



Exploring the Interplay between EFL Teachers' Professional Identity and Continuous Professional Development: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

An exponential growth of research interest has been directed towards the significance of teachers' professional identity (TPI) which plays a pivotal role in their teaching practices. The current study was conducted to shed light on the professional identity of Iranian teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), their common types of continuous professional development (CPD) activities, and the interplay between them. The research design employed in this qualitative study was a phenomenological approach, utilizing purposive sampling to select a group of 11 EFL teachers at a private language institute in Kerman, Iran. The sample consisted of 5 male and 6 female teachers. For data collection, semi-structured interviews were used and thematic analysis, proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was implemented for data analysis. The results indicated that Iranian EFL teachers conceptualized their PI in terms of teacher cognition, teacher emotion, participation in communities of practice, teacher biographies, contextual factors, and teacher learning. The findings also revealed that personal and contextual factors affected the engagement of EFL teachers in various types of CPD endeavors. Finally, TPI had a positive impact on teachers' pedagogical knowledge, professionalism, working atmosphere, and personal growth. The study has several multifaceted implications for educators, educational institutions, and policymakers.

KEYWORDS: Continuous Professional Development; English as a Foreign Language; Teacher Education; Teachers' Professional Identity

INTRODUCTION

An exponential growth of research interest has been directed towards different dimensions of teacher education. Teachers are currently viewed as not only cognitive beings but also agentic social beings whose cognitive, social, cultural, and emotional characteristics need to be explored (Cross, 2018; Pazhoman & Sarkhosh, 2019). It is now commonly assumed that to best capture the complexity of teachers' practice, we need to move beyond the limits of the classroom as teachers' practice can be conceived in light of the accumulated experiences with significant others as they draw on their own cultural, historical, and social resources to make sense of the classroom world (Davin et al., 2018). In this regard, English language teaching (ELT) educators and scholars (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hanna et al., 2019; Hayes et al., 2005; Prabjande et al., 2020; Trent, 2010; Varghese et al., 2005) have attached enormous importance to teachers' professional identity (TPI) which refers to a teacher's sense of belonging, values, beliefs, roles, and perceptions within their professional community influencing their actions and behavior in educational settings (Chong et al., 2011; Labbaf et al., 2019; Pennington & Richards, 2016).



TPI encompasses how teachers perceive themselves, understand their roles, and derive meaning from their professional development process (Beijaard et al., 2004). Moreover, teachers' professional identity is a multifaceted and evolving process influenced by various internal and external factors. Unquestionably, perceiving TPI is crucial for comprehending the complex journey from novice to experienced educator, as it involves a myriad of individual attributes, values, beliefs, social roles, and institutional policies (Richardson & Watt, 2006). Referring to the context-sensitive nature of teacher identity, Trent (2010) holds that teacher identity is formed at the intersection of teachers' past experiences of learning, individual aspirations, and social expectations with the aforementioned factors being in either harmonious or contradictory relationship with each other. In addition to the role of teachers' past experiences, the practice of teaching has proven to contribute to teacher identity development (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019).

According to Van Lankveld et al. (2017), TPI is most likely to flourish in four situations: (a) when educators sense that their work is valued; (b) when they feel a sense of belonging to the community; (c) when educators feel competent in their roles as teachers, including when others acknowledge this feeling, and lastly, (d) when they are given the chance to envisage their future careers. As the aforementioned conceptualizations demonstrate, TPI is a kaleidoscopic idea of self that develops when individual characteristics of teachers such as past experiences combine with institutional, social, cultural, and environmental forces.

By the same token, continuous professional development plays a vital role in enhancing teacher and school effectiveness (Boyle et al., 2004; Guskey, 2002; Powell et al., 2003). Teacher professional development is described as a lifelong process of collaborative or autonomous learning, where teachers actively engage in self-reflection on their practices (Crandall, 2000). Interestingly, Freeman (2004) refers to second language (L2) teacher education to encompass both initial professional preparation and ongoing development, while Craft (2000) defines professional development as a broad spectrum of activities aimed at enhancing the learning of teachers post their initial training. Creating an environment conducive to rapid acquisition of new competencies is crucial for gaining a competitive edge, and teaching is no exception. Various authors have underscored the significance of professional development for language teachers across diverse contexts and methodological frameworks (Vo & Nguyen, 2009; Williams & Power, 2009).

