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NEGOTIATING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF CULTURAL LEARNING OF ENGLISH TEACHERS AT MTS NAHDLATUT THALIBIN TIRIS PROBOLINGGO

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Abstract:

This research aims to explore the negotiation process of the professional identity of English teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin, a pesantren based madrasah that prioritizes local religious and cultural values. This study identifies how English teachers negotiate their roles amid the demands of a national curriculum based on global competencies and local values upheld in madrasas. Through a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, three main themes were found: (1) teachers' perception of their professional identity, (2) adaptation strategies in learning, and (3) challenges faced in negotiating professional identity. The results of the study show that teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin view their identity as more than just language teaching, but also as cultural agents who must transfer local religious and cultural values. Strategies used by teachers include the selection of teaching materials that are sensitive to local culture, the integration of religious values in English learning, and the translation of foreign terms using local cultural analogies. However, the main challenge facing teachers is the tension between the demand to teach English based on a global curriculum and the need to maintain local religious and cultural values. This research provides insight into how English teachers in faith-based madrassas negotiate their identities

and demonstrates the importance of developing a curriculum that is sensitive to local and religious contexts in language learning.

Keywords: *Professional identity, English teacher, Mts Nahdlatut Thalibin, cultural values.*

INTRODUCTION

In the dynamics of modern education, the professional identity of teachers has become an important study in the realm of education, especially in the context of globalization and multiculturalism that requires teachers to be adaptive to social and cultural changes (Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016; W. Liu et al., 2024; Nigar et al., 2024). The professional identity of teachers is no longer considered as a static entity, but rather as a social construct formed through the interaction between personal experience, institutional values, educational policies, and societal expectations (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016; Das, 2024; Vizek Vidović & Domović, 2019). Teachers are not only teaching, but also cultural agents who play an important role in instilling values, norms, and cross-cultural understanding in students. This becomes even more complex when teachers are in a religious education environment such as madrassas that uphold traditional and religious values (Husna et al., 2025; Khalim & Parut, 2025; Nordin et al., 2024).

In this context, English teachers face their own challenges. English, as a global language, carries with it a Western cultural content that is often considered different, even contradictory, to the local values upheld in madrasas (Malla, 2021). One of the institutions that reflects this reality is MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin, a madrasah located in Tiris District, Probolinggo Regency, East Java. This madrasah has strong Islamic characteristics, based on pesantren, and is surrounded by traditional community communities that are thick with religious values. In this environment, English teachers are not only faced with pedagogical tasks, but must also be able to negotiate their professional identity between the demands of the curriculum, local values, and public perception of the foreign language being taught.

A number of previous studies have highlighted the importance of teachers' professional identities in learning, especially in the context of language education (Beijaard et al., 2023; Hsieh, 2015; Steinert et al., 2019). These studies reveal that professional identity in language education is shaped by teachers' ongoing reflections on their pedagogical beliefs, their interaction with students and institutional expectations, and their negotiation of multiple roles as language instructors, cultural mediators, and agents of change. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) emphasize that teacher identity is the result of a continuous reflective process, while Sachs (2005) refers to identity as something political and contextual. In English language teaching, this issue becomes increasingly relevant because teachers not only transfer linguistic knowledge, but also become cultural representations of the language they teach (Varghese, 2008). English teachers often face a dilemma between being an extension of a foreign culture and maintaining the integrity of local values. Therefore, identity negotiation became an important mechanism in their professional practice (Drori et al., 2013; Ma, 2023; McCall et al., 2021).

In the context of Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, the study of the identity of English teachers is beginning to develop (Anindya & Triyoga, 2025; Sulistiyo et al., 2023). De Costa and Norton (2016) argues that language teachers' identities are influenced by power relations in the classroom and community, while Barkhuizen (2016) develops a narrative approach to examine teachers' experiences in shaping their professional identities. However, most of the research focused on the context of general education or urban schools (Carter Andrews & Donaldson, 2009; Keiler, 2018), with relatively little attention to the context of madrassas or religious-based institutions in rural areas. Some studies have raised this issue in general, but have not specifically explored how teachers' identities are negotiated in an Islamic educational environment that is steeped in local religious and cultural values (Gholami & Costantini, 2025; Kiramba et al., 2024).

