transformative pedagogy for EFL learners in a challenging context by merging third space and literature circles. The results of their study indicated that combining third space and literature can provide a learning zone in which EFL learners can transform their negative experiences into stories to imagine a better future. Moreover, the results of Awada et al.'s (2021) study acknowledged the effectiveness of combining the third space and literature circles in achieving curricular learning outcomes.

The third space lends itself to many teacher education studies in different realms, apart from EFL/ESL teacher education. Williams (2014) investigated the third space experiences of 18 teacher educators in Australia, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. These teacher educators worked as teachers in the schools and mentors. Thus, the study primarily aimed to investigate these teacher educators' challenges as mentors. Through conducting a series of interviews, the researcher pointed out that the teacher educators negotiated relationships and managed their shifting identities between teacher and teacher educators in the third space.

Later, McIntyre and Hobson (2016) examined how the third space created by experienced external mentors could support beginning physics teachers' identity development. The results showed that the third space created a discursive context in which beginning physics teachers could practice professional learning and discuss alternative classroom performances to become better risk-takers. In another study, Woolf (2020) addressed the concept of third space by reflecting on her practices as an action research program teacher. Overall, the findings of this study showed that the third space developed the researcher's competence to stimulate critical

engagement and discourse in the students. Moreover, action research developed learners' ability to confront epistemological beliefs and disruptive prior learning experiences critically.

### *ESP Teacher Education in Iran*

Although some subject specialists, called technical teachers, teach English to the students of specific subjects in Iran, most often than not, ESP courses are taught by EFL teachers whose major is Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The graduate students of TEFL participate in various ESP courses in which they are informed about the theoretical and practical aspects of the ESP context (Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008; Nezakatgoo & Behzadpoor, 2017). Thus, those who have earned a graduate degree in TEFL will be considered competent in teaching ESP courses. Because of the differences between the EFL and the ESP contexts, these teachers face challenges, such as adopting appropriate teaching methodology (Mostafaei & Ershadi, 2016) and addressing technical content. The situation is not improved by the ESP textbooks (designed by Iranian publishers such as SAMT), which focus more on translation than developing language skills (Zand-Moghadam et al., 2018). ESP students are often competent in translating their technical texts from English to Persian, but it will be difficult for them to use English to communicate technical issues. TEFL degree holders should know about these issues when working in the ESP context.

The review of the previous studies indicated that the concept of the third space had not been sufficiently addressed in the EFL/ESL contexts. Moreover, there is a paucity of studies showing different aspects of the ESP teachers' participation in the third space. Consequently, we do not have a precise understanding of the features of the third space when ESP teachers leave the first space, the EFL context, and reach the second space, the ESP context. Thus, this study attempted to address this gap in the literature in which the ESP teachers' main approaches to evolving professional identity and their challenges in the third space were investigated.

## **Methodology**

This study was a qualitative one in which autobiographical narratives were collected and analyzed to examine the third space challenges that the ESP teachers encountered. One of the main reasons for selecting autobiographical narratives was that narratives are appropriate tools to indicate *temporality* across time and space (Baynham, 2015). Hence, the autobiography was an appropriate tool in the present study to investigate the challenges when ESP teachers transitioned from the EFL context to the ESP one, mainly because narrative and identity are interconnected (De Fina, 2015). Since one of the objectives of this study was to examine the main approaches of the ESP teachers' evolving professional identity in the third space, autobiographical narratives could be considered revealing, showing how ESP teachers participate in the first space, the EFL context, second space, the ESP context, and third space, transitioning from the EFL context to the ESP context.

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were 17 (10 male and 7 female) Iranian ESP teachers recruited purposefully. These ESP teachers were either PhD holders or PhD candidates of TEFL and had different years of experience in EFL and ESP teaching. They taught EFL and ESP in different schools, institutes, and universities whose students were Iranian learners of different majors. Although the researchers could continue recruiting more participants, they did not do so because data saturation was reached with 17 participants (Ary et al., 2014). Table 1 shows the participants' teaching backgrounds in EFL and ESP contexts.

