Religion and ESL Teacher Identity in Malaysia Context: Does Religion Matter?

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Abstract
This paper aims to showcase the interrelationship between religion and ESL teacher identity by using the literature on religion, religion and English teacher, religion and English teacher identity, as well as religion and English Language Teaching (ELT). Despite the potential significance of religious beliefs in shaping teacher identity, this area has received little attention. By examining the literature on religion and ELT, this paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of the importance of religious beliefs in shaping teacher identity. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform teacher training programs and promote culturally sensitive and inclusive learning environments. This study reveals that religious beliefs play a significant role in shaping ESL teacher identity. Religious beliefs are deeply personal and intimately intertwined with one's identity, and they can influence teaching practices and interactions with students. The study proposes a conceptual framework for future research on the impact of religious beliefs on ESL teacher identity. The article also suggests that a study focuses on the impact of religious beliefs on ESL teacher identity, whether religion matters in shaping and negotiating ESL teacher identity, should be conducted in Malaysia, a country with a diverse religious landscape. These findings have important implications for teacher training programs and for creating inclusive learning environments that take into account the religious and cultural diversity of students.

Keywords: Religion, religious beliefs, religious identity, ESL teacher identity, transidentitying, Malaysia context

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Introduction
Previous research on Language Teacher Identity (LTI) and language education has shown that the main focus has always been on professional norms such as knowledge, competencies, and skills that language teachers should possess in language teaching and learning due to the connection between teaching quality and teacher identity (Anwaruddin, 2016; Arends, 2014; Pennington & Richards, 2016, Richards, 2021). For example, teacher's beliefs on language teaching and learning is a crucial component of a teacher's identity and cannot be disregarded in LTI (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015). Most studies of teacher’s beliefs emphasize professional norms such as matter of language teaching and learning awareness and a teacher’s beliefs (see Borg, 2003, 2018; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017). The existing literature has been emphasizing things a teacher should know and do, and the teacher's personal self has been dissociated from the act of teaching (Farrell et al., 2020). However, a cohesive teacher identity is formed by the dynamic interaction and emerging of a teacher's personal and professional notions (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). Although teaching involves two dimensions: personal and professional, the discussions of teacher’s personal self and beliefs are under-addressed in the literature (Farrell et al., 2020). By counter-balancing this scenario, this paper intends to show the relationship of religion and English teacher by focusing on personal aspects of English teacher identity, specifically their personal beliefs (religious beliefs), which may help language teachers to be more integrated with both professional and personal development. Moreover, there has been a lack of attention given to religion in language teaching and education research as it is overdue for religion to be openly discussed and integrated into language teaching and education (Canagarajah, 2018). To address this gap, this article presents the relationship between religion and English teacher by analysing the literature on religion, religion and English teacher, religion and English teacher identity, as well as religion and ELT. The findings of this study demonstrate the significant influences of religious beliefs on the formation and negotiation of ESL teacher identity. The study also suggests a conceptual framework for future research on the influences of religious beliefs on ESL teacher identity.

Literature Review
Religion and English Teacher
It is imperative to first expound on the relationship between religion and English teachers and their identity before delving into religion and ELT.

Religion consists of three elements: (a) beliefs (ideas and representation), (b) rituals (behaviour and practices) (Jensen, 2014; Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020), which shape (c) institutions that set the limits, conditions and rules for humans that govern ethics and morality (Jensen, 2014) and these elements are held and performed by humans. Also, everything that happens in religion is initiated by religious beliefs, and therefore belief comes first, ritual follows (Jensen, 2014).

Religion is a foundational and long-lasting element of human thought and civilization. Thus, they play an essential and lasting function in education and learning (Baurain, 2012,2016). A person’s identities, actions, views of self and others, ambitions for purpose, relationships, moral standards, and general happiness are shaped by religious beliefs, regardless of their association with any particular religious institution (Baurain, 2012, 2016). In other words, ethical and moral principles instilled by religious beliefs empower humans to develop theories and knowledge that promote social justice, cultural diversity, environmental sustainability, and an improved quality of life (Canagarajah, 2018). Having said that, teachers' religious beliefs often shape their perspectives
on effective teaching (Canagarajah, 2018, Kubanyiova, 2013). This recognition has prompted the
development of more reflective teacher development programmes, which aim to bring teachers' beliefs to the forefront and support them in creating a cohesive approach that combines their pedagogical philosophy and professional expertise with their personal belief systems (Canagarajah, 2018). This implies that recognizing the inner lives of teachers is crucial, and this can be achieved by comprehending their spirituality from a vantage point of the teacher development, both personally and professionally (Farrell et al., 2020).