Research on the professional identity of English teachers in madrasas, especially those in rural areas and closely tied to Islamic values, is still very

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limited. In fact, in a context like this, the process of negotiating teachers' professional identities becomes more complex and interesting to research. This research seeks to answer this need by conducting a case study at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin, Tiris District, Probolinggo Regency. The uniqueness of the local and cultural contexts of these educational institutions makes this research important to explore how teachers navigate their identities in the midst of professional, cultural, and spiritual demands.

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the negotiation process of professional identity of English teachers in the context of learning rooted in local and religious cultures. To identify the contextual factors that influence the formation of teacher identity, understand identity negotiation strategies carried out in daily practice, and uncover their impact on the English language learning process. The focus of attention is directed to how English teachers balance their role as global knowledge transmitters with their position as members of local religious and traditional communities. This focus is selected because English teachers working in faith-based and culturally grounded institutions experience unique and often competing demands that differ significantly from those in mainstream schools.

In such settings, teachers are required not only to deliver a globally oriented curriculum but also to safeguard religious norms and community expectations. These responsibilities create a complex space of identity negotiation that remains underexplored in the literature, particularly in rural madrasa contexts. By examining how teachers navigate these overlapping obligations, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how professional identity is constructed in culturally sensitive environments and responds to the need for research that addresses the intersection between global language teaching and local religious values.

The significance of this study lies in two main areas: theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this research is expected to expand the discourse on teacher professional identity, especially in the context of foreign language education in faith-based educational institutions. This research also offers

a contribution to the development of a pedagogical approach that is more contextual and sensitive to cultural dynamics. Practically, the results of this study are expected to provide input for policy makers, managers of educational institutions, and teacher training programs in designing curricula and learning strategies that consider teachers' local identities and values as an integral part of the educational process.

In this study, attention is directed toward understanding how English teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities within the cultural and religious environment of a pesantren-based madrasah. This context is shaped by strong communal expectations, institutional norms, and the interplay between global language demands and local values. The negotiation of professional identity among these teachers is influenced not only by the educational policies and curricular expectations imposed at the national level but also by the social relations and cultural perceptions that operate within the community. These dynamics illustrate the complexity of identity formation in faith-based educational settings and highlight the need to examine how teachers balance professionalism, religious commitments, and cultural responsibilities in their daily practices.

Thus, this research is expected to make an important contribution to the understanding of teachers' professional identities in a unique local context. Through an in-depth case study approach, this research opens up a space for reflection on how English education practices can run harmoniously in the midst of globalization and still maintain local cultural roots. The findings of this study are not only relevant for academics, but also for education practitioners and policymakers in designing culturally equitable education.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen to allow an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of negotiation of professional identity of English teachers in the context of local and religious culture at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin, Tiris District, Probolinggo

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Regency. Case studies provide flexibility to understand social realities in complex and natural contexts, particularly in relation to the professional practice of teachers in a typical Islamic educational environment (Creswell et al., 2007).

The research subjects consisted of two English teachers who were purposively selected based on criteria: (1) have at least three years of teaching experience at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin, (2) play an active role in learning and school institutional activities, and (3) be able to reflect on professional experience and cultural challenges faced in the teaching process. The selection of subjects with these criteria aims to ensure a direct link between the teacher's experience and the focus of the research.

Data collection was carried out through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were indeed conducted with the participating teachers to explore their personality in constructing and negotiating their professional identities. Observations were carried out using a non-participant approach, both inside and outside the classroom. Classroom observations focused on instructional practices, teacher–student interactions, the integration of cultural or religious elements in English teaching, and teachers' responses to curriculum demands. Observations outside the classroom included teachers' interactions during school activities, informal discussions, and engagements with the broader madrasa community. Documentation includes an analysis of the lesson plan (RPP), school policy documents, and relevant teachers' reflective notes.

Triangulation of methods and sources is used to improve the validity and reliability of the data. The results of the interviews were confirmed through observations and documents, and member checking was carried out by asking the informant (two teachers) for confirmation of the researcher's interpretation. Systematic process during the data collection and analysis process is also carried out as part of the audit trail to maintain the transparency of the research process.

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This process

includes the stage of coding data, grouping into categories, to identifying key themes that reflect the dynamics of teachers' professional identities. The researcher performed an iterative analysis by rereading the data, developing code, and drawing inter-thematic relationships, which were then interpreted within the framework of teacher professional identity theory (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; De Costa & Norton, 2016).