Table 1  
*Participants and their Teaching Backgrounds*

NO.	Pseudonym	Gender	Educational degree	Years of EFL teaching experience	Years of ESP teaching experience
1	Ali	Male	PhD	12	5
2	Reza	Male	PhD	10	5
3	Tahere	Female	PhD	10	4
4	Amir	Male	PhD	10	4
5	Fateme	Female	PhD	9	4
6	Nima	Male	PhD	9	3
7	Negar	Female	PhD	9	3
8	Matin	Male	PhD	8	3
9	Mobin	Male	PhD	8	3
10	Saeed	Male	PhD Candidate	8	3
11	Amin	Male	PhD Candidate	7	3
12	Ardashir	Male	PhD Candidate	7	3
13	Kowsar	Female	PhD Candidate	7	3
14	Mahshid	Female	PhD Candidate	7	2
15	Shiva	Female	PhD Candidate	7	2
16	Ayda	Female	PhD Candidate	6	2
17	Ashkan	Male	PhD Candidate	6	2

#### *Data collection*

The participants were asked to send their autobiographical narratives to the lead researchers in written or oral formats. The researchers contacted the participants in person and talked about the narrative prompts. The prompts of the narrative were as follows: "What were the most challenging issues you faced while shifting from being an EFL teacher to an ESP teacher?" and "How do you develop your abilities and practices to come up with the challenges of transitioning from EFL context to the ESP ones?" The researchers provoked the participants' awareness of the third space of their teaching through these prompts. Consequently, the participants produced autobiographical narratives about the third space where they transitioned from the EFL to the ESP context.

Moreover, the researchers discussed the aims of the study and talked about the concept of the third space with the participants. Thus, the participants were aware of what the third space was. This was thought to help them produce their narratives to the point, focusing on the third space. Twelve participants recorded their autobiographical narratives orally, while five wrote their narratives and sent them to the researchers. The longest narrative comprised 1980 words, and the shortest included 1560 words. There was no considerable difference in the oral and written narratives regarding the number of words. To check whether or not the participants produced structured narratives, the researchers examined their narratives based on Riessman's model (2008), in which each narrative should include an abstract, introduction, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda. All the narratives authored by the participants had these components.

#### *Data analysis*

To analyze the narratives authored by teachers, the researchers used the principles of qualitative data analysis, including organizing and familiarizing, coding and reducing, and interpreting and representing (Ary et al., 2014). When the narratives are used as the primary data sources in an investigation, the researchers need to search for the changes. Thus, the researchers in the current study used Creswell's (2007) procedures to analyze the narratives. To do so, the researchers managed the data, read and memo, described the memos, and classified and interpreted the

memos. The researchers used MAXQDA 2020 to manage the oral and written autobiographical narratives based on each participant's profile. Then, the researchers read the narratives and wrote memos for each narrative. Memoing has two levels, initial and advanced. First, the researchers wrote initial memos based on the researchers' perceived thoughts and ideas about the data. Later, in the advanced memoing, the researchers used the related literature to help refine the categories. Finally, the researchers interpreted the data based on the results provided by MAXQDA 2020 and the relevant literature to obtain the main themes about the challenges of ESP teachers and their evolving professional identity in the third space.

Moreover, to make it more reliable, the researchers added the principles of ethnographic semantics (Spradley, 1997) to analyze the narratives' core meaning. To do so, the researchers flagged the revealing words and phrases. As shown in Figure 1, the researchers used ethnographic semantics principles during the narrative analysis procedure. The two-way arrows indicate the emergent nature of the narrative analysis in which the researchers went back and forth between different stages of data analysis to obtain robust findings.

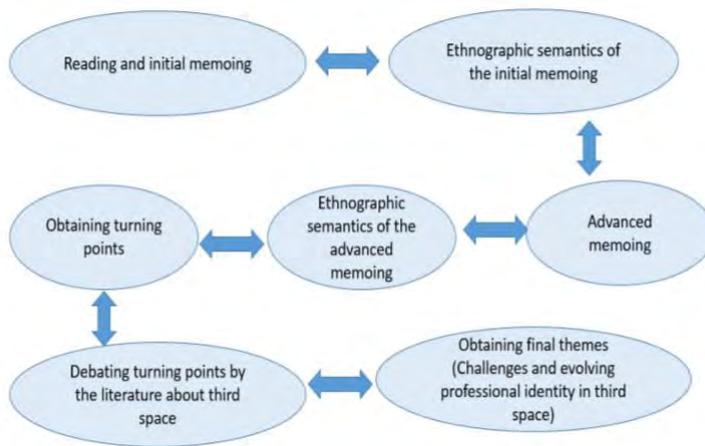


Figure 1. Narrative Analysis Procedure followed in this study

Different stages shown in Figure 1 can be seen in the following example, in which part of the autobiographical narrative of one of the participants is analyzed.