Language teachers have the opportunity to engage in ongoing professional development using different approaches, as outlined by Farrell (2013). One approach is the top-down method, which originates from higher authorities such as school administrators, curriculum developers within a country's ministry of education, or members of boards of education in various school districts. In this model, teachers receive information about workshops, seminars, or professional development from administrative figures and typically participate in sessions led by external experts rather than internal faculty. In contrast, the bottom-up approach to professional development involves teachers taking the initiative to investigate aspects of their practices and beliefs in order to develop their own teaching and learning. This approach emphasizes the importance of individual teachers' personal experiences and reflections on teaching, leading to a more personalized and self-directed professional development process. In this model, teachers assume responsibility for their own growth and development, selecting areas of practice that align with their interests and needs rather than having these determined by their institution (Farrell, 2017; Wilden & Porsch, 2017). In conclusion, irrespective of the professional development strategy, whether top-down or bottom-up, the sustainability of such initiatives is contingent upon deliberate efforts as highlighted by Farrell (2013). To sum up, the body of literature on teacher CPD is extensive and multifaceted, mirroring the dynamic landscape of education and the enduring commitment to bolstering educators in their professional development and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. Researchers persist in exploring novel avenues, taking into account the diverse requirements of teachers and the intricate factors influencing CPD endeavors (Hong, 2012).

As teachers engage in professional learning, they negotiate their identities, which are "shaped and re-shaped with others in a professional context" (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178). TPI, therefore, provides a frame or a lens through which we can examine how teachers act, how they understand their work, how identity is negotiated and shaped through experience and influenced by contextual factors (Miller, et al., 2018). Participation in CPD endeavors has the potential to influence the formation and progression of a teacher's professional identity by molding their convictions, principles, and methodologies. Conversely, an established professional identity may impact the nature of CPD activities sought by a teacher or the manner in which they assimilate and apply newfound knowledge (Sachs, 2003).



LITERATURE REVIEW

TPI is a fluid ever-shifting construct and a number of scholars have attempted to theorize the construct from a sociocultural perspective. For instance, Holland and Lachicotte (2007) consider TPI as a sense teachers develop of themselves "in relation to ways of inhabiting roles, positions, and cultural imaginaries that matter to them" (p. 103). To Klechtermans (2018), this self-understanding emerges out of teachers' interactions and unique understanding of themselves, as well as the intense processes of intersubjective and context-specific sense-making. It is an undeniable fact that L2 teachers take various identities as they change their roles in social interaction when they have to come into contact with many players such as students, colleagues, parents, managers, and public community (Flores & Day, 2006; Freeman, 2004; Kanno & Stuart, 2011). Research has explored the concept of L2 teacher identity in relation to various factors. Studies have shown a significant link between teacher professional identity and computer literacy, suggesting a potential avenue for professional development (Abtahi & Motallebzadeh, 2016). Behin et al. (2018) also found that social and institutional factors play a significant role in influencing TPI. The study highlighted the impact of language teaching policies on the construction and reconstruction of a teacher's identity.

In the study performed by Mahmoodarabi et al. (2021), English language teachers' PI was investigated in Iran and the findings confirmed a six-factor model representing L2 teacher identity encompassing aspects such as self-development, language awareness, institutional practices, learner engagement, self-evaluation, and sociocultural considerations. Likewise, Flores and Day (2006) explored teachers' identity in Portugal using semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and short essays. The findings highlighted the impact of the workplace in reshaping teachers' perceptions of teaching, either facilitating or impeding their professional development.