The entire research process is carried out by upholding the principles of research ethics. The identity of the participant is anonymized, and informed consent is obtained prior to data collection. The researcher maintains confidentiality, respects the local cultural context of the madrasah, and is neutral in observation. With this method, the research is expected to describe in depth how the process of negotiating the professional identity of teachers takes place in English learning practices rooted in local culture and the typical religiosity of madrasah educational institutions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on findings from in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation, three main themes were found in this study, which illustrate the dynamics of the professional identity of English teachers: teachers' perception of their professional identity, Adaptation strategies in learningand Challenges faced in negotiating professional identity.

Teachers' Perception of Their Professional Identity

English teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin view their identity not only as language teachers, but also as cultural agents responsible for maintaining and transferring local religious and cultural values in English language learning. Their identity is formed through the interaction between the pedagogical competence expected in English teaching and the commitment to local religious and cultural values that are highly valued in the madrasah environment.

Most teachers feel that they are tasked with teaching English while maintaining the cultural piety that exists in the madrasah society. One of

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the teachers emphasized that his role as teachers is not only focused on the technical aspects of the language, but also on the formation of students' character, which reflects local religious and cultural values.

Interview data show that English teachers perceive themselves not only as language instructors but also as cultural agents responsible for maintaining and transmitting local religious and cultural values. One teacher stated, "*Teaching English here means guiding students with Islamic character, not only language skills.*" This indicates that their identity is formed through the interaction between pedagogical responsibilities and the cultural-religious expectations of the madrasah.

Observation data support this perception. During classroom observations, teachers consistently integrated moral reminders, Islamic etiquette ("adab"), and community values while explaining English content. Teachers also avoided examples or materials they considered inappropriate for the cultural context.

Document analysis further confirms this pattern. Lesson plans and institutional guidelines contained objectives emphasizing character formation, Islamic values, and cultural sensitivity alongside English learning goals.

Table 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Identity

Theme	Description of Findings	Example Practice
Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Identity	Teachers perceive their professional identity not only as language instructors but also as cultural agents who transmit local religious and cultural values.	Teachers are careful in choosing teaching materials that do not conflict with religious values.

The findings of this study reveal that English teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin not only see themselves as language teachers, but also as guardians of local religious and cultural values. Their identity is formed in the process of negotiation between the pedagogical competence expected in English teaching and the commitment to religious values that must be maintained in

the madrasah. This supports the thinking of Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) view that teacher identity is formed through a continuous reflective process shaped by personal histories and social values, but it also extends their work by showing how this reflection is strongly grounded in Islamic norms and pesantren traditions. The teachers' narratives indicate that they constantly reconsider what it means to be a "good English teacher" in a faith-based context—negotiating between being competent language instructors and being moral role models and cultural guardians.

These findings are also consistent with more recent discussions of teacher professional identity as dynamic, hybrid, and context-dependent. Farwa et al., (2025), for example, argue that professional identity is closely tied to how teachers interpret and appropriate their professional roles, while Nigar et al., (2025) highlight how non-native English teachers develop "hybrid professional identities" as they navigate global expectations and local realities. The teachers in this study similarly embody hybrid identities: they see themselves as part of a global English-teaching profession while simultaneously positioning themselves as agents of religious moderation and cultural continuity. In the specific context of a rural, pesantren-based madrasah, professional identity negotiation thus involves balancing the authority of the national curriculum with the moral authority of the local religious community, confirming that language teacher identity is deeply entangled with wider ideological, cultural, and institutional forces rather than being a purely individual or pedagogical construct.

English teachers in these madrassas view that they have a responsibility not only to teach linguistic skills, but also to transfer moral and religious values to their students. This confirms that the professional identity of English teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin is shaped by two different worlds: a global-based world and a world that prioritizes local and religious values.

Adaptation Strategies in Learning

English teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin developed various strategies to overcome the tension between the national curriculum based on

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global competence and the local and religious values that must be maintained in the madrasah. These strategies include:

Selection of Teaching Materials Sensitive to Local Culture Teachers

Teachers select the teaching materials that do not contain foreign cultures that can conflict with religious values. The texts chosen emphasize on universal values that students can accept without sacrificing their religious teachings.