#### Example 1

*... at that time, I was baffled with whom I should discuss my problems. Should I talk with a content specialist or a language specialist ... this is a time of hot debate and tension for me ... I try to participate in webinars related to ESP teacher education ... one way to relieve the problems is reflective teaching, ... I learned in a teacher training program ...*

**1. initial memoing:** the third space is confusing for ESP teachers; the third space is full of different tensions for ESP teachers,

**2. ethnographic semantics (initial memoing):** Baffling, problems of content and language, tensions,

3. **advanced memoing:** negotiation tension (Bhabha, 1994),
4. **ethnographic semantics (advanced memoing):** negotiation tension done by the teachers,
5. **obtaining turning points:** ESP teachers try to resolve negotiation tension with language or content specialists,
6. **debating turning points by the literature about third space:** teacher education programs can enable EFL teachers to pass third space by helping EFL teachers develop their reflectivity in ESP teaching,
7. **obtaining final themes (dealing with challenges and evolving professional identity in the third space):** negotiation tensions (challenge), reflective practices (evolving professional identity).

As mentioned, the researchers went through the autobiographical narratives to obtain the challenges and evolving professional identity through these seven stages, addressing all of them by MAXQDA 20. The analysis of the example mentioned above indicates that the ESP teachers face negotiation tension in a third space in which they do not know with whom to consult their problems. Moreover, ESP teachers can reduce their third space challenges by learning about reflective practice in teacher education programs.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Challenges of ESP Teachers in the Third Space*

To answer the first research question, "What are the challenges that ESP teachers encounter in the third space, i.e., the space between EFL and ESP contexts?" the researchers analyzed the autobiographical narratives of the participants. The ESP teachers' main challenges concerning the third space were negotiation tension, identity struggle, the inefficiency of their previous third space experiences, and institutional barriers to change.

#### *Negotiation Tensions: Teaching Methodology and Subject-Related Content*

One of the challenges that the ESP teachers faced in the third space was negotiation tension. The analysis of the ESP teachers' autobiographical narratives indicated that their negotiation tensions were about teaching methodology and subject-related content. The negotiation tension in teaching methodology happens when ESP teachers in the third space cannot reach an agreement about what teaching methodologies should be used. Thus, the third space is a limbo space regarding teaching methodology for the ESP teachers, whether to follow EFL teaching methodologies to teach ESP. In the following extract, one of the participants (Ali) mentioned how he could not answer which teaching methodology to be used when commencing ESP teaching.

#### Extract 1

*... the first two years, thus, were problematic since I was unable to choose an appropriate teaching methodology for my ESP classes ... should I follow the traditional translation methods, the methods that I use in my EFL classes, or a specific method ... there is no way out of this question ...*

As Ali mentioned, there was no agreement on which methodology to choose and how to teach appropriately. He is in a constant negotiation space between the first and the second spaces, but his negotiation was with tensions. According to Williams (2014), the successful transition from the third space to a more stable space needs negotiation of new meaning, here, a new teaching methodology. Teacher educators can address the negotiation tension about teaching methodology if the strategies of in-between practices are provided to the ESP teachers. By doing so, teacher educators help ESP teachers remove the tensions in their negotiation so that their "transformation leads to profound changes in practices, potentially even the creation of a new in-between practice" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 146).

Furthermore, ESP teachers indicated that they had negotiation tension with subject-related content in the third space. Due to their subject matter background, ESP teachers are not competent in teaching specific content. To solve this problem, ESP teachers try to negotiate meaning with their EFL context. However, their negotiation concerning the specific content is open to tensions since the EFL context cannot provide them with ways to address the specific content, leading to their embarrassment in front of ESP students (Tao & Gao, 2018). In extract 2, another participant (Tahere) addressed negotiation tensions concerning subject-related content in the third space.