Regarding the professional development of EFL teachers, the study carried out by Karim et al. (2019) in Bangladesh revealed that contextual impediments that English teachers experience are unique in terms of both practices and culture. The study concluded that in specific context of Bangladesh, the focus of TPD is just on developing teacher linguistic and pedagogic knowledge. Moreover, the results of the study by Saberi and Sahragard (2019) revealed that Iranian EFL teachers tend to rely more on the self-regulation factor than other-regulation factor which refers to teachers' use or request for external sources of guide and support such as asking colleagues for help, peer coaching, in-service training programs, observers' feedback, classroom observation, attending workshops, and checking relevant articles in the journals. Similarly, in the context of Indonesia, Amin and Saukah (2015) supported that TPD is a complex and non-linear process involving both personal and contextual factors. They also emphasized that teachers do not often go through the same process for their professional development, a process that indicates idiosyncrasy.

Two theoretical frameworks underpin the current study. Regarding teachers' professional identity, the study elucidates Yazan's (2018) conceptual framework including the following constructs: (a) teacher learning, (b) teacher cognition, (c) teachers' participation in communities of practice, (d) contextual factors, (e) teacher biographies, and (f) teacher emotions. The current study is also informed by Njenga's (2022) framework which emphasizes the intricate nature of teacher CPD, highlighting its varied aims, content, and learning methods, all within the context of a complex interplay of personal, institutional, and contextual factors. To put Njenga's framework briefly, teachers' personal as well as professional characteristics and the institutional factors leave an impact on the aims and desired outcomes of teacher CPD, content, and learning methods. Teachers may then select whether and when to participate in CPD, what to learn, and how to learn. As a result, teacher CPD practices are characterized by the outcomes aimed for, content learnt, and learning methods used.

Noteworthy to mention, English language teaching in the specific context of Iran with its sociocultural characteristics is a challenging issue. Having specific cultural, religious, and political conflict with western English speaking countries on one side and the need for learning English as an international language on the other side, has changed Iran to a particular situation for EFL learning. Therefore, there is a crucial need for more research that examines the issues of language and identity in the complex context of Iran (Mohammadi & Izadpanah, 2019). Given the increasing population of students eager to learn English in Iran, it is not surprising that EFL teaching is a growing field in this country and identification of CPD intricacies seems integral to teacher education (Saberi & Sahragard, 2019). Meanwhile, CPD is a key to students' learning in the EFL context of Iran; however, the opportunities for teachers' CPD are sparse.



In light of the substantial surge of interest in professional identity in second language teacher research, it has become necessary to explore the inner dynamics of professional identity development. Previous research has

predominantly focused on CPD and TPI as distinct entities in various contexts; nevertheless, there exists a dearth of research examining the interplay between professional identity of EFL teachers and their CPD within the context of Iran. The present research delved into Iranian EFL teachers' conceptualization of their PI, their common CPD endeavors, and the interplay between their PI and CPD activities. Consequently, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do Iranian EFL teachers conceptualize their professional identity?
2. What types of CPD activities do Iranian EFL teachers engage in?
3. How do EFL teachers' CPD endeavors interact with their PI ?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The current study used phenomenological research design to investigate the professional identity of Iranian EFL teachers, their common CPD activities, and the interconnectedness of PI to their ongoing professional development. In selecting participants for this study, purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that the individuals met specific inclusion criteria to gain a comprehensive understanding of the EFL teachers' professional identity concerning their CPD. A total number of 11 Iranian EFL teachers participated in the study. The sample included both male (n= 5) and female (n= 6) teachers with the age range of 25-48 teaching English in a private language institute in Kerman, Iran. All teachers were native speakers of Farsi and had at least B.A. degrees. The largest group of participants held a master's degree, with 7 individuals in this category. Their fields of study included translation (2 participants), linguistics (2 participants), English literature (2 participants), and one individual with an English teaching major. Following this, 3 participants in the study had a bachelor's degree, with 2 participants specializing in English literature and one in translation. Additionally, there was 1 participant with a Ph.D. degree in linguistics among the EFL teachers under the study. It should be noted that EFL teachers in the present study varied in terms of their teaching experience ranging from 1 to 20 years.