Interviews reveal that teachers intentionally choose texts that avoid Western cultural elements considered incompatible with Islamic values. One teacher noted, "We use materials that don't confuse students with ideas against our religion." Observations show teachers replacing culturally sensitive examples with locally relevant ones. Document reviews confirm the use of textbook substitutions or modifications toward more neutral or universal themes.

Integration of Religious Values in Learning

The integration of Islamic values in English material is carried out by integrating examples of conversations that reflect Islamic ethics in interaction. This is done to ensure that the teaching of English also strengthens the moral character of the students in accordance with the teachings of the religion. Interview data show teachers often integrate Islamic values into English lessons. A teacher shared, "While teaching conversation, I also remind them about speaking politely as taught in Islam." Classroom observations demonstrated that teachers inserted short moral reflections, Islamic greetings, and etiquette when conducting English learning activities. Documents, including lesson plans, contained sections labeled "values integration," indicating intentional alignment with religious teachings.

Translation of Terminology with Local Cultural Analogy

Teachers use local cultural analogies to explain foreign terms, such as describing the concept of "democracy" using the analogy of "deliberation", which is better known and understood by students. Interviews indicate

teachers use familiar cultural concepts to explain foreign terms. For example, one teacher explained, "Students understand 'democracy' better if we relate it to 'musyawarah."

Observations confirmed this method, as teachers frequently connected English concepts to cultural practices known by students. Document analysis showed notes in lesson plans guiding teachers to use analogies rooted in local culture.

Table 2: Adaptation Strategies in Learning

Strategy	Description of Findings	Example Practice
Selection of Teaching Materials	Teachers avoid the material that contains elements of Western culture that may contradict Islamic values.	Choose texts that emphasize universal and moral values that are relevant to the local culture.
Integration of Religious Values	The integration of religious values in English materials to remain relevant to the student's religious context.	Use conversation examples that reflect Islamic ethics and moral teachings in English.
Translation of Terms with Analogy	Translating foreign terms using local cultural concepts that are closer to the student's experience.	Using the analogy of deliberation to explain the concept of democracy.

Teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin successfully negotiated their professional identities by developing various adaptation strategies that align the global curriculum with local and religious values. As explained by Priestley et al., (2012) teachers act as active agents of the curriculum, who select teaching materials that are appropriate to the social and cultural context of their students.

This finding resonates with more recent work that reframes professional identity as closely tied to how teachers appropriate and reinterpret policy and curriculum in practice (Phuong et al., 2025).Rather than being passive

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implementers of a global, Western-oriented English curriculum, these teachers actively reconstruct it so that it supports the cultivation of Islamic character and local cultural continuity.

The integration of religious and cultural values into English lessons also reflects broader trends in language teacher identity research, which emphasize hybridity and context-sensitivity. Yang & Forbes, (2025), describe how non-native English-speaking teachers develop hybrid identities as they navigate global English norms and local ideological commitments, while Ahn, (2021) and G. Liu, (2025) show how teachers and students negotiate multiple literacies and imagined communities in specific sociocultural settings. The teachers in this study similarly use English not only as a tool for global communication but also as a medium for transmitting Islamic ethics and community-based values. In the context of a rural, faith-based madrasah, these adaptation strategies can therefore be understood as a form of identity work in which teachers align their professional obligations with their religious commitments and local cultural expectations. This suggests that curriculum adaptation in such settings is not merely a pedagogical technique, but a central mechanism through which teachers negotiate and sustain their professional identities.

The strategies found in this study show that teachers are not only language teachers who rely solely on foreign materials, but they play a role in maintaining moral, ethical, and religious values in teaching English. The integration of religious values in English language learning is an important part of ensuring that the language taught not only enhances students' linguistic abilities, but also serves as a medium to teach Islamic values in accordance with their religious teachings.

Challenges in Professional Identity Negotiation

Teachers face tensions between the demand to follow a more global national curriculum and the expectations of local communities that want them to maintain local religious and cultural values. Teachers feel trapped in a dilemma between following a larger education policy and

meeting the expectations of local communities who want them to maintain cultural integrity in English teaching. Interview data show teachers feel caught between "global" and "local" demands. One teacher admitted, "We sometimes feel pressured by the curriculum, but the community expects us to keep everything religiously safe." Observations reveal this dilemma when teachers skip or adjust certain topics from national textbooks to avoid cultural conflicts. Document analysis also reflects this tension. National curriculum materials promote global exposure, while local school policy documents emphasize religious character and cultural preservation.