#### Extract 2

*... while starting to teach ESP courses, I had many problems with the disciplinary content. I had no idea, and my students were reasonably competent in it ... sometimes I consult this issue with the experts during my in-service education, but alas ...*

What is evident from Tahere's autobiographical narrative is that there is no program helping ESP teachers while they are in the third space. This led to tension in the negotiation about subject-related content since ESP teachers could not agree on how to address subject-related content. It is necessary to change teacher education methodology to help ESP teachers negotiate with both language teacher educators and subject specialists in the third space. By so doing, a "shared problem space" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 147) will be established in the third space in which language teacher educators, subject specialists, and ESP teachers negotiate so that they can produce an agreed-upon and shared understanding of the practices in the third space. Bringing language teacher educators, subject specialists, and ESP teachers together can remove the tensions that the ESP teachers face about subject-related content.

#### *Identity Struggle: This or That*

The analysis of the narratives authored by ESP teachers indicated an identity struggle for them in the third space. They struggled with their primary identity in the third space because their main concern was whether they were EFL or ESP teachers. The most notable feature of the struggle is ESP teachers' "instability and lack of clarity about where one belongs and what one should be doing" (Barlow, 2007). Nima, one of the participants, stated that he was "*tortured by the forces about whether to belong me to the EFL community or the ESP ones.*" Another participant, Kowsar, pointed out the struggle as follows:

#### Extract 3

*... while teaching ESP for the first time, I had problems with whether my professionalism belongs to the EFL context, ESP context, or both...*

What Kowsar mentioned in extract 3 indicated that there was an identity struggle in the third space when she taught ESP courses. ESP teachers' identity struggle in the third space is due to the liminality feature of the third space, detaching ESP teachers from either space. Nevertheless, this is the responsibility of pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to help ESP teachers understand that they belong to both spaces, EFL and ESP. Thus, in the liminality of the third space, ESP teachers can negotiate and renegotiate different aspects of their identity to construct and reconstruct it (Rubin, 2020).

#### *The Inefficiency of Their Previous Experiences in the Third Space*

One of the main themes addressed in ESP teachers' autobiographical narratives was the inefficiency of their previous experiences in the third space. Matin stated that "*class management in the ESP context is not the same as in the EFL context*", while Ayda pointed out that "*when trying to practice the previous experiences [of the EFL context], I have obtained dissimilar results in the ESP contexts.*" Moreover, in his narrative, Ashkan stated, "*... my experiences in the EFL classes cannot help me address problems in my ESP classes ...*". As an ambivalent space (Rubin, 2020), the third space has features of the first and second spaces. Since ESP teachers in the third space address the problems according to their EFL context experiences, they will not solve them. The reason may be that they do not have the required ESP experiences, so they do not address the problem through the ESP learners' needs. To address this problem, teacher education programs need to help ESP teachers understand the requirements of ESP contexts. The teacher educators create an imaginary context based on which the ESP teachers can prepare themselves for the ambivalent space. Imagination is part of identity construction through which ESP teachers can expand themselves "by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). If ESP teachers imagine third space circumstances before putting steps into it, they can accrue experience for the third space. Thus, language teacher educators must emphasize imagination concerning identity development while administrating teacher education programs.

#### *Institutional Barriers to Change: We Want, They Do Not!*

Another theme extracted from the authors' autobiographical narratives was institutional barriers to change related to the established educational methodologies in teaching ESP courses. In his narrative, Amin stated that "*...I participated in different webinars and learned how to address learners' needs; however, the department in which I am teaching ESP has asked me to follow translation methodology ...*". Shiva also asserted that "*our challenges are not just to transfer from EFL context to ESP one, but to follow the educational rules made by the institutions ...*". The following extract from Saeed's autobiographical narratives shows how his institution hindered him from using the ESP teaching methodology.