Ethical considerations were paramount in the research undertaken. Before engaging in semi-structured interviews, all participants provided informed consent, with opportunities available for them to seek clarification and express any concerns related to the study. Confidentiality was meticulously maintained throughout all phases of the research. To protect the identities and privacy of participants, pseudonyms (P1, P2, P3, etc. were assigned during the processes of data collection, analysis, and reporting. It is important to emphasize that access to the data was strictly limited to the members of the researchers involved in the study.

INSTRUMENTS

Initially, a Google form questionnaire was employed to identify Iranian EFL teachers who possessed extensive experience in CPD initiatives. This questionnaire aimed to collect data on the participants' personal details, age, gender, degree, field of study, teaching experience, and involvement in CPD endeavors. Furthermore, the data collection approach employed in this study involved conducting semi-structured interviews aiming to reveal the conceptualization of PI among Iranian EFL teachers, their common CPD activities, and the interplay between teachers' CPD activities and their PI. In so doing, a semi-structured interview protocol was created in alignment with the objectives of the study.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face with predetermined interview questions. The interviews were conducted in Persian to ensure clarity and effective communication with each interview spanning approximately 50 minutes. Researcher 1 made an attempt to facilitate interactive discussions to delve into the teachers' nuanced



perspectives on their professional identity and their CPD endeavors. Responses to interview questions were recorded using Samsung Smart Phone Model A31. To enhance the credibility of the interviews, the researcher employed consistency checks. This involved soliciting two additional researchers, who possessed a certain degree of familiarity with the subject matter, to conduct an independent analysis of the data. To reduce potential inconsistencies and discrepancies, both the transcription and translation processes were meticulously proofread by a skilled bilingual colleague. The trustworthiness of the findings was further reinforced through member checking, wherein the researcher informally verified the accuracy of their interpretations with participants during the data collection phase. Additionally, the researcher utilized techniques such as echoing, paraphrasing, and seeking further clarification on ambiguous comments made by respondents during the interviews to ensure clarity and understanding.

DATA COLLECTION

At the outset of the study, participants were required to sign a consent form indicating their voluntary participation in the present study. Participants were assured the right to withdraw from the study at any point or decline to answer any questions without facing any consequences. Subsequently, a Google form questionnaire was administered to 15 EFL teachers to gather their personal information related to their age, gender, university degree, the field of study, teaching experience, and involvement in CPD activities. Afterwards, the researchers purposefully selected 11 participants_ both professional and novice_ with the most CPD experiences. Then, based on the theoretical framework of the study (Njenga, 2022; Yazan, 2018), the interview questions related to CPD and TPI key factors and the interconnectedness of CPD activities and EFL teachers' professional identity were developed and posed to them during 50 minute individual and face-to-face interview sessions.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed and treated as textual data, coded, and analysed to identify themes and subthemes. To uphold the methodological rigor in the analysis, the researchers followed the six-phase process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report.

RESULTS

RESULTS of THE FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION

In response to the first research question (How do Iranian EFL teachers conceptualize their PI?), six major themes including contextual factors, teacher biographies, teacher cognition, teacher learning, teacher emotions, and participation in communities of practice were identified which will be scrutinized in the following section.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Contextual factors included two sub-themes of 'Ideal Workplace' and 'Ideal Colleagues'. Regarding the factors that contribute to ideal workplace, two pertinent factors were identified. All the interviewees conceptualized their PI by working in well-managed as well as peaceful and encouraging atmosphere.

I prefer to work in a peaceful and intimate environment. Teaching in well-managed institutes is desirable to me. (P5, P7, P11)

As another factor contributing to the 'Contextual Factors' theme, ideal colleagues who were believed to contribute to the participants' PI, according to the interviewees, needed to be highly adaptable, reliable, innovative, and collaborative.



I like to work with colleagues who can get along and collaborate easily. An environment with co-workers who are supportive and have creative teaching ideas is favourable to me (P3, P11).

TEACHER BIOGRAPHIES

As implied by the obtained interview