Table 3: Challenges in Professional Identity Negotiation

Theme	Description of Findings	Example Practice
Challenges in Identity Negotiation	Teachers experience tension between adhering to global curriculum demands and preserving strong local religious and cultural values.	The demand to teach English materials in accordance with national curriculum standards tends to be global, while on the other hand it must respect local and religious values.

The challenges faced by English teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin strongly reflect the professional dilemmas often faced by teachers in a faith-based education environment. The tension between global competency standards in the national curriculum and the preservation of strong local and religious values creates a challenging situation. As explained by Sachs (2005), the professional identity of teachers is not only shaped by technical competence, but also by interaction with the social and cultural expectations that exist around them.

The findings of this study highlight the complex challenge teachers face in balancing national curricula that emphasize global competencies with the need to preserve local and religious values. Teachers do not simply follow prescribed guidelines; they actively interpret and adapt them based on their own beliefs, values, and the expectations of the communities they serve. This often creates a sense of tension, as they try to meet external

demands while remaining true to their cultural and ethical commitments. This is in line with Suarez & McGrath, (2022) that teacher identity is shaped not only by professional skills but also by the social and cultural contexts in which they work. At the same time, this tension can encourage creativity, pushing teachers to find ways to integrate global concepts in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their students' cultural context. This is in line with Dai & Hardy, (2024) who stated perspective that negotiating global and local demands can lead to a richer, more hybrid professional identity. Overall, these findings show that teaching is not simply about delivering content; it is about actively shaping knowledge in a way that honors both global perspectives and local values.

Teachers feel trapped in a dilemma between following a national curriculum that emphasizes global competence and meeting the expectations of a society that wants them to maintain cultural integrity in their teaching. This shows that the process of negotiating teachers' professional identities is something very dynamic and is influenced by complex external factors, such as educational policies and societal expectations.

Briefly, the professional identity of English teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin is shaped by the interplay between their roles as language instructors and cultural-religious agents within the madrasah environment. Data from interviews, observations, and documents consistently show that teachers perceive their identity as extending beyond teaching linguistic competence to maintaining and transmitting local religious and cultural values. This identity construction emerges from their daily experiences, institutional expectations, and community norms. Teachers integrate Islamic ethics into English instruction, select culturally safe learning materials, and use local cultural analogies to explain foreign concepts, reflecting a dynamic negotiation between global curriculum demands and the cultural-religious foundations of the school.

Furthermore, the data demonstrate that teachers employ multiple adaptation strategies to align national English curriculum goals with local

values, yet they continue to face significant challenges in managing competing expectations. While teachers strive to implement a curriculum oriented toward global competencies, they must also uphold the cultural integrity valued by the surrounding community. Observations and document reviews highlight how teachers navigate this tension by modifying instructional content and adjusting pedagogical approaches to maintain cultural relevance and religious appropriateness. Overall, the findings emphasize that teachers' professional identities in faith-based settings are negotiated within a complex cultural and institutional landscape, requiring ongoing reflection, adaptation, and value balancing.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the professional identity of English teachers at MTs Nahdlatut Thalibin is formed in the complex negotiation between the demands of a national curriculum based on global competence and local and religious values upheld in madrasas. Teachers in this madrasah not only teach English as a linguistic skill, but also act as cultural agents who integrate moral and religious values in learning. Despite facing challenges in balancing two often conflicting demands, teachers have managed to develop a range of adaptation strategies that allow them to remain relevant in global education without neglecting local values. However, this study has several limitations. The findings are based primarily on a specific cultural and educational context, which may limit their generalizability to other regions or types of schools. Additionally, the study relied mainly on self-reported perceptions of teachers, which may be influenced by social desirability or personal biases.

For further research, it would be valuable to examine these dynamics in different cultural and institutional settings to see how teachers negotiate global and local demands in varied contexts. Longitudinal studies could also track how teachers' professional identities evolve over time as curricula change and as global and local pressures shift. Investigating the impact of targeted professional development programs on helping teachers manage

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these tensions could provide practical insights for policymakers and educational leaders.

This research makes an important contribution to expanding the understanding of teachers' professional identities in the context of faith-based education, as well as the importance of a curriculum that is more contextual and sensitive to local values in English language learning.

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