#### Extract 4

*... we learned many issues regarding how to address English in ESP classes, including teaching methodologies and techniques ... however, when I started to teach ESP, this was arduous to change the idea of the institution to teaching methods ...*

It should be stated that educational changes can be approached by developing teachers' identities (Tao & Gao, 2018). Given that, there should be a hierarchical system through which teachers' identity development leads to educational changes, and educational changes will remove institutional barriers to change (Beck, 2020). That said, teacher education programs should consider the ESP teachers' identity development to help them understand third space features and set their teaching methodologies based on these.

### ***ESP Teachers' Approaches to Shaping Professional Identity in the Third Space***

This second research question was, "What are the main approaches used by ESP teachers to shape their professional identity in the third space?" By analyzing the autobiographical narratives authored by the ESP teachers, the researchers recognized three approaches through which the ESP teachers tried to evolve their professional identity, including addressing reflective teaching and criticality, seeking external support, and creating a third space community of practice.

#### *Addressing Reflective Teaching and Criticality*

The narrative analysis showed that reflective teaching and criticality were among ESP teachers' approaches to addressing third-space challenges. Reflective teaching is teachers' critical look at their teaching practices in their classes (Falk, 2009). Reflective teaching needs teachers' criticality to help them advance their teaching profession (Alvarado Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Aydın Yazıcı & Atay, 2023). As Negar stated, "... [when starting to] teach ESP courses, and when facing some problems, I created a profile of my problems, then, I addressed them by reviewing how to remove the problems ...". Moreover, Mobin mentioned that "*retrospectively, I check my teaching methods and practices ...*". Furthermore, Ardashir, another ESP teacher, asserted that "... *I have tried and, still, I am trying to see what I have done in the ESP classes and what to do in the future ...*". Teacher educators need to address reflective teaching in their teacher education programs (Loughran, 2010) to improve ESP teachers' reflectivity and criticality in third space.

ESP teachers' criticality in the third space can develop through "thirthing" or "thirthing-as-othering" (Soja, 1996, p. 5). ESP teachers can use these strategies to reconstruct their teaching practices to obtain new alternatives for encountering third-space challenges. Using the "thirthing" strategy, ESP teachers can develop their commitment to discovery and recognize third space participants' special needs. By doing so, ESP teachers can reflect upon their practices according to third space needs. Moreover, Beck and Kosnik (2014) believed collaboration and critical friends could help develop reflective teaching and criticality. Thus, by establishing collaboration desks involving critical friends from ESP and EFL contexts, ESP teachers can obtain practical knowledge to work in a third space. Mahshid mentioned this in her autobiographical narrative: "... *through participating in weekly or monthly critical discussion about ESP teaching, we can develop our teaching practices.*"

#### *Seeking External Support*

One of the approaches ESP teachers used to remove the challenges of teaching ESP in the third space was seeking external support. ESP teachers mentioned a range of external supports in their narratives, such as "...*seeking the experiences of expert ESP teachers ...*" (Fateme), "... *participating in the related conference to settle the challenges ...*" (Shiva), and "... *discussing subject-related content with subject-matter experts ...*" (Nima). External supports can make the third space a "motivating" and "safe" space (Luehmann, 2007). Ali declared this issue in his narrative when he remarked, "... *by providing solutions for some of my problems with the help of the experts, I restarted my ESP teaching with a calmer mind ...*". According to McIntyre and Hobson (2016), the negotiation that happens between the teachers and the external support about the challenges of the third space "overcome impediments to their professional learning and positively develop their professional identities" (p. 149). Consequently, external supports for the third space allow ESP teachers to create alternative ways to address their teaching in ESP classes. In this way, external supports help teachers develop their identity (Sachs, 2005), including ESP teachers' professional identity.

Through seeking external support, the teachers could develop their professional identity as ESP instructors who understood subject-related content. Although they did not assert they became as

knowledgeable as the subject specialists, they learned some basic terms by seeking external support. Ardashir mentioned in his narrative that "...after consulting and discussing some content-related challenges with some content-specialist in the department, and participating in these discussions, I understand some basic concepts about their discipline". Negar also pointed out that she "learns the essence of the major by asking some questions from the content specialists." Identifying the content helps teachers develop their professional identity (McIntyre & Hobson, 2016). The reason may be the ESP teachers' negotiations about subject-related content with the subject specialists (Meihami, 2019; Rashidi & Meihami, 2019). Negotiations help construct the meaning, and ESP teachers create subject-related meanings when negotiating with the content specialist. Thus, negotiation can lead to the professional identity development of ESP teachers.

