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Beyond technical competence: the lived experience of professionalism among EFL teachers in Addis Ababa

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

Teacher professional development has become increasingly prominent in recent years, as teaching has grown more complex and challenging. Educators now need, more than ever, to refresh and enhance their expertise through continuous professional growth (Craft, 2000). The literature consistently emphasises that teachers must regularly update their pedagogical repertoire in order to function as adaptive experts capable of differentiating instruction (Bransford et al., 2005). Teacher knowledge and practice are among the most significant factors affecting student performance in schools (Darling-Hammond-Sykes, 1999; Fullan et al., 2006).

The need for continuous professional development is especially pronounced among English language teachers. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), the field of second language teaching has undergone numerous changes and transformations over the years, and language teaching differs from other areas of education that experience less rapid change. Since English is the most widely used language in political, cultural, and economic activities worldwide, educational institutions must respond to new demands arising from curriculum change, language testing, and learners' needs.

1.2. The Ethiopian context

Ethiopia provides a particularly relevant context for studying EFL teacher professionalism. The country has achieved remarkable progress in expanding education at all levels, although concerns about quality remain (Ministry of

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Education [MOE], 2007). English has a special role in Ethiopian education: it is used as a medium of instruction in secondary and post-secondary education (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 1994) and has been taught as a school subject from Grade 1 at the national level. Despite this policy, studies consistently show that many Ethiopian students experience moderate to high levels of foreign language anxiety (Firew, 2008; Gerencheal, 2016), while the English proficiency of some EFL teachers remains a serious concern.

Kahsay (2016) describes a persistent vicious cycle in which Ethiopian students are taught English by teachers who themselves learned the language as a foreign language. This cycle, dating back to the 1970s, stems from education expansion policies that prioritised access over quality, thereby contributing to low levels of English language proficiency among teachers.

The Ministry of Education has developed two strategies for teacher professional development, focusing on updating and upgrading teachers through pre-service and in-service training (MOE, 2009). In Ethiopia, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) refers to two main processes: updating, which is a continuous process focused on subject knowledge and pedagogy; and upgrading, which involves further study beyond regular working hours in order to improve qualifications. According to MOE (2009), CPD helps teachers improve their performance by continuously supporting their personal and professional development.

1.3. Statement of the problem

Despite policy interventions, a significant gap remains between intended and actual professional competence among Ethiopian teachers. The General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP) document acknowledges that continuous teacher professional development schemes have been affected by long-standing structural problems, including a lack of needs assessment in teacher training programmes, poorly coordinated training initiatives, and fragmented CPD provision (MOE, 2008).

English language teaching in government schools has declined critically, particularly in its ability to meet the demands of higher education. According to Negash (2006), the problem of English as a medium of instruction becomes evident when students reach higher education unable to speak, write, listen to, or understand the language adequately. This issue is closely linked to the shortage of qualified teachers, which is largely the result of inadequate access to relevant CPD. As Mejena (2003) noted, English language teachers in Ethiopia teach on the basis of what they possess, what they understand, what they think, and what they believe. Teachers cannot offer more than they themselves possess, and the professional development they consider appropriate and viable often remains unavailable throughout their careers.

1.4. Research gap and objectives

Despite the large body of literature on professional development in general, there remains a lack of research on EFL teacher professionalism in Ethiopia. Much of the existing research has adopted quantitative designs, which may be viewed as a limitation (Hoş-Topal, 2013), as such approaches often fail to provide deeper insights into participants' views, beliefs, and attitudes (Johnson-Christensen, 2014). In addition, a considerable portion of the literature offers general and, in many cases, theoretical descriptions of professional teachers and professionalism (Tichenor-Tichenor, 2005). However, little empirical research has investigated these issues from the perspectives of teachers themselves.

This paper aims to fill this gap by conducting a phenomenological inquiry guided by the following research question: How do English language teachers in Ethiopian secondary schools describe and experience professionalism?

The specific objectives include:

1. to analyse teachers' perceptions of teaching as a profession or an occupation;
2. to identify the qualities and characteristics that teachers associate with professionalism;
3. to explore the role of lived experience in teachers' professional identity formation;
4. to investigate the relationship between teachers' perceptions and official representations of professionalism.

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of professionalism in teaching

Every profession, in the course of its development, has sought to define what it means to be a professional and to demonstrate professionalism. Shulman (1986, as cited in Bransford et al., 2005) identified six common characteristics of professions: service to society with an ethical commitment to clients; a body of scholarly knowledge on which practice is based; engagement in practical action and the enactment of knowledge; uncertainty arising from the diversity of client needs and requiring professional judgment; the role of experience in shaping practice; and the establishment of professional communities in which knowledge is shared and standards are set.

When applied to teaching, Bransford et al. (2005) argue that teaching is not simply a calling, although it may have vocational dimensions. Teaching is a purposeful and irreplaceable instrument in the transformation of society, combining systematic and scientific aspects with tradition and practical experience. Cooperation among practitioners is crucial because teachers need to understand how to act as members of a professional community, with shared access to knowledge, standards, and commitments (Bransford et al., 2005).

2.2. *Sockett's framework of teacher professionalism*

Sockett (1993) developed a conceptual framework of teacher professionalism and identified five fundamental dimensions: personal traits and virtues, professional knowledge, professional practice, professional community, and professional status and standing. This model acknowledges that professionalism is not only about what teachers know and do, but also about who they are as individuals. Sockett (2008) notes that individual teachers may view themselves as professionals, scholars, change agents, nurturers, child advocates, or moral agents. These images of professional identity play a vital role in sustaining teachers' commitment to their work and their adherence to professional norms (Darling-Hammond-Bransford, 2005). Recent scholarship has further emphasized that teacher identity is not static but is continually shaped by personal, relational, and institutional factors (Day, 2021), and that teacher agency – the capacity to act purposefully within structural constraints – is central to sustaining professional commitment, particularly in neoliberal policy contexts (Buchanan, 2020).

2.3. *Language teacher professionalism*

Recent decades have witnessed significant changes in language teaching, as shifting educational paradigms have transformed understandings of how teachers learn their profession (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Richards-Farrell, 2005). Mann (2005) identified several key features of language teacher development: its bottom-up nature, in contrast to top-down staff development; its emphasis on insider rather than external perspectives; its partial independence from institutional structures, although it is often supported by institutions; its character as a continuous and unfinished process of becoming; its concern with teachers' inner worlds of conscious decision-making; and its engagement with personal, moral, and value-based dimensions.

2.4. *Personal traits and virtues in teaching*

The emphasis on personal qualities in teacher professionalism is echoed in Noddings' ethic of care (1984, 2003), which places caring at the centre of teaching. Noddings argues that caring is not merely an affective response but a primary ethical disposition that shapes pedagogical relationships. In a similar vein, Palmer (2007) asserts that identity and integrity are at the heart of teaching, and that genuine teaching flows from the teacher's authentic self. The focus on role modelling is also consistent with Bandura's social learning theory (1986), which suggests that learning occurs through observation and imitation. Teachers therefore understand that they are constantly engaged in modelling, which remains an integral part of professional practice.

2.5. Subject matter expertise and pedagogical knowledge

Shulman's work (1986, 1987) on teacher knowledge distinguishes between content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and curricular knowledge. In the case of EFL teachers, language competence represents a particularly important issue. Richards (2017) highlights the importance of teachers' language proficiency for student performance, suggesting that language educators should serve as models of effective language use. Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence emphasizes that language and culture cannot be separated; therefore, successful EFL teachers also need to be culturally competent.

Extending this line of inquiry, Levrants (2022) examined how foreign language teachers' knowledge base is shaped by teaching experience. The study found that experienced teachers draw more extensively on pedagogical content knowledge, while novice teachers rely more heavily on subject matter knowledge, with important implications for differentiated professional development. Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner suggests that professional practice is characterised by knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action, that is, the real-time adjustments made in expert practice. This aligns with teachers' perceptions of teaching as requiring practical wisdom and the ability to make meaningful decisions in specific situations, rather than the mere technical application of prescribed methods.

2.6. Commitment to professional growth

Studies of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) and the self-directed professional (Hargreaves, 2000) emphasize teachers' active contribution to their own professional growth. Collaborative professional development involving inquiry and the sharing of experiences offers meaningful opportunities for professional learning through professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2006) and teacher networks (Lieberman-Mace, 2010). According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), effective professional development is characterised by several key features: a focus on content, the integration of active learning, support for collaboration, the use of models of effective practice, the provision of coaching and expert support, opportunities for feedback and reflection, and sustained duration.

2.7. Language teacher associations in Global South contexts

Teacher associations play an important role in enhancing professional development, cooperation, and innovation among teachers. Kuchah and Salama (2022) note that language teacher associations offer opportunities for long-term professional development, enabling teachers to learn from one another, share best practices, and participate in educational reform. Elsheikh et al. (2018) report that African teacher associations face a myriad of challenges but provide much-needed professional learning opportunities that are often unavailable within formal

systems. Milligan (2022) offers a broader theoretical analysis of teacher professionalism in the Global South, arguing that dominant Western frameworks often fail to capture the relational, context-specific, and value-driven dimensions of teachers' work in postcolonial settings.

Parallel tensions in teacher professionalism have also been examined in recent phenomenological studies from the Global South. Makhanya and Mkhize (2023) investigated the effects of post-apartheid education policy on the emergence of performative demands that stand in opposition to teachers' relational professional identities in South Africa. Oliveira and Santos (2024) reported that EFL teachers in Brazil experienced tensions between systems of obligatory documentation and actual classroom practice, revealing similar patterns of dual consciousness. Ahmed and Khan (2022) examined the role of professional identity in teachers' experiences of conflict between Western-based competency models and local cultural values of care and relationality. Taken together, these studies suggest that the performative-relational dichotomy documented in the Ethiopian context reflects broader trends within Global South education systems shaped by postcolonial legacies and centralised policy structures.

2.8. Theoretical framework: Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology

The present research is grounded in Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, which centres on the concept of *Dasein*, understood as the mode of human being or as human existence situated in the world. According to Heidegger (1962), human beings cannot exist in isolation from the world in which they are already embedded. When phenomenology becomes interpretive, it moves into the domain of hermeneutics. Heidegger emphasized that all encounters are interpreted through the background of an individual's prior understanding. This interpretive process focuses on the meanings of experience, how these meanings develop, and their cumulative consequences at the individual and social levels (Polkinghorne, 1983). Hermeneutics aims to reveal phenomena through language (Annells, 1996) within a hermeneutic circle, where understanding emerges through an iterative movement between the parts and the whole. Sloan and Bowe (2021) provide a contemporary articulation of this approach in educational research, emphasizing how hermeneutic phenomenology enables researchers to explore the lived experience of teaching as a situated, interpretive, and relational phenomenon.

This framework is appropriate for exploring teachers' lived experiences of professionalism because it acknowledges that understanding is always situated within prior experience and that interpretation is central to meaning-making. Unlike Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to bracket assumptions, Heideggerian hermeneutics recognizes that complete bracketing is impossible and that the researcher's pre-understandings serve as resources for interpretation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The research design used in this study is qualitative and phenomenological, following the principles of Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenological research is a systematic endeavour to capture and describe individuals' lived experiences in order to better understand the meaning, structure, and content of the phenomena under study (van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 1997). As van Manen (1990) explains, "phenomenology demands to know the very nature of a phenomenon, that which renders a something what it is – and without which it would not be what it is."

3.2. Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The researcher's insider knowledge, based on 19 years of teaching experience in Ethiopian public and private schools, enriched the interpretation but also required strict reflexivity. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study to record assumptions, preconceptions, and evolving understandings. Interpretive biases were identified and examined through debriefing sessions with a second coder, an Assistant Professor of ELT at Dire Dawa University. Although Heideggerian hermeneutics acknowledges that bracketing cannot be fully achieved, the researcher adopted an attitude of openness and curiosity by consciously suspending judgment during the interviews (Gadamer, 1989).

3.2.1. Insider knowledge as interpretive resource

Teaching experience in Ethiopian state schools, including primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, provided the researcher with interpretive breadth while also heightening the need for self-awareness and reflexivity. This prolonged engagement with the Ethiopian education system offered first-hand insight into the systemic opportunities and challenges faced by EFL teachers. It also facilitated access to participants and helped the researcher understand their narratives without reducing them to overly simplistic explanations. Nevertheless, the insider position also carried the risk of projecting the researcher's own experiences onto participants' accounts.

To address this tension, the researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the study to record assumptions, preconceptions, and shifting understandings. One sample entry reads: "Today I interviewed T14, a veteran teacher who spoke passionately about his classroom as his only space for practising English. I felt strongly aligned with his experience, as I have often felt the same loneliness. I must be careful not to project my own emotions onto his story." Debriefing with a second coder, an Assistant Professor of ELT, provided an external audit of the interpretations, while member checks with five participants helped confirm that the

analysis resonated with their lived experiences. During the interviews, the researcher adopted an attitude of openness and curiosity, following Gadamer (1989), by consciously suspending judgment while recognizing that complete bracketing is impossible within a Heideggerian hermeneutic framework. The researcher's insider knowledge was therefore not treated as something to be ignored, but rather as a resource to be used reflexively throughout the interpretive process.

3.3. *Participants and sampling*

The study used purposive criterion sampling to identify participants who could provide rich and meaningful descriptions of their experiences (van Manen, 2014). In-depth individual interviews were conducted with sixteen English language teachers working in government secondary schools in Addis Ababa. The sample included 10 men and 6 women, with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 34 years: four early-career, six mid-career, and six late-career teachers. The participants held either bachelor's or master's degrees, accounting for 56.25% and 43.75% of the sample, respectively.

To capture the diversity of the educational landscape in Addis Ababa, participants were selected from four sub-cities representing different contexts: Yeka and Gulele, densely populated urban areas; Arada, the old city centre; and Akaki Kaliti, a peripheral and industrial mixed-growth area. Two schools were selected from each sub-city, resulting in a total of eight participating schools.

3.4. *Data collection*

Eight formal Continuous Professional Development (CPD) portfolios were reviewed, one from each participating school. These portfolios are mandatory institutional documents. They ranged from 4 to 17 pages in length, with an average of 10.9 pages per school. They typically included: (a) needs assessment forms, (b) priority-setting tables at school, department, and individual levels, (c) activity logs and allocated hours, (d) session plans with stated objectives and durations, (e) observation checklists, and (f) portfolio completion records. However, the availability and quality of these components varied considerably across schools.

School 1, whose portfolio consisted of 10 pages, presented a professionally structured three-level module at the school, department, and individual levels, with clear objectives and collaborative activities. By comparison, the portfolio from School 5, consisting of 13 pages, was characterized by repeated filler text – “Impair the long-term outcomes of the business” – inserted identically into several priority sections, alongside many blank areas. The portfolio from School 3, consisting of 12 pages, was largely incomplete and difficult to interpret; the only accessible page was page 8, which contained only a series of zeros and sequence numbers. The six-

page portfolio from School 2 was the only one that documented teamwork with a psychologist and included peer observation guidelines.

The decision to use portfolios was based on the fact that they are the main institutional artefacts formalising teacher professionalism in Ethiopian secondary schools and are used to assess teacher professionalism. The sampling rationale was representation at the school level. Each school (N=8) contributed one portfolio, allowing for maximum variation across the four sub-cities. This enabled comparison among schools with qualitatively different documented approaches to CPD implementation, ranging from relational documentation, as seen in Schools 2 and 4, to performative compliance, as seen in Schools 5, 3, and 7. The analysis of these portfolios is presented in Section 4.8 and is organized around the relational and performative models that emerged from the data.

3.5. Data analysis

Document analysis procedures. The document analysis followed Bowen's (2009) three-step approach: skimming, close reading, and interpretive analysis. This approach was operationalized through a hermeneutic document analysis protocol developed for the present study. The protocol combined Heideggerian concepts, including lived body, lived time, and lived relation, with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. This integration helped examine how teacher professional identity was constructed through CPD portfolios.

First stage: skimming. In each portfolio, physical characteristics were examined, including whether the document was organized or rushed, template-driven or personalized, handwritten or typed, and complete or fragmented. The overall tone was also noted, for example, whether it was bureaucratic, reflective, performative, or incoherent. For instance, the portfolio from School 1 was well written, with clear section titles and a logical three-module structure. By contrast, School 7's portfolio contained disjointed and incoherent text, suggesting rushed or superficial work. The School 3 portfolio included pages containing only zeros and number sequences, with no meaningful content, indicating a high level of performative compliance.

Second stage: close reading. This stage involved line-by-line coding according to four analytic dimensions derived from the objectives of the study:

Professional self and disclosure of views. The analysis examined the use of personal possessive language, such as *my skill* and *my speaking skill* in Schools 4 and 7, as well as institutional plural forms, such as *we* and *the teacher*.

Articulation of perceived needs. Genuine, context-related needs were distinguished from generic or copied priorities. For example, School 5 repeatedly used the same phrase, "Impair the long-term outcomes of the business," across three priority sections.

Evidence of practice and relationality. The analysis identified documentation related to collaboration with students, parents, psychologists, or peers. Examples included School 2's work with a psychologist and School 1's peer planning and co-teaching models.

Description of challenges and limitations. The presence or absence of reflection sections, blank fields, and descriptions of problems encountered was recorded. For instance, the School 6 portfolio contained an English language test intended for students, which represented questionable evidence of CPD.

The dimensions were rated on a scale from 1 to 5, ranging from *Poor/Performative* to *Excellent/Hermeneutic*. Each rating was supported with quotations and interpretive analysis through existential and systemic lenses.

Third stage: interpretive analysis. This stage examined three aspects of the experience reported by teachers: (a) personal voice and agency, such as the use of *I* or *my* instead of institutional language; (b) time orientation, namely whether professional development was presented as a continuous process or as a series of disconnected episodes; and (c) collaboration, including work with students, parents, colleagues, or specialists.

Lived body referred to the presence or absence of personal voice and agency-related terms. For example, School 1 made frequent use of *I*, *me*, and *my*, whereas School 5 largely erased personal voice.

Lived time referred to the temporal orientation of professional development, namely whether it was presented as continuous, with clear start and end dates, or as segmented and lacking coherent timelines. For example, School 7's entries lacked coherent dates, whereas School 4 provided clear semester-based schedules.

Lived relation referred to evidence of collaboration. For example, School 2 clearly documented activities such as "discussing with students," "discussing with parents," "working with a psychologist," and "peer observation and feedback." By contrast, School 7's entries were largely solitary and self-centred.

The analysis generated the following codes: **relational documentation** in Schools 2, 4, and 1; **performative compliance** in Schools 5, 3, and 7; and **teacher voice present/absent**. Schools 1 and 4 showed evidence of teacher voice through the use of personal possessive pronouns, as in *developing my skill*, whereas Schools 3 and 7 showed limited or absent teacher voice.

Triangulation and synthesis. The document findings were triangulated with interview and focus group data. Themes from the interviews, such as teachers' criticism of CPD as mere paperwork, were compared with document features, including repeated placeholder text in School 5, blank pages in School 3, and nonsensical entries in School 7. Disconfirming cases were also identified, particularly Schools 2 and 4, which represented exceptions to the performative

pattern. These examples indicate that relational documentation is possible within the current CPD framework.

A cross-case synthesis was then conducted to identify patterns across the eight portfolios in relation to professional self-concepts, categories of perceived needs, forms of practice, and narratives of challenges. This synthesis revealed a performative-relational split: six portfolios displayed predominantly performative qualities, while two portfolios, Schools 2 and 4, showed evidence of relational documentation.

The full hermeneutic document analysis protocol, including rating anchors ranging from 1 = *Poor/Performative* to 5 = *Excellent/Hermeneutic*, ecological systems mapping at the micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono levels, and cross-case synthesis templates, is available via Google Drive¹.

3.6. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established according to the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was ensured through the triangulation of data sources, including interviews, focus group discussions, and documents; member checks with five participants; peer examination through an interpretive team approach; debriefing sessions with the supervisor and committee members; prolonged engagement, supported by the researcher's 19 years of experience in the context; and negative case analysis.

Transferability was supported through thick description of the setting, participants, and research methods, enabling readers to judge the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was strengthened through detailed documentation of the research design and procedures, inter-coder discussion, supervisor consultation, stepwise replication, and reflexive journaling. Confirmability was supported through triangulation, methodological transparency, engagement with relevant literature, reflexive practices, and collaborative analysis, which helped surface and critically examine the researcher's pre-understandings.

3.7. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained at multiple levels, including the Addis Ababa University Departmental Research Committee, the Addis Ababa City Education Bureau, sub-city education offices, and school principals. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, and confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms: T1-T16 for individual interview participants and FGD1_T1-FGD2_T4 for focus group participants. The data were stored on password-protected computers and were accessible only to the research team.

¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1s-BdMeeo8bf3DonvXRVC2V9A1CFeDPZZ/view?usp=sharing>

4. Findings

4.1. Introduction to findings

To understand the expectations and intentions that drive and guide teachers' professional practice, teachers' perceptions of their occupation were explored through in-depth phenomenological interviews and focus group discussions. The analysis is based on the accounts of 16 EFL teachers and two focus groups, and it shows that the image of the professional teacher in the Ethiopian context is shaped by a rich range of beliefs.

All 16 teachers in this study affirmed that teaching is a profession and not merely an occupation for earning a living. Nevertheless, there was considerable variation in how teachers understood and described the nature of their professionalism, reflecting nuanced interpretations shaped by experience, personal philosophy, and contextual circumstances. All respondents identified certain traits as defining their practice and making their profession special, and in some cases even sacred.

T14 captured a sentiment echoed by many: "Teaching is a big profession, a noble profession. We say teaching is a mother of all professions. Yeah, because all other professions are derived from this teaching profession. That's why we call it the mother of other professions. If no teaching, you can't get other professions." This figurative language positions teaching as the cornerstone of society itself – not merely as one profession among others, but as the profession from which other professions emerge.

T8 added a spiritual dimension, stating, "I think teaching is a gift of God. As I think." This perception elevates teaching beyond technical competence to something approaching a vocation or calling, suggesting that professionalism in teaching involves a form of vocational commitment that transcends economic calculation.

The distinction between profession and occupation was consistently articulated across all interviews and focus groups. T5 explained: "When we say occupation, we work this job for the sake of maybe money or for something else. Okay, when I get some another opportunities, I move there. So profession, it's a profession it's not an occupation." T10 reinforced this view: "When we say occupation, you may occupy something by two or three days or weeks of training, but teaching is not like that. For that matter, teaching is not occupation, it's a profession."

FGD1 participants collectively affirmed this view. FGD1_T2 stated, "I think teaching is not an occupation. It is a profession because the teacher must love their profession." FGD1_T3 added a structural argument: "It's a profession because it has got assigned trainings, assigned courses and assigned learning duration so that it could be a teacher. So it's not just an occupation."

Participants indicated that professionalism may be manifested in different ways and that it encompasses both attitudes and behaviours. Their responses were

analysed using Sockett's (1993) categorisation of teacher professionalism. Although Sockett identifies five key dimensions, the analysis showed that teachers' comments clustered around four broad categories of teacher professionalism: (i) personal traits and virtues, (ii) subject matter expertise, (iii) pedagogical knowledge and skills, and (iv) commitment to professional growth.

Table 1. Teacher professionalism based on the full dataset of 16 teachers and two FGDs

Category	Elements or traits	Frequency
I. Personal traits and virtues	Love and passion for teaching	15
	Intrinsic motivation / volunteer spirit	8
	Caring disposition / "good heart"	5
	Patience	2
	Being a role model / moral example	5
	Punctuality and discipline	4
	Confidence	3
	Being energetic and active	3
	Friendliness / approachability	1
	Moral integrity / strong moral character	1
	Being well-organized	2
	Creativity and initiative	2
	Being inspirational	1
	Being conscientious	1
	Having well-developed social skills	1
	Being flexible	2
Being empathetic and sensitive	1	
II. Subject matter expertise	In-depth content knowledge / mastery of the subject	14
	English language proficiency	5
	Knowledge of the target culture	1
	Knowledge of learners' generational context and textbooks	2
	Up-to-date knowledge	2

Category	Elements or traits	Frequency
III. Pedagogical knowledge and skills	Knowledge of methodology / how to teach effectively	9
	Knowing students' needs, backgrounds, and learning styles	4
	Planning and preparation, including lesson plans	7
	Using appropriate methods in different situations	3
	Engaging all students in the class	1
	Classroom management	2
	Being adaptive and flexible	3
	Preparing varied instructional materials	2
	Thinking outside the box	2
	Designing lessons to meet diverse needs	2
	Making expert use of various instructional methods	1
	Integrating instructional media and technology	1
	Capturing students' attention through engaging lessons	3
IV. Commitment to professional growth	Need for continuous improvement / updating	13
	Engaging in CPD activities / formal programmes	8
	Reading and self-study	5
	Learning from experienced colleagues	4
	Conducting action research	2
	Attending webinars and workshops	3
	Learning through professional communication	3
	Critical perspective on CPD implementation	3
	Participation in professional associations, including EELPA	4

4.2. Personal traits and virtues

This theme refers to the individual traits, dispositions, and character features that teachers consider essential for becoming a professional educator. These traits are described as inherent personal qualities. Unlike skills that can be learned, they are understood as qualities that individuals possess and that characterise who they are, rather than what they have been taught. Teachers consistently framed these

personal values as professional requirements, implying that professionalism in teaching cannot exist apart from the teacher's personality.

4.2.1. Love and passion for teaching

A genuine love for the profession emerged as a central characteristic of teachers, without which other qualities would lose their meaning. Love or passion was mentioned as necessary by fifteen out of sixteen teachers, as well as by several focus group participants. T6 described a developmental view of professional love: "Teaching for me especially is a profession for me. It's not an occupation. But when I started teaching it was an occupation for me. But gradually teaching becomes a profession for me." This account shows that professional identity does not simply follow certification but is gradually formed through experience and commitment.

T11 emphasized the role of internal motivation: "The first thing is just I have to focus on the appetites of the teachers. Are they doing the profession or are they living in this profession with their interest, internal interest? If there is the attitude that I have towards teaching, if it is a positive, and if I am interested when I am the part of this profession, just the rest becomes very simple. So, the big problem is, I think, on this." The phrase "appetites of the teachers" captures the embodied and affective nature of professional motivation. Five other teachers in the individual interviews and focus groups also identified love and passion as the professional qualities on which their professionalism is based, while FGD1 respondents generally agreed that it is essential for teachers to love their profession.

4.2.2. Intrinsic motivation and volunteer spirit

In addition to a general affection for teaching, teachers stressed the importance of being personally rather than externally motivated. Intrinsic motivation was presented as what distinguishes the professional from the mere job-holder. T2 articulated this distinction clearly: "You have to have intrinsic motivation, right? If you expect extrinsic motivation or external motivation in salary, your living status, it's very hard to work properly." This statement does not dismiss the importance of remuneration; rather, it suggests that professionalism becomes difficult to sustain when it is based primarily on external rewards.

T1's phrase "lovely sacrifice" captures a profound paradox that emerged repeatedly: "Teaching for me, it is a lovely sacrifice. It needs sacrifice. You know? It's we have to exert our time, energy and it needs more effort. But it has not what? Gain as the effort. So it is a lovely sacrifice." Teachers willingly give more than they receive, and this sacrifice itself is described as "lovely," suggesting a vocational calling that transcends economic calculation.

4.2.3. Having a “good heart” and a caring disposition

Teachers also spoke about professional qualities that involve genuine concern for students. This caring orientation takes the form of patience, empathy, and sensitivity to students’ needs. T2 directly connected personal attributes with professional performance: “When you’re a teacher, you have to have a good heart. You have to be passionate. You have to be... You have to have intrinsic motivation... Even being a mother helped me a lot to be a good teacher.” The phenomenological meaning of this statement is not that only mothers can be good teachers, but that caring capacities developed through parenting – such as patience, attentiveness, and unconditional positive regard – can be transferred directly into teaching. This challenges views of teaching as a purely technical activity.

Two other teachers identified care as central to professionalism: one described it as the most important quality, while the other referred to family-like relationships with students.

4.2.4. Being a role model and moral example

Teachers expressed a strong awareness that they constantly model behaviour, attitudes, and values for students, whether intentionally or not. Professionalism therefore requires careful attention to one’s behaviour both inside and outside the classroom.

T9 developed this idea further: “A professional teacher must behave properly. For me, this is one item, this is one criterion. Another, a teacher must be a good example, a good example for the society, for the students, for every individual. A teacher must be a good example.” The progression from “students” to “society” and then to “every individual” indicates that teachers understand their modelling role as extending far beyond the classroom.

T14 added: “A teacher has to be role model, alright? Role model. A teacher has to be role model, a teacher has to be facilitator, monitor, leader and so on to teach students.” The phrase “morally built” suggests that morality is not merely a matter of doing what is right, but of possessing a well-formed moral character.

T3 connected role modelling to student success: “To encourage success among the students... you need to be a good model to them.” This places modelling within the context of student achievement and presents it as a pedagogical resource.

4.2.5. Additional virtues

A number of teachers mentioned punctuality and personal discipline as indicators of professionalism. T16 specifically linked teacher discipline to student achievement: “The professional teachers are disciplined. If it’s not disciplined, they didn’t show about the direction for the students.” This frames punctuality not merely as a matter of bureaucratic compliance, but as a pedagogical requirement.

Confidence was also identified as a crucial component of teaching. FGD2_T5 elaborated: “I think as English teachers, it should have confidence, and a positive thinker we have to be. And also, we have to be supportive. We have to... So, we have to have... We have to be energetic, confident, and positive.”

Teachers explained that it is necessary to bring energy and enthusiasm into the classroom. T6, referring to her model teacher, stated: “He was very energetic.” Creativity and initiative were also valued, particularly when standard methods proved insufficient. T1 linked creativity directly to methodology: “We have to have what? Creativity and then the methodology.”

Organization and preparation were identified as professional qualities that enable effective teaching. T10 offered a sophisticated framing: “If you are well organized in different situations, you are a professional.” Here, organization does not mean rigidity, but rather the ability to maintain structure while remaining flexible in response to changing conditions.

Taken together, these personal attributes portray the professional teacher as a person of character: someone who enjoys the work, cares deeply about students, sets a moral example, and brings energy, confidence, and imagination into the classroom. These qualities are not presented merely as desirable additions to technical competence, but as professional necessities.

4.3. Subject matter expertise

This theme concerns the breadth and depth of content knowledge that teachers need in order to be regarded as professionals. Unlike personal traits, subject matter expertise can be formally certified and systematically developed, although teachers emphasized that initial certification is insufficient without ongoing learning.

4.3.1. In- depth content knowledge

A common element in teachers’ perceptions was the view that deep subject knowledge forms the basis of professionalism. Fourteen of the sixteen teachers clearly stated that subject knowledge was important.

T1 praised her primary school English teacher: “She has the subject matter knowledge. She masters all the contents, all the topics.” The term “masters” implies not merely sufficient knowledge, but a high level of authority over the subject.

T9 expressed a broader perspective: “A teacher must be knowledgeable in every aspect, in every aspect, not only his or her subject area. Okay, in every dimension, in every aspect, a teacher must be knowledgeable.” This suggests that teachers understand professional knowledge as extending beyond narrow subject specialisation to include cultural knowledge, current events, and student development.

The remaining twelve respondents also repeatedly cited subject matter knowledge as a non-negotiable foundation of professionalism. Many specified that

such knowledge must go well beyond the immediate curriculum and encompass cultural, pedagogical, and developmental dimensions.

4.3.2. English language proficiency

In the case of EFL teachers in particular, language proficiency emerged as a clear and important element of subject knowledge. Teachers recognized that they should not only know about English but also be able to use it at an acceptable level.

T3 linked language development to professional practice: “I always update myself through doing action research on professional development, also searching from online to reading vocabulary.”

T12 described the relationship between professional growth and language development: “When you become professional English, your language skills, that means speaking skills, writing skills, listening skills, and even vocabulary and grammar skills, upgrade with your profession.”

T13 identified language skills as minimum requirements: “The minimum required must be a student or someone gets the skills. For example, writing skills, listening.”

T16 made an important connection between teachers’ speaking proficiency and student learning: “If the instructor or if the teacher doesn’t speak about well, it’s not sure about the direction or they’re not sure about what the students get from him.” Language proficiency is therefore not only related to teachers’ confidence; it is also central to instructional effectiveness. Students cannot receive proper guidance when teachers are unable to communicate information clearly.

FGD2_T6 emphasized the use of “modern English” as a quality of good teaching.

Interestingly, teachers also identified language proficiency as one of the areas in need of improvement. T2 admitted, “Most teachers, we have a lack of ability to speaking and also in writing skill.” T5 stated, “I want to improve my speaking and writing skills. If I get an opportunity, this is my prior to develop.”

4.3.3. Knowledge of target culture

The significance of cultural knowledge as part of subject knowledge was mentioned by one teacher, who recognized that language cannot be separated from culture.

T2 stated: “They must possess not only knowledge of English but also an understanding of the culture associated with it.” This reflects an advanced understanding of language teaching, namely that language is embedded in culture, although only one teacher explicitly mentioned this point.

4.3.4. Knowledge of young generations and textbooks

Teachers also emphasized the importance of knowing not only what they teach, but also whom they teach. This involves knowledge of textbooks as well as knowledge of contemporary young people.

T2 emphasized “knowledge relevant to young generations in textbooks.” This linking of “young generations” and “textbooks” suggests an understanding that curriculum must be mediated through knowledge of who students are.

T4 mentioned the need to “dig different kinds of internet and so on,” suggesting that knowledge of student-relevant materials requires ongoing research and engagement with online resources.

4.3.5. Up-to-date knowledge

Teachers emphasized that subject matter knowledge is not static but must be continuously updated in order to remain relevant. T3 stated: “Update myself day to day through reading also.” T7 offered an important rationale: “The subject matter by itself, it changes the situation accordingly.”

Subject matter knowledge emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned requirements across all interviews and focus groups. This strong emphasis suggests that, in the eyes of these teachers, subject knowledge is a non-negotiable requirement: personal friendliness or general teaching ability cannot compensate for weak subject expertise. The teachers demonstrated a sophisticated understanding that subject knowledge cannot remain static but must be continuously updated. In the case of language teachers in particular, practical language proficiency is just as important as knowledge about the language.

4.4. Pedagogical knowledge and skills

This theme represents professional expertise related to teaching methodology, lesson planning, classroom management, and instructional adaptation. If subject knowledge refers to what teachers know, pedagogical knowledge refers to how teachers translate that knowledge into student learning.

4.4.1. Knowledge of methodology and how to transmit knowledge

Teachers stressed that content knowledge alone is insufficient without an understanding of how to teach it. Methodology transforms subject knowledge into accessible instruction.

T1 stated: “The methodology also. But it is, I think it should be improved from time to time.” T2 emphasized: “They know how to transmit the skill or knowledge.”

T10 presented a particularly insightful argument: “You must know the methodology of teaching. Unless otherwise, it’s difficult to teach a human being.” This is a profound statement: transmitting information to human beings is very different from transmitting information to machines, because teaching requires knowledge of psychology, motivation, and relationships.

T15 emphasized pedagogy as a foundation: “If you don’t know the methodology, the students... if you don’t change the methodology, okay? everyone cannot understand what you say... The most important one, that’s pedagogy.”

This view was also affirmed by FGD participants. FGD1_T2 included “knowing about methodology and techniques” in her definition of a professional English teacher. FGD1_T3 emphasized “approaching students with different methodologies and way of teaching.” FGD1_T4 stated that a professional teacher “uses different kinds of methodologies.”

4.4.2. Knowing students’ needs, backgrounds, and learning styles

Professional teachers recognize that students are not homogeneous and therefore need to be addressed differently according to their needs and circumstances.

T2 emphasized: “They know how to treat different students in their needs. Try to understand what their student background.” The emphasis on students’ backgrounds indicates an awareness that classroom learning is shaped by factors beyond the classroom itself.

T5 added: “They understand their students. They know the different kinds of teaching method and techniques.” T16 linked teacher interest to student engagement: “The first one is based on the interest. If there are those teachers, they don’t have interest, they don’t teach about the students.”

4.4.3. Planning and preparation, including lesson plans

Planning was consistently identified by teachers as a characteristic of professionalism. Teaching and learning begin before the teacher enters the classroom.

T3 stated: “Starting from planning, that means having a lesson plan.” T5 emphasized “well-prepared, well-organized lessons.” T7 elaborated: “Preparing a plan. He has a subject, a timetable for his subjects, when and how he implements. So, this is the quality.” T8 added: “You have to prepare your lesson plan properly.” T10 noted the value of learning from colleagues: “For instance, how to prepare lesson plans... in addition to my experience, I got another experience from my colleagues.”

FGD2_T6 included being “well-prepared” among the qualities of a teacher. FGD2_T8 emphasized being “knowledgeable, and use different systems to manage the classroom.” The frequent references to planning suggest that teachers view professionalism as deliberate and intentional practice.

4.4.4. Using appropriate methods for different situations

Teachers stressed that professional teaching requires situational awareness and the ability to select methods appropriate to the situation, content, and students.

T5 stated: “They know the different kinds of teaching method and techniques if they have such kinds of things, qualities this is very important for teaching.”

T10 provided a highly articulate explanation: “Teaching may change in situations; it may be situational. According to your classroom situation, you may use different methods to teach the students. So, it’s difficult to list this, this, this, this, but there are different. So, if you are well organized in different situations,

you are a professional.” Professionalism, therefore, does not consist in having one correct method, but in possessing a repertoire of methods and knowing how to choose appropriately.

T15 offered a realistic illustration: “If you don’t change the methodology, okay? everyone cannot understand what you say... It depends on the feeling of the student. If the students are boring, okay, why don’t you change the method? When you change the method, okay, they might be aware or they might be active.” This statement suggests that teachers understand methodology as responsive to students’ engagement and classroom mood.

4.4.5. Classroom management

Although classroom management was explicitly named as a key professional quality by only two teachers, it was often implied in descriptions of teacher–student interaction. T12 stated: “The first and the basic qualities is classroom management, manage students, control students, then deliver quality lessons for the learners. I think this is the basic quality of teaching.” His formulation is significant: classroom management is presented as a prerequisite for quality instruction. FGD2_T8 emphasized the use of “different systems to manage the classroom.”

4.4.6. Being adaptive and flexible

Teachers valued the ability to modify plans and strategies according to classroom realities. T1 associated methodology with creativity, which presupposes adaptation: “You have to adjust and prepare yourself for delivering the education or what you have taught.” The phrase “adjust and prepare yourself” implies self-regulation in the process of adaptation. Similarly, T10 emphasized the importance of situational adaptation.

4.4.7. Additional pedagogical elements

Other pedagogical attributes were also cited by teachers. T1 emphasized engaging all students: “In my opinion, we have to engage all the students in the class.” Thinking outside the box was mentioned by T2 and T3 in connection with creativity. Designing lessons to accommodate the needs of diverse learners was mentioned by T2 and T4 and was closely related to knowledge of students. Capturing students’ attention, mentioned by T1, T2, and T3, was also regarded as essential for student engagement.

Pedagogical knowledge represents the practical dimension of professionalism: it concerns how teachers apply what they know to support student learning. The teachers demonstrated a complex understanding that teaching requires methodological competence, situational awareness, careful planning, and adaptation. They recognized that effective pedagogy begins before the teacher enters the classroom and continues through moment-by-moment instructional decisions.

4.5. Commitment to professional growth

This theme describes teachers' orientation towards lifelong learning and development – their willingness to grow, improve, and change in response to the evolving demands of their careers. It involves not only the recognition that learning must be a continuous process, but also the practices teachers undertake in order to become and remain professionals. This theme highlights the dynamic nature of professionalism as an emergent process.

4.5.1. Need for continuous improvement and updating

A common view among teachers was that professional knowledge and skills are not static but require continuous development. Thirteen out of the sixteen teachers clearly stated that they needed to grow continuously.

T1 expressed this clearly: “We have to improve our skills and knowledge. It is not stagnant knowledge or it is not fixed. So, it's not routine activity.” The idea of “not stagnant knowledge” captures a central aspect of teachers' understanding of professionalism: professional knowledge in teaching is dynamic because the teaching context – including students, society, technology, and language itself – is never static.

T15 provided one of the strongest justifications for continuous development: “So it's very mandatory for this one to be updated, to be what's civilized. We have to we have to what? profession professional development. So, each day, each year, every teacher must take what? The course to be to be to be civilized, to be competent with what? The new generation.” The motivation for updating is not merely abstract professional standards, but the ability to connect with and teach current students – “the new generation.”

Other teachers also expressed the need to keep updating their knowledge and skills. They used expressions such as “day to day,” “every now and then,” and “continuously progressive” to describe their orientation towards professional development.

4.5.2. Engaging in CPD activities

Teachers described their participation in various formal and informal professional development activities, while also expressing significant criticism of current programmes. T6 demonstrated active engagement through professional associations: “I am the executive committee member of English language professional association, and I participated in different seminars, in different workshops, in different training sessions and different sessions of English language professional association.”

FGD1_T2 added: “When I participated in ELPA, I got a lot of experience from that association. So that helps me to enhance my teaching techniques.” Three other participants mentioned formal CPD activities but expressed significant reservations about their usefulness, a theme discussed further in Section 4.5.5. Notably, the Ethiopian English Language Professionals Association (EELPA) was mentioned

positively by several participants. This voluntary professional association appeared to be more valuable to teachers than government-mandated INSET programmes.

4.5.3. Reading habits and self-study

Teachers identified independent reading as one of the main sources of professional development, undertaken independently and in their own time.

T3 stated: "Update myself day to day through reading also." T4 emphasized: "You have to read different kinds of sources of materials. So, you have to dig different kinds of internet and so on."

T7 warned: "If the teacher can't update this one or develop his professions day to day or read anything, they can't compute with the students." The word "compute" is notable here. Whether intended as *compete* or *cope*, it suggests a perceived gap between teachers and students when teachers fail to read, update themselves, and remain intellectually current.

T8 included "the habit of reading" among the minimum requirements of professionalism. T2 noted: "I read some books when I have a time." The phrase "when I have a time" suggests that reading is often fitted into personal time, reflecting the individual sacrifices teachers make in pursuit of professional growth.

4.5.4. Learning from experienced colleagues

Teachers valued opportunities to learn from more experienced colleagues, usually through informal mentoring relationships.

T3 mentioned "getting some experience from experienced persons." T8 expressed a desire to "communicate with experienced persons. I want to develop my skills." T10 described actual practice: "I got some experience from my colleagues in English department teachers. For instance, how to prepare lesson plan... in addition to my experience, I got another experience from my colleagues, especially who serve more than me."

T16 elaborated: "I do have the well-experienced instructor in our departments, well-matured person, the one who taught about more than 35 years also. Then from them, if I got about some professional training experience, the way how to develop our professionals." This represents a resource that has not been fully utilised within the system: experienced teachers who have both the willingness and the capacity to mentor younger teachers.

4.5.5. Critical perspective on CPD implementation

One major finding was teachers' critical awareness of the discrepancy between the promise and the reality of formal CPD programmes. This critical perspective itself can be understood as a sign of professionalism, since teachers do not passively accept poor provision but actively evaluate its relevance and usefulness.

T2 offered the most detailed criticism: “When we see this in our school, it seems like a CPD. It doesn’t work. I don’t like that. But when you say some training that just contributes for proficiency, that that works. But some training that doesn’t give me such a good thing or anything add for me, it works.”

T2 further explained the implementation problem: “The concept is really nice because when you have something bad, that will not make you work properly. But when you say the work, it’s just the paperwork. Nobody checks what we are doing, nobody checks what we are working on. We have to write something, we have to do something. That’s just the paperwork for me.”

T5 added: “To tell you frankly, I didn’t get anything from that in-service program because the program itself was not attractive. So, I didn’t get anything to apply in my class.” T6 criticized the structure of government-provided in-service training: “But the in-service training that is given by the government, honestly speaking, that is not something which is related to my work... There is nothing that I have to apply to in my classroom.” She continued: “It has to be very practical. I have already taken theoretical aspect of the things, so there is nothing that I should bring it to my classroom and to my professional development.”

The similarity among teachers’ critiques is striking. They distinguish between the concept of CPD, which they often regard as “really nice,” and its implementation, which they frequently experience as “just paperwork.”

Overall, teachers showed a strong orientation towards continuous professional growth. They recognized that initial certification is not sufficient for a successful teaching career. They also engaged in various professional development activities, including reading, learning from colleagues, conducting action research, attending webinars, and participating in professional associations, mostly on their own initiative and in their own time. At the same time, they expressed sharp criticism of formal CPD programmes, describing them as insufficiently connected to their needs, overly theoretical, and often reduced to meaningless paperwork.

4.6. Integration of focus group discussion findings

The focus group discussions provided useful triangulation and enriched the themes identified in the individual interviews. The FGDs not only confirmed the recurrence of several perceptions but also added nuance through group interaction.

4.6.1. FGD1 contributions

On teaching as a profession. All four participants in FGD1 affirmed that teaching is a profession. FGD1_T2 explicitly stated: “I think teaching is not an occupation. It is a profession because the teacher must love their profession.”

On the definition of a professional English teacher. Participants identified the most significant aspects of professional identity:

FGD1_T1: “For me, a professional English teacher means a teacher who has a quality of teachers. Like for example, a teacher should love his profession. He or she should consider teaching as a profession rather than an occupation. At the same time, he or she or the teacher, an English teacher, needs to have a subject matter knowledge and other qualities of teachers.”

FGD1_T2: “A professional English teacher for me means the person who has skill, knowledge and certified about the language, maybe the profession. So, the person has subject matter knowledge and the way that the person knows about how he or she teaches that profession and it has also knowledge about methodology and techniques.”

The FGD1 responses show considerable overlap with the core characteristics identified in the individual interviews: personal qualities, especially love for the profession; subject matter knowledge; pedagogical knowledge; and an orientation towards professional growth.

4.6.2. FGD2 contributions

On teacher qualities. The FGD2 responses added further detail:

FGD2_T5: “I think as English teachers, it should have confidence, and a positive thinker we have to be. And also, we have to be supportive. We have to... So, we have to have... We have to be energetic, confident, and positive.”

FGD2_T6: “Qualities of teaching, the best quality, I think, is handling students, and well-prepared. Well-prepared, and get students, and say appropriate appropriately, transfer information, attitudes, and modern English.”

FGD2_T8: “Teachers should be knowledgeable, and use different systems to manage the classroom. And always should be learner.” FGD2_T8’s phrase “always should be learner” captures Theme 4’s emphasis on continuous professional growth.

Overall, the FGD1 definitions converged around three core elements: love for teaching, subject knowledge, and methodology. The FGD2 participants, meanwhile, emphasized confidence, energy, positive attitude, classroom management, and lifelong learning.

4.7. The phenomenological essence: teaching as a holistic vocation

Synthesizing the findings from the four themes, individual interviews, and focus group discussions, the phenomenological essence of teacher professionalism, as perceived by these Ethiopian EFL teachers, can be described as a holistic vocation. It brings together who teachers are, in terms of personal virtues; what they know, in terms of subject knowledge; what they are able to do, in terms of pedagogical competence; and how they continue to develop, in terms of commitment to professional growth.

This holistic understanding is evident in the way teachers resist reducing professionalism to a single dimension. A professional teacher cannot be defined by

content knowledge alone, by a caring heart alone, or by methodology alone. Rather, professionalism emerges at the intersection of these dimensions and is embodied in the person of the teacher.

Several important insights emerge from this phenomenological analysis.

First, professionalism is not merely an activity but an identity. Teachers do not simply say that they practise professionalism; rather, they describe themselves as professionals. This identity orientation is expressed through the language of love, passion, and intrinsic motivation. T11's distinction between "doing the profession" and being "in this profession with their interest" captures this difference.

Second, professional practice is centred on care. The repeated references to a "good heart," patience, understanding students, and being a role model indicate that the teacher-student relationship is constitutive of professionalism. In this sense, relational teaching is professional teaching.

Third, teachers demonstrate sophisticated professional judgement. Their emphasis on situational adaptation, knowing when and how to apply different techniques, and responding to students' needs shows that they view teaching as a practice requiring practical wisdom.

Fourth, teachers are agentic in relation to their own development. Despite their criticism of formal CPD, they actively pursue professional growth through individual and collaborative reading, participation in professional associations, learning from colleagues, and the use of online resources.

Fifth, there is a significant gap between teachers' desire for professional development and what institutions provide. Teachers seek classroom-focused, practical, needs-oriented, ongoing training delivered by qualified trainers. Instead, they often experience training as theoretical, disconnected from classroom realities, paperwork-oriented, intermittent, and, in their own words, "just paperwork."

4.8. Document analysis: How CPD portfolios construct professionalism

The following analysis summarises the results of eight school-level CPD portfolios, one from each of the eight participating schools, labelled School 1 through School 8. Each portfolio consisted of 4-17 pages. The documents were analysed to examine how they constructed teacher professional identity, whether teacher voice was present or absent, and how they corresponded to the themes that emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions. The analysis followed Bowen's (2009) framework, operationalised through the hermeneutic document analysis protocol developed for this study (see Section 3.5 and Google Drive).

The analysis revealed a clear performative-relational divide. Two portfolios constructed a relational model that affirmed teacher identity, whereas six portfolios constructed a performative, compliance-based model that largely silenced teacher voice.

4.8.1. The relational model: Schools 2 and 4

Schools 2 and 4 received CPD portfolio scores of 4, indicating a substantial level on the hermeneutic protocol. These documents constructed the professional teacher as an agentic and collaborative practitioner whose professional self is formed through relationships with multiple stakeholders.

School 4 was particularly specific: “Every teacher will include a third topic of his own” (p. 5), and the teacher’s individual priority was formulated as follows: “Developing my skills to change documents and information by means of technology” (p. 7). The use of the possessive pronoun “my” indicates personal ownership of professional growth. The priorities were based on a needs assessment form completed by teachers and principals (p. 5), suggesting a bottom-up and consultative process.

School 2 constructed the professional self as relational and collaborative, involving work with students, parents, a psychologist, and colleagues. The documented activities included “discussion with students,” “discussion with parents,” “working with a psychologist,” and “peer observation and feedback.” The portfolio allocated eight hours to preparing and teaching through short training videos and notes, and four hours to working with a psychologist, indicating awareness of multi-professional collaboration.

These relational portfolios support the interview findings presented in Sections 4.2 and 4.5, where teachers emphasized that relationships with students, colleagues, and the wider community are central to their professional identity.

4.8.2. The performative model: Schools 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8

Six portfolios were rated either 1, indicating *Poor/Performative*, or 2, indicating *Limited*. These texts largely silenced teachers’ voices and reduced professionalism to compliance with top-down checklists.

School 3 represented the most extreme case: it contained a blank supervision checklist with long behavioural checklists but no space for teacher reflection. The structure suggested a disembodied practitioner whose lived experience was subordinated to assessment.

School 5 repeated the same placeholder text, “impair the long-term outcomes of the business,” in several priority sections, along with directives such as “The main purpose of this session is to,” which were left incomplete.

In School 6, the section on problems faced contained blank or incoherent statements. For example, “Group work was successful” was listed in the problems section.

School 8 repeated the same evidence record, including the phrase “Telegram Aneeser, Secretary of the main student program,” across all three identified needs.

School 1 presented a submissive, module-based portfolio with no evidence of individual agency, personal interest, or subject-specific professional identity.

School 7 subsumed personal professional identity into collective administrative discourse, replacing individual teacher voice with impersonal institutional language.

Common features across the six performative portfolios included template-based language, blank or garbled fields, repetitive placeholder text, the absence of personal possessive pronouns such as “my,” and no evidence of reflection on practice.

4.8.3. Triangulation with teacher perceptions

The document analysis provides material evidence of the structural gap that teachers reported during the interviews. When teachers described CPD as “just paperwork” (T2) and government INSETs as “not something which is related to my work” (T6), they were referring to a system that produces the kinds of paperwork observed in Schools 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

The systematic removal of teacher voice in these portfolios confirms the phenomenological finding that teachers feel their professional identities are not acknowledged by official systems. By contrast, the relational portfolios from Schools 2 and 4 indicate that formal CPD systems can affirm teacher identity when implementation is driven by authenticity rather than mere compliance. The fact that two out of the eight schools were able to do so suggests that the CPD framework itself is not necessarily the problem. Rather, the issue lies in the implementation of the framework, including leadership commitment, resource allocation, and institutional will.

5. Discussion

5.1. Teaching as a profession: beyond economic rationality

The fact that all 16 participants and both focus groups unanimously affirmed that teaching is a profession rather than merely an occupation is consistent with the broader literature on teacher professionalism (Hoyle, 2001; Sachs, 2003). However, the justification teachers provided goes beyond the conventional standards of specialised knowledge and autonomy that prevail in sociological accounts of professionalism (Evetts, 2011). Teachers grounded their understanding of professionalism in love, sacrifice, and moral commitment. T1’s notion of “lovely sacrification” and T8’s description of teaching as “a gift of God” add further dimensions to Palmer’s (2007) argument that teaching is rooted in identity rather than merely in technique.

The distinction teachers made between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (T2, T11) complicates policy strategies that rely primarily on material incentives. Although teachers acknowledged that salary and working conditions are important (T4, T6), they argued that when extrinsic motivation becomes the main priority, it is extremely difficult to work properly (T2). This aligns with Deci and Ryan’s

(2000) self-determination theory, which holds that intrinsic motivation is supported by autonomy, competence, and relatedness, all of which are essential for long-term engagement in complex professional tasks.

The developmental trajectory described by T6 – in which teaching initially functioned as an occupation but gradually became a profession – extends research on teacher identity formation (Beijaard et al., 2004) by highlighting the temporal dimension of becoming a professional.

5.2. Personal traits and virtues: The neglected dimension of professionalism

The salience of personal traits and virtues in teachers' conceptions of professionalism is evident, yet this dimension tends to be overlooked in professional standardisation. Teachers do not describe love, care, patience, role modelling, and moral integrity as desirable extras, but as essential professional requirements. This finding aligns with Noddings' ethic of care (1984, 2003), which places caring at the centre of teaching. T2's statement that being a mother helped her become a good teacher suggests that caring capacities developed in one sphere of life can inform and enrich professional practice. This challenges narrow views of teaching as merely technical instruction.

Teachers' emphasis on role modelling (T9, T14) also resonates with Bandura's social learning theory (1986). The fact that T9 extends modelling beyond students to society and "every individual" indicates that teachers understand their professional role as contributing to the moral development of the wider community. The relative absence of some other virtues, such as having an active social life, is also noteworthy, especially in light of the strong vocational orientation described above.

5.3. Subject matter expertise: The non-negotiable foundation

The fact that the vast majority of teachers, 14 out of 16, emphasized subject knowledge is consistent with Shulman's (1986, 1987) foundational work on teacher knowledge. The three dimensions of knowledge referred to by teachers include content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and curricular knowledge, with content knowledge being the most explicit.

In the context of EFL teaching, language proficiency becomes a particularly important issue. T16's observation that when a teacher does not speak well, students are not sure where they are heading or what they are receiving from the teacher indicates an awareness that language teachers must model the language they teach. This is supported by studies on the significance of teachers' language proficiency for student performance (Levrins et al., 2021). T2's reference to cultural knowledge, or to understanding the culture associated with English, demonstrates a sophisticated awareness that is consistent with Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence.

5.4. Pedagogical knowledge: The art of translation

The complexity of pedagogical reasoning is evident in teachers' emphasis on methodology, planning, adaptation, and student-centred understanding. T10's statement that it is difficult to teach "a human being" expresses a fundamental idea: teaching is not a matter of following routine procedures, but of exercising practical wisdom. This aligns with Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner.

When T15 describes changing methods in response to students' reactions – "if the students are boring, why not change the method" – he is describing reflection-in-action, that is, the real-time adjustment that characterises expert practice. The emphasis on planning (T3, T5, T7, T8, T10) indicates that good teaching is planned and purposeful. However, planning is not understood as rigid prescription, but as preparation that enables adaptation. This dialectic between structure and flexibility is reflected in T10's idea of being "well organized in different situations."

5.5. Commitment to professional growth: Agency amidst constraint

Teachers demonstrated considerable agency in pursuing professional development despite systemic constraints. They engaged in independent reading, learning from colleagues, participation in professional associations, webinars, and action research, often unofficially and on their own initiative. This aligns with research on teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) and the self-directed professional (Hargreaves, 2000).

It is significant that the Ethiopian English Language Professionals Association (EELPA) was mentioned consistently and positively. This voluntary professional community appeared to be more useful to teachers than compulsory government INSET programmes, which is consistent with research on professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2006) and teacher networks (Lieberman-Mace, 2010).

Teachers were also highly critical of formal CPD programmes. T2's distinction between the concept of CPD, which is "really nice," and its implementation, described as "just paperwork," reveals a sophisticated understanding of policy-practice gaps. Similarly, T6's view that government INSETs are not related to her work and offer nothing she can bring into the classroom indicates an unresponsive system. Teachers' critiques correspond closely to Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2017) features of effective professional development, including content focus, active learning, collaboration, coaching and feedback, and sustained duration – features that teachers perceived as lacking in formal CPD.

5.6. The holistic nature of teacher professionalism

Perhaps the most notable finding is that teachers define professionalism in a holistic manner. The four themes outlined above do not represent separate areas of teachers' lived experience, but interrelated dimensions of professional identity. A teacher who

loves students but has limited subject matter knowledge cannot teach effectively; a teacher who has strong content knowledge but is unable to build relationships with students cannot make a meaningful professional impact; and a teacher who understands methodology but is unwilling to grow cannot continue to develop professionally. This whole-person conception resonates with studies of teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004) and Palmer's (2007) notion of the whole teacher. According to T11, when teachers have a positive attitude and genuine interest, "the rest becomes very simple." This challenges reductionist approaches that identify discrete competencies without attending to the integrative core of the person.

5.7. *The performative–relational bifurcation*

The document analysis reveals a fundamental contradiction in how professionalism is constructed. Two schools demonstrate a relational model, in which professional identity is enacted through multiple relationships and documented in ways that preserve teacher voice and agency. By contrast, six schools exemplify a performative model, in which the practitioner dimension of professionalism is reduced to compliance with standardised checklists that systematically erase teacher identity.

This division reflects a broader systemic logic. The performative model treats professionalism as an auditable commodity, echoing Ball's (2003) concept of performativity as a technology of control that requires individuals to organise themselves in response to targets and assessments. Teachers become performers of compliance, while their authentic professional selves remain invisible.

By contrast, the relational model understands professionalism as lived experience. This resonates with Heidegger's notion of *Mitsein*, or being-with, according to which professional identity is formed through relationships with students, colleagues, and communities. In this model, documentation becomes narrative: it allows teacher voice to emerge and preserves lived complexity.

Teachers navigate these two systems simultaneously, developing a form of dual consciousness: they perform compliance while also seeking real development through self-directed and collaborative practices. This lived experience is marked by alienation, but also by extraordinary resilience. The performative–relational split challenges the assumption that documentation is neutral. The systematic erasure of teacher voice in the performative model shows that documentation actively constructs professional identity.

5.8. *Transferability to Global South EFL contexts*

Although these findings are based on data from Addis Ababa, they resonate with broader patterns in Global South EFL contexts, where postcolonial language policies, resource limitations, and bureaucratic frameworks generate comparable tensions between lived professionalism and institutional demands. The performative–

relational bifurcation echoes research from other African (Elsheikh et al., 2018), Asian (Kumaravadivelu, 2012), and Latin American contexts, where teachers often work between two systems: genuine professional practice and required conformity.

Transferability depends on several factors, including the degree of centralisation, the availability of resources, the strength of professional associations, and the historical relationship between English and local languages. The exceptional cases of Schools 2 and 4 show that alignment between lived and documented professionalism is possible when institutional will, resources, and authentic implementation intersect. These cases may provide useful examples for contexts seeking CPD reform.

6. Conclusion and implications

6.1. Conclusion

The findings of this phenomenological study show that Ethiopian EFL teachers perceive professionalism as a holistic professional identity that involves personal virtues, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical competence, and commitment to lifelong learning. Their understanding extends far beyond technical expertise to include love, sacrifice, care, and moral responsibility – dimensions that are often systematically removed from official documentation systems.

The findings challenge technical-rational views of teacher professionalism that dominate policy discourse. Teachers are not simply curriculum implementers or deliverers of instruction; they are persons whose professional work cannot be separated from who they are. Their professional becoming is not a fixed state achieved through certification, but an ongoing developmental journey.

The study also demonstrates a deep divide between teachers' lived experience of professionalism and the institutional systems intended to support their growth. While teachers engage in intensive, collaborative, and self-organised learning, official CPD records often silence their voices and suppress their individuality. The notable cases of Schools 2 and 4 show that alignment between lived and documented professionalism is possible. However, such alignment requires resources, leadership commitment, and institutional will, which are unevenly distributed across educational settings.

6.2. Implications for policy

First, professional development should be reoriented towards teachers' actual needs. The current system is often perceived as "just paperwork" because it is top-down, disconnected from classroom realities, and theoretical rather than practical. Teachers consistently expressed a desire for professional development that responds to their identified needs, supports practical classroom application, and is

delivered by experienced practitioners. Policy should therefore ensure that teacher voice is included in needs assessment and programme development.

Second, professional associations should be strengthened and supported. EELPA emerged as a valuable source of professional learning that teachers perceived as more relevant than government programmes. Providing funding, recognition, and opportunities for collaboration with such associations would help mobilise existing teacher networks on a wider scale.

Third, school-based collaborative learning should be recognised and institutionalised. Teachers already learn informally from one another through mentoring, departmental collaboration, and even social interactions in which professional dialogue takes place. Policies should provide time for such practices and recognise them as legitimate professional development rather than treating them as additional paperwork.

Fourth, documentation systems should be redesigned to reflect the richness of teachers' lived practice. Existing CPD portfolios are often performative artefacts: incomplete, template-driven, rushed, and generic. They systematically eliminate subject specificity, relational richness, and teacher voice. New documentation structures should preserve teacher agency and authenticity by incorporating narrative and reflective accounts.

Fifth, reflective narrative templates should replace standardised CPD portfolios. In the performative model, generic templates systematically erase teacher voice and subject specificity. Based on the practices of relational schools, documentation frameworks should be redesigned to include unstructured narrative questions that ask teachers to recount their professional development stories; provide space for English language teaching topics and innovations; document collaborative practices such as peer observation, departmental planning, and mentoring relationships; include both teacher-identified priorities and school-driven objectives; and focus on evidence of influence on student learning rather than merely on the completion of activities.

Such narrative templates would transform documentation into an instrument of reflection rather than an obligation. They would also align accountability with the genuine professional development that teachers in this study identified as central to professionalism.

6.3. Implications for practice

School administrators should institutionalise protected time for collaborative professional learning. The findings in Section 4.3 show that teachers currently rely on informal peer mentoring, such as T10 learning lesson planning from senior colleagues, but lack scheduled opportunities for such learning. Administrators

should allocate at least two hours per week for departmental meetings, peer observation, and cross-subject sharing.

In addition, the sharp contrast between School 4's relational CPD model and School 3's performative checklist, discussed in Section 4.8, indicates that leadership commitment to authentic documentation, rather than mere compliance, is the critical variable. Administrators should therefore replace blank observation forms with reflective, narrative-based portfolios that capture teacher voice.

6.4. Implications for research

The study points to several opportunities for future research. Longitudinal designs could trace the transformation of teacher professional identity over time and in response to policy changes. Comparative studies could systematically investigate the influence of school-level factors on professional identity and CPD experiences.

Intervention research could design and test documentation frameworks that better represent teachers' lived practices. Cross-national studies could also examine how EFL teachers in different Global South contexts construct professionalism and how they navigate tensions between authentic professional practice and bureaucratic compliance.

6.5. Limitations

The present study has several limitations. The findings are specific to the context of government secondary schools in Addis Ababa and may not be applicable to other settings or types of schools. The sample of 16 interviewees and 8 FGD participants is appropriate for phenomenological research, but it cannot represent the full diversity of EFL teachers' experiences. The documents analysed were those that teachers and schools were willing to share, and therefore may not capture the full range of documentation practices. The study also records perceptions at one point in time and cannot trace how they change over time.

6.6. Final reflection

This study began with a fundamental question: How do English language teachers in Ethiopian secondary schools define a professional English language teacher? The answer, revealed through teachers' own voices, is both profound and urgent. For these teachers, professionalism is not a list of skills one possesses or a portfolio of activities one has documented. It is a way of being in the world – a holistic calling that combines who they are, what they know, what they can do, and how they continue to develop. Their passion for teaching, their commitment to students, their dedication to lifelong learning, and their sophisticated understanding of both their subject and how to teach it form a vision of professionalism that policy systems should recognise and support.

The research reveals that teachers have developed, largely through their own initiative and despite systemic deficiencies, many of the very conditions for meaningful professional development identified in the literature. These teachers have much to teach the system. The question is whether the system will listen.

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Beyond technical competence: the lived experience of professionalism among EFL teachers in Addis Ababa

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This phenomenological study examines teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of professionalism among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Ethiopian secondary schools. It addresses a gap in research on teacher professionalism in Global South contexts. Based on interviews with 16 teachers, two focus group discussions, and an analysis of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) portfolios from eight schools, the study finds that teachers define professionalism as a holistic vocation consisting of four interrelated dimensions: personal traits and virtues, subject matter expertise, pedagogical knowledge and skills, and commitment to professional growth. The findings challenge technical-rational perspectives on teacher professionalism by showing that Ethiopian EFL teachers ground their professional identity in love, sacrifice, care, and

moral commitment – dimensions that are often systematically erased from official documentation systems. The document analysis reveals a sharp divide between two schools where relational and identity-affirming forms of documentation were evident, and six schools where performative, compliance-oriented documentation suppressed teacher voice. The study contributes to the literature on Global South perspectives in language teacher education by foregrounding teachers' lived experiences. Its implications include redesigning CPD documentation to reflect teachers' genuine professional identities, strengthening professional associations such as the Ethiopian English Language Professionals Association (EELPA), and reconnecting policy to teachers' expressed needs through participatory approaches.

Keywords: *teacher professionalism, EFL teachers, phenomenological research, teacher identity, vocational commitment.*

Поza технічною компетентністю: пережитий досвід професіоналізму серед викладачів англійської мови як іноземної в Аддис-Абебі

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У цьому феноменологічному дослідженні розглянуто уявлення вчителів англійської мови як іноземної та їхній пережитий досвід професіоналізму в закладах середньої освіти Ефіопії. Дослідження заповнює прогалину у вивченні професіоналізму вчителів у контекстах Глобального Півдня. На основі інтерв'ю з 16 учителями, двох фокус-групових дискусій та аналізу портфоліо безперервного професійного розвитку (*Continuous Professional Development – CPD*) з восьми шкіл встановлено, що вчителі визначають професіоналізм як цілісну єдність покликання, особистісних рис і чеснот, фахової компетентності з предмета, педагогічних знань і навичок, а також відданості професійному зростанню. Отримані результати ставлять під сумнів техніко-раціональні підходи до професіоналізму вчителя, демонструючи той факт, що ефіопські вчителі англійської мови як іноземної у формуванні своєї професійної ідентичності надають перевагу моральним засадам: любові, жертовності, турботі та моральній відданості – вимірах, які часто ігноруються офіційними посадовими інструкціями. Аналіз документів виявив значні відмінності між двома школами, у яких були наявні реляційні форми документації, що підтверджують професійну ідентичність, та шістьма школами, де перформативна, орієнтована на відповідність вимогам документація пригнічувала голос учителя. Дослідження робить внесок у літературу про перспективи Глобального Півдня у сфері підготовки вчителів іноземних мов, висуваючи на передній план пережитий досвід учителів. Серед практичних наслідків дослідження – перегляд документації CPD з метою відображення справжніх професійних ідентичностей учителів,

зміцнення професійних асоціацій, таких як Ефіопська асоціація фахівців з англійської мови (*Ethiopian English Language Professionals Association – EELPA*), а також повторне узгодження освітньої політики з потребами, висловленими вчителями, через партисипативні підходи.

Ключові слова: професіоналізм учителя, вчителі англійської мови як іноземної, феноменологічне дослідження, ідентичність учителя, професійне покликання.

A technikai kompetencián túl: az addisz-abebai angol mint idegen nyelv tanárok professzionalizmusának megélt tapasztalata

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A jelen fenomenológiai tanulmány az etiópiai középiskolákban dolgozó angol mint idegen nyelv tanárok professzionalizmusról alkotott elképzeléseit és megélt tapasztalatait vizsgálja. A kutatás a tanári professzionalizmus vizsgálatában mutatkozó hiányt kívánja pótolni a Globális Dél kontextusában. A tizenhat tanárral készített interjúk, a két fókuszcsoportos beszélgetés, valamint nyolc iskola folyamatos szakmai fejlődést dokumentáló portfólióinak (*Continuous Professional Development – CPD*) elemzése alapján a kutatás megállapítja, hogy a tanárok a professzionalizmust holisztikus hivatásként értelmezik. Ez négy, egymással összefüggő dimenzióból áll: a személyes tulajdonságokból és erényekből, a szaktárgyi kompetenciából, a pedagógiai tudásból és készségekből, valamint a szakmai fejlődés iránti elkötelezettségből. Az eredmények megkérdőjelezzik a tanári professzionalizmus technikai-rationális megközelítéseit, mivel rámutatnak arra, hogy az etiópiai angol mint idegen nyelv tanárok szakmai identitásukat a szeretetre, az áldozatvállalásra, a gondoskodásra és az erkölcsi elkötelezettségre alapozzák. Ezek olyan dimenziók, amelyeket a hivatalos dokumentációs rendszerek gyakran módszeresen háttérbe szorítanak. A dokumentumelemzés éles különbséget tár fel két olyan iskola között, ahol megjelentek a kapcsolati alapú, a szakmai identitást megerősítő dokumentációs formák, és hat olyan iskola között, ahol a performatív, megfelelésorientált dokumentáció elnyomta a tanári hangot. A tanulmány azzal járul hozzá a Globális Dél szempontjait érvényesítő nyelvtanárképzési szakirodalomhoz, hogy előtérbe helyezi a tanárok megélt tapasztalatait. A kutatás gyakorlati következtetései közé tartozik a CPD-dokumentáció átalakítása annak érdekében, hogy az jobban tükrözze a tanárok valódi szakmai identitását; a szakmai szervezetek – például az Etiópiai Angol Nyelvi Szakemberek Egyesülete (*Ethiopian English Language Professionals Association – EELPA*) – megerősítése; valamint az oktatáspolitikai újbóli összehangolása a tanárok által megfogalmazott szükségletekkel, részvételi megközelítések alkalmazásával.

Kulcsszavak: tanári professzionalizmus, angol mint idegen nyelv tanárok, fenomenológiai kutatás, tanári identitás, hivatásbeli elkötelezettség.