In the field of English teacher research, religion does influence English teacher professional choices. Religious beliefs influence teachers’ professional choice to venture into teaching (Wong, 2013). Moreover, religion has a significant role in sustaining teachers' mental and emotional health in circumstances that may lead to professional burnout because they seek Allah's reward when teaching (Almayez, 2022). This shows that religious beliefs help teachers to overcome hardship, cope with the emotional obstacles of working in unfamiliar sociocultural and professional situations, and instill an attitude to accept the paradoxes and imperatives imposed by their organizations (Kubanyiova, 2013). Having said that, religious beliefs may play a prominent role in preventing professional burnout and motivating teachers to persevere in their profession.

Although there is widespread agreement among social science scholars that religious beliefs do influence teachers thinking and actions in general, such issues have rarely been discussed in TESOL or ELT (Baurain, 2012, 2016). Moreover, researchers in teaching and teacher development maintain that integrating teacher’s beliefs and identities is essential for creating relevant, meaningful, and rewarding teaching practices (Canagarajah, 2018). In this case, the following sections will discuss the connection between religion and English teacher identity followed by ELT.

**Religion and English Teacher Identity**

As mentioned above, religious beliefs are essential in most people’s daily lives. Researchers in ELT have also regarded religious beliefs as potentially central influences on teacher identity as they are one of the most important sources for teachers to construct images of good teaching (Kubanyiova, 2013; Wong, 2013). However, religion is a neglected part of the field of language teacher identity (Almayez, 2022; Mahboob & Courtney, 2018; Wong, 2018; Karimpour et al., 2022) although it possesses potential influences on some language teachers when approaching their work (Baurain, 2012, 2016). Literature and studies on teacher identity regarding ELT are predominantly focused on language awareness as well as language teaching and learning (For E.g. Borg, 2003, 2018; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017) rather than personal beliefs (Farrell et al., 2020) such as religious beliefs. As Morgan (2009) has claimed, the religious aspects are a “blind spot” in teacher identity research in TESOL. Just as personal beliefs shape teacher identity (Richards, 2021), religious beliefs, the most personal and profoundly held beliefs are connected to an individual's identity of any sort of belief (Johnston, 2003). Religious beliefs are also regarded as the most fundamentally important aspects of identity, they are the most profoundly and deeply held, and strongly tied to identity compared with other kinds of beliefs that are held by an individual. Hence, religious beliefs are relevant to individuals seeking a thorough knowledge of teacher identity. This is because a religious individual draws on religious beliefs that influence their moral choices in personal life (Oviedo & Szocik, 2020) and thus influence their work as a teacher (Johnston, 2003). Despite the centrality of religion in most human’s daily lives, discussions
about the impact of religious beliefs on English teachers’ identity are often left out (Johnston, 2003; Mahboob & Courtney, 2018).

When addressing teacher religious beliefs and teacher identity in the ELT context, Johnston (2003) argued that teachers’ beliefs influence their actions in class and schools. In this light, this division of teacher identity focuses on how language teachers’ religious beliefs influence their thinking and actions as teachers (see Almayez, 2022; Karimpour et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2013). This is because Miller (2009) argues that teacher’s thinking, knowledge, beliefs, and actions in the classroom are intertwined with their identity formation, which is influenced by their ongoing interactions. Having said that, personal religious beliefs fit into the way teachers acquire their knowledge and the reasons for their actions as teachers (White, 2009, 2014). Simply put, the religious beliefs and experiences of teachers will mediate the skills and knowledge of being an effective teacher (Canagarajah, 2018; Kubanyiova, 2013). Borg (2003) indicated that such beliefs represent the dimensions of the “complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs” (p. 81), which teachers refer to while constructing teacher identity. Furthermore, the identity of a teacher cannot be understood merely by observing the classroom, religious beliefs that clearly come from outside the classroom deserve a place in language teacher identity context (Johnston, 2003; Mahboob & Courtney, 2018) because teacher’s personal beliefs and values influence identity construction (Richards, 2021) and religion-related beliefs are the most fundamental parts of identity (Johnston, 2003). In short, these researchers not only highlighted the interrelationship between religious beliefs and English teacher identity but also claimed that religion should be considered in language learning and teaching contexts (Wong, 2018).

In LTI research, Vandrick (2018) and Kayi-Adar (2019) mentioned that current research has been paying attention to racial, social, gender identity and other identities of teachers but an identity that is related to religion has seldom been a subject of study, and hence, it is notably understudied (Vaccino-Salvadore, 2021). Similarly, Norton (2013) also pinpointed that although issues of socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, class, and race as well as their influence on learning and teaching are being openly studied, it is ironic that the issue of religion in the social category is often overlooked. This shows that religion has been “the neglected domain of language teacher identity research” (Wong, 2018, p. 15). To address this discrepancy, studies that focus on the issues of religion and teacher identity are needed. This is because Canagarajah (2017) and Duff (2017) maintain that it is insufficient to believe that an English teacher's identity is being exclusively determined by their proficiency of language and ELT. It is also essential to pay attention to characteristics other than the English subject, which are generally still understudied when examining teacher identity up to this point, particularly religious identity in LTI research. Thus, religious identity should be considered just as important as other identities in LTI research and literature.

Some researchers endeavored to venture into the research of religion and language teacher identity, and showed how this is reflected in the ELT (see Baurain, 2012, 2016; Varghese & Johnston, 2007; Wong et al., 2013). Their focus is on the influences of Christian beliefs on English teacher identity. According to Kubanyiova (2013), Christian beliefs may substantially impact in shaping a teacher’s image of effective teaching. This is a noteworthy conclusion in light of previous research has proven that teachers' perceptions of effective teaching, precisely, their future-oriented self-perceptions, are not only critical in impacting their professional development decisions (Hiver, 2013) but also “firmly imprinted in what the teachers do in the classroom, what
concerns them about their practices, which classroom events they are determined to act upon and to which, in contrast, they, subconsciously or deliberately, turn a blind eye” (Kubanyiova, 2013, p. 122). Having said that, religious beliefs are proposed to be a critical stimulant for the production of adaptive images for classroom practice and a comprehensive examination of their influence on the perspectives of Christian language teachers and, subsequently, the implications for students' language learning possibilities might be a significant area of future research. Furthermore, Dornyei et al. (2013) illustrated that religious beliefs facilitate teacher in shaping visions of being a language teacher and pedagogical decisions. The teachers translate Christian faith into classroom teaching and learning. Similarly, Baurain’s (2012, 2016) study showcased that personal religious beliefs affect pedagogical decisions in classroom, relationships with students, a teacher's professional identity and growth, and pedagogical style in general. Apart from ELT and learning in the classroom, Wong et al., (2013) has discovered that religious beliefs are critical in helping teachers maintain their determination and commitment to overcome obstacles, managing emotional challenges inherent in new professional and sociocultural contexts often entails and cultivating positive attitudes such as addressing the numerous paradoxes and imperatives imposed by the workplace.

However, religious beliefs, not limited to Christianity, exist in an individual’s professional context and they influence their professional identity (Mahboob & Courtney, 2018). Numerous studies have also started to focus on the influences of other religions. Johnson (2003) revealed that Islamic beliefs influence ESL teacher’s professional behaviour particularly in regards to their selection of teaching materials. This can include the incorporation of biblical texts into English lessons. Moreover, three Muslim English language teachers in Vaccino-Salvadore’s (2021) study showcased three Muslim English language teachers demonstrated various ways in which their religious identity informs their professional lives, including how they navigate their religious beliefs and position themselves in a professional setting. Furthermore, Brown (2018) has also highlighted the connection between Buddhism by showing its impacts on language teachers’ approaches to work. In addition, Sharma (2018) has revealed the relevance of Hinduism with ELT as it could be the fundamental element of what it means to teaching and learning. Sharma (2018) also discovered the interrelationship between existing professional TESOL ideas, learner autonomy, student-centredness and Hinduism. In addition, the researchers have also stated that religious beliefs how teachers view themselves as language educators, thereby potentially influencing the development of their professional identity. These studies have demonstrated a connection between English teacher religious identity that is shaped by religious beliefs and teacher identity. In this scenario, more research is required to examine the dynamic, complexity, as well as interrelationship between religious beliefs and English teacher identity (Wong et al., 2013) corresponds to the intention of this article, that is by using literature to show that ESL teachers do deploy their religious beliefs into their professional contexts and their identities are shaped by their religious beliefs from their respective religious background. Subsequently, studies that disclose how religious identity intersects with professional identity may also explain how religious beliefs influence ESL teacher identity is essential.

**Religion and English Language Teaching**

Numerous studies in the field of ELT have attempted to unpack the influence of religious beliefs on different aspects of ELT. However, until recently, ELT educators and scholars have mostly
shared their religious beliefs at Christian conferences and in Christian publications, which are not widely known among the larger TESOL professional community (see Baurain, 2012, 2016).

This has started to change recently, as more educators and scholars have publicly spoken and written about how their religious beliefs have influenced their teaching. Many of these individuals have been associated with Mary Shepard Wong, the co-editor of this book and two previous books on the same topic (Wong & Canagarajah, 2009; Wong et al., 2013), which fostered dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. Wong and co-editor Ahmar Mahboob subsequently published a book which encompasses significant domains of teacher development, encompassing religious, cultural and self-identity, as well as teacher cognition. This book examines major world religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, and discusses how religious beliefs intersect with teacher identity, pedagogical practice, and language learning context (Wong & Mahboob, 2018). Moreover, Baurain (2012, 2016) explored the influence of Christian beliefs on TESOL teachers' knowledge, including their teaching philosophies, curricular selections, pedagogical commitments, and relationships with students. This study demonstrated that Christian values such as respect, love, and student-centeredness are integral to the development of teacher knowledge. Additionally, the influence of Islam on teachers' professional practices and decision-making has been aptly examined by Karimpour et al. (2022) and Vaccino-Salvadore (2021). Some scholars also discuss how other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, can influence pedagogical strategies and choices in the classroom. For example, teachers could employ “spiritually motivated activities and materials” that are drawn from the Hindu concept of life in their classroom to foster ecological attentiveness and peace (Sharma, 2018, p.98). Also, Brown (2018) notes that a teacher's religious beliefs can shape their vision of pedagogy and student growth, influencing the strategies and resources they provide in the classroom. The scholars have clearly pinpointed the connection between religious beliefs and ELT, as well as how religion helps shape the normative horizon within which pedagogical strategies are designed, chosen, critiqued, and implemented, which is not often reflected in professional literature on language classrooms (Smith, 2018).

The abovementioned literature have shown the importance of investigating, discussing, and debating religious beliefs in the field of English Language Teaching, rather than dismissing or stereotyping them as taboo or private concerns (Baurain, 2012, 2016). Baurain (2016) asserts that due to the vital relevance of religious beliefs in human mind and culture, they should be incorporated into TESOL research, emphasizing the significance of teaching and learning. Also, the literature has clearly shown that many teachers believe that their personal religious beliefs is inextricably linked to how they learned what they know and why they teach in the manner they do as educators, and these beliefs should be considered as important elements of professional roles and work (Baurain,2012; Chow, 2020). This suggests that the well-known pedagogical truism "we teach who we are" (Baurain, 2012, p. 328) extends to religious beliefs, as well as other aspects of identity and action. Additionally, Wong (2018) also suggests that philosophical changes in human inquiry from positivistic views to social constructivist orientations allow for the consideration of religion in language teaching and learning contexts. In this case, new understandings of teaching and learning as a developmental process value the significance of teacher identities.

Religion in Malaysia

Chew (2020) asserts that sociolinguists have recently started investigating the connection between language and religion, a subject that has traditionally been studied by anthropologists,
philosophers, psychologists, and theologians. The study of religion and language is important because they are interconnected in Asia and other parts of the world. English is considered a lingua franca, a holy language, and a tool for proselytizing. In order to attain a comprehensive understanding of Asian society, it is imperative to recognize the significant impact of religious beliefs in countries such as Afghanistan, Malaysia, and Taiwan (Chew, 2020). Therefore, research centered on Malaysia as the research context could potentially expand the existing literature on this topic.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022), this country has a population of 29.8 million consisting of 69% Malays and Bumiputera, 23% Chinese, 6% percent Indians and less than 1% of other ethnic groups. Malaysia's distinctiveness lies in its diverse population, which comprises people of different races and religions (Sulong et al., 2019; Ibrahim, 2007). While race has become a prominent characteristic for Malaysian since the 1950s, religion has become increasingly significant since the 1980s (Ahmad Fauzi, 2018; Ibrahim, 2007). It appears that religious identity has supplanted ethnic identity as the key component of national identity (Barr & Govindasamy, 2010). Currently, Malaysia consists of 63.5% of Muslims, 18.7% of Buddhists, 9.1% of Christians, 6.1% of Hindus, and 2% of others (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). In this scenario, a person’s ethnicity may not always indicate their religious affiliation, which is why their religious identity can be a crucial aspect of their identity (Liow & Noor, 2011). For example, some non-Malays are also Muslims, Chinese are Christians, Hindus are Buddhists. In this case, it might be problematic to identify an individual’s religion with ethnicity (Ibrahim, 2007). With that being said, religious identity is important for Malaysian.

Religion has been a prominent factor in Malaysia's social, political, and personal spheres, serving as a personal identifier for Malaysians. Religion has consistently held significant importance for most Malaysians, serving as a means of identity and an indicator of political, sociocultural, and personal affiliation (Means, 1978; Barr & Govindasamy, 2010). Similarly, religion emerged as a significant factor in the process of constitution-making and, indirectly, in defining the legal and political relationships between Malays and other ethnic groups (Means, 1978). This is because the Malaysian Constitution holds the position of primacy in shaping and directing public policy, which respects ethnic and religious diversity but accords Islam a prominent place. According to Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution (1957) Malaysia, “Islam is the religion of the Federation”, while other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism are freely practised by non-Muslims in this multireligious society as mentioned in Article 11, which has grown in numbers from the original seven million in Malaya at independence in 1957 to now over 30 million in 2020 in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020).

This situation creates religious pluralism where diversity is a “living reality”, freedom of belief is inevitably an integral part of that conceptualization of the role of religion in society (Sofjan, 2017). In this case, religion serves as “one of the principal sources of identity” and “fixes the tone of life” (Nagata, 1987, p. 37). Religion is not only capable of shaping the form of an individual's identity, but also of constructing the national identity of a nation state (Sabri et al., 2014). Having said that, religion plays a prominent role in Malaysians’ life and it is a crucial identity marker for them regardless of which religion they are inclined to. The literature reveals that Malaysia is a multicultural and multireligious society with a diverse religious landscape that includes Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and other religions. Given the significance of religion in the lives of many Malaysians, it is likely that religious beliefs play a considerable influence on ESL teachers’ identity and pedagogical approaches. This is because religious beliefs
Religion and ESL Teacher Identity in Malaysia Context

Tyng, Senom & Wei

do have an impact on how teachers think and behave in their roles as educators (Almayez, 2022; Karimpour et al., 2022; Kubanyiova, 2013; Wong et al., 2013)

According to Mahboob and Courtney (2018), the discussion on the interconnection between ELT and other belief systems is under-researched. Moreover, Wong (2013) also proposes that additional study is needed to include non-Christian religions, non-Western contexts, and non-Western educators. In addition to that, the situation where some studies only examine one religion in each paper such as Islam (Almayez, 2022; Karimpour et al., 2022; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2021) and Christianity may limit its applicability to other contexts with different religions or cultural norms (Baurain, 2012; 2016). This research gap highlights the need for a comprehensive investigation of the potential interplay of religious beliefs between the identity of ESL teachers, particularly in Malaysia, a multicultural and multireligious context. This is because religion in Malaysia is viewed as a cultural aspect that pertains to fundamental aspects of life and death, right and wrong, as well as success and failure - essentially, the significance and ethics of existence (Ibrahim, 2007). Examining how teachers incorporate religious experiences into their professional lives can facilitate the development of a more thoughtful, introspective, and mindful teaching practice among educators and researchers (Canagarajah, 2018). Hence, undertaking a study on the influence of religious beliefs on ESL teacher identity in Malaysia is not only a logical decision, but also a vital and an essential endeavour that may provide valuable insights and enrich the literature on language teacher identity, inform ELT practices and teacher training and professional development, as well as contribute to the broader field of language teaching in multicultural contexts.

**Approach to ESL Teacher Identity**

This paper suggests that the study of religion and ESL teacher identity can be conceptualized by transidentitying, introduced by Richards and Wilson (2019) to show the interaction between ESL teacher’s religious identity and professional identity. This concept not only exemplifies the dynamic nature of teacher identity but also counters the traditional notions that regard individuals shift between multiple separate identities (Richards & Wilson, 2019).

**Transidentitying**

Transidentitying is a newly constructed concept that suggests that language teacher identity can be viewed as a "unitary underlying multidimensional identity" (Richards & Wilson, 2019, p. 182). This means that it emphasizes the holistic nature of teacher identity, which can be both unstable and multiple, as well as stable and unitary. It combines the concepts of identity that are constructed by identity Bucholtz and Hall (2005) together with Blommaert and Varis (2011), as well as translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2014). It dismantles the traditional view of identity, where individuals move back and forth between different identities (Richards & Wilson, 2019). They view identity as a unified underlying multidimensional identity, achieved through interactions. In this case, transidentitying is a situation where a teacher has a repertoire of teacher identity and "adjusts or makes transitions between distinct identity-markers, traits, or processes within a given social interaction to reflect changes in roles, social relationships, affinities, positions, meanings, and intention" (p.182).

Richards and Wilson (2019) elaborate on the concept of transidentitying by demonstrating the identity markers, processes, or features that cause teachers to position and reposition themselves according to these six circumstances during social interactions: "teacher-learning,
teacher-to-student interactions, teacher-to-teacher interactions, and social media interactions" (p.183). These categories include: to illustrate the changes in social proximity, which refers to a instructor adjusting himself from the vantage point of being an educator to a persona that is more casual and friendly as a mean to create rapport with college students in English classes; to show authenticity, which refers to a transition of a mere language instructor to that of a competent, functionality and expert in the English language; to establish a status, which refers to an instructor using a title or volunteer information to mirror his or her occupational repute; to show a change in roles which refers to teachers oscillating between a formal to casual settings or vice versa during interaction; to acknowledge the audience, which refers to an English instructors making an attempt to acknowledge the students’ culture and mother tongue an ideal way to establish a positive rapport with them; to show stance and affiliation, which refers back to the manner teachers made their opinion clear and express their stance during an interaction which handles discussions associated with politics and religion. These categories could serve as a guideline for researcher study in interpreting the scenario and why ESL instructors trans-identity themselves.

As noted above, teacher identity construction involves two dimensions of a teacher: personal and professional (Arvaja, 2016; Beijaard & Meijer, 2017; Day et al., 2006; Pennington & Richards, 2016). As the combination of the two notions forms a cohesive and complete teacher identity (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017), teacher’s personal and professional identities are inseparable from teacher identity (White, 2009; 2014). This is because teacher connects the features and aspects of personal identity to work-related identity – professional identity while constructing teacher identity (Pennington & Richards, 2016). This situation suggests that teacher identity development is dynamic and complex. It is a product of a complex combination of personal and professional notions that interact and influence each other (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017), and subsequently lead to an interrelationship of teacher personal and professional identities (Day et al., 2006). With that being said, teacher identity consists of multiple identities, yet they should not be seen as fragmented. Richards and Wilson’s (2019) transidentifying that captures teacher identity as "a unitary underlying multidimensional identity” (p. 182) explains the interrelationship of multiple identities.

![Figure 1. Application of transidentifying in this study (Adapted from Richards & Wilson, 2019)](image-url)
Applying transidentitying to examine religious beliefs' impact on ESL teacher identity.

Moreover, religious orientation is included in the personal dimension of teacher identity and affects personal and professional dimensions interaction (White, 2009; 2014). White (2014) maintained that religion is a component of a teacher’s personal core self (White, 2014) and thus religious beliefs influence teachers’ personal notions such as thinking and action (Johnston, 2003; White, 2014) and inform professional notions (White, 2009, 2014). Having said that, religious beliefs may impact both personal and professional identities interaction during teacher identity construction.

According to Varghese et al. (2005), identity refers to an individual's 'understanding of self', which is not solely determined by the individual but is also shaped by various social, political, cultural, and religious contexts. Religion, in fact, constitutes an identity referred to as religious identity. With that being said, teachers who are inclined to religious beliefs will inculcate religious identity in themselves, and thus religious beliefs are directly associated with religious identity (White, 2014). In this sense, religious beliefs are inseparable from religious identity because beliefs are inseparable from the ‘self’ (Hartse & Nazari, 2018). This implies that religious identity could be considered as an identity marker (Kubota, 2018) from the personal dimension that permeates an individual’s professional experience and is intertwined with professional identity (Vaccino-Salvadore, 2021). The need to investigate a teacher's entire identity implies a reciprocal interaction between religion and teacher identity, where religious beliefs can influence a teacher's professional identity and practice, and professional context can also impact a teacher's religious identity (Vaccino-Salvadore, 2021). This shows the interrelationship of a teacher’s personal and professional notions. If a teacher's identity is considered holistically, religious beliefs can impact professional identity and practice, and concurrently, professional context can also influence religious identity (Vaccino-Salvadore, 2021). This is because, religious identity is inconsistent and difficult to disentangle from other influences (Mahboob & Courtney, 2018). Thus, teacher’s personal and professional dimensions intertwine to produce teacher identity.

While Vaccino-Salvadore's (2021) study has shown that a teacher’s religious identity intersects with their professional identity, the intricate process of how these identities interact with each other has not been thoroughly examined. The application of the concept of transidentitying may capture how teachers integrating their personal notions of religious identity, which foreground their religious stance and affiliation, into their professional identity, and how they trans-identity themselves in the process.

In essence, utilizing this concept enables researcher to capture the negotiation between a teacher’s religious and professional identities. Transidentitying may serve as a lens to understand the process how ESL teachers negotiate, adjust and position themselves when striking coherence between personal self in religious identity and professional self in professional to construct a unitary multidimensional teacher identity through social interaction. The six circumstances of transidentitying may also guide the researcher to identify the situations in which teacher trans-identity themselves when connecting personal notions to professional notions. Since this is a newly constructed concept, there is a need to explore how, why and when the selected ESL teachers trans-identity themselves. This may also contribute to the literature of TESOL research.

Conclusion and Implication

This article seeks to investigate the relationship between religion and the identity of ESL instructors. Religion, as an integral component of human existence, can be a central aspect of
teachers' identities, influencing their self-perception, worldview, and interactions. Religion may also influence ESL teacher's moral and ethical values, as well as their instructional approach and topic selection. This article proposes a conceptual framework that highlights the relationship between personal and professional identity by investigating the role of religion in ESL teachers' identity negotiations. Specifically, the study focuses on the religious beliefs of English teachers and utilize Transidentitying to capture the influence on teacher identity. The findings from such study may assist ESL teachers in better aligning their personal and professional development. Moreover, it can also inform teacher professional development and curriculum development in Malaysia. Future research in other cultural contexts may expand on these findings by comparing and contrasting results to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how religion influences ESL teacher identity and practise. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the effect of religion on the identity of ESL teachers in multicultural contexts such as Malaysia.

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Religion and ESL Teacher Identity in Malaysia Context

Tyng, Senom & Wei

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