#### *Creating a Third Space Community of Practice*

The analysis of the ESP teachers' narratives indicated that creating a third space community of practice for the ESP teachers is necessary to help them develop their professional identity. According to Talbert and Mclaughlin (2002), teachers' identities are directly associated with professional communities. Tahereh stated, "...we should participate in contexts where we can interact with language and content specialists ...". At the same time, Reza believed "... if there is an organization that we can join to develop our teaching performances, we can develop our classroom practices ...". Moreover, Saeed pointed out that "in the ESP context, we should have a similar special community that we have in the EFL context ...". Accordingly, a community of practice should be established, which addresses the needs of the ESP teachers in the third space. A third space community of practice should have engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger, 1998). Through engagement, ESP teachers can participate in an ongoing negotiation about third-space challenges. Imagination helps ESP teachers to recreate a self-image concerning third space. Goodnough (2010) stated that imagination could lead to novel learning since it needs flexibility and creativity to produce new practices. Alignment allows "the identity of a larger group to become part of the identity of the individual participants" (Trent, 2010, p. 155). Thus, if ESP teachers align themselves with the identity of the members of the third space community of practice, they can develop their professional identity based on the community's requirements. Hence, a third space community of practice can lead to the ESP teachers' professional identity development and help them remove the challenges they face in the third space.

Another point about a third space community of practice is whether ESP teachers are accepted in such a community of practice. Acceptance is a significant concept that can lead to teachers' identity development (Lave & Wenger, 1990). Some ESP teachers asserted that they were not accepted to join the community of practice while teaching in the ESP context. As Ayda mentioned, "...there were weekly sessions for the subject-specialist teachers who taught the English language ... but my ideas and opinions were not acknowledged ...". Mahshid also declared that "... even though I participated in the sessions with others, there I had difficult moments to talk about my opinions ...". If the ESP teachers are not accepted in different communities of practice, they cannot engage, imagine, and align their identity with the third space community of practice. Consequently, there will be no context for developing their professional identity.

#### **Conclusion and Implications**

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the transitional experiences that ESP teachers may have in the third space. The findings indicated that ESP teachers' main challenges in the third space were negotiation tensions, identity struggles, the inefficiency of their previous third space experiences, and institutional barriers to change. Moreover, ESP teachers' approaches to evolving their professional identity encompassed reflective teaching and criticality, seeking external

support, and creating a third space community of practice. Thus, it can be concluded from the findings of the current study that the third space can be a *double-edged sword* for ESP teachers. It can hinder ESP teachers' professional identity development due to the challenges they encounter in the third space, but, at the same time, it can help them evolve their professional identity through the approaches they use to solve the problems of the third space.

Teacher education programs should lend themselves to some modifications to help ESP teachers go through the third space. The teacher education program should allow ESP teachers to practice reflectivity and criticality. If ESP teachers are equipped with reflectivity and criticality, they can address their teaching puzzles in the third space and problematize them (Meihami, 2021). The ESP teachers construct and reconstruct their teaching profession, developing their professional identity. Moreover, teacher education programs should create various follow-up programs through which ESP teachers can seek external support. Due to the nature of the ESP context, external supports provided for the ESP teachers should be both language-related and subject-related. The constant interactions between ESP teachers in the third space and both language-related and subject-related supports will develop their identification of the teaching process, leading to their professional identity development (McIntyre & Hobson, 2016). Creating a third space community of practice is also related to external support. Such a community of practice helps ESP teachers engage, imagine, and align in the third space to develop their professional identity in a collaborative context (Williams, 2014).

Overall, ESP teacher education needs to be remodeled to help ESP teachers develop their professional identity. The significant concept to be concentrated on in the process of professional identity development is negotiation. The teacher education programs should help ESP teachers negotiate third-space challenges to develop their professional identity and, in turn, their teaching profession. Future researchers can address the role of negotiation in evolving professional identity in the third space. Moreover, various aspects of the community of practice can be further researched so that syllabus designers can understand how to run a community of practice in the third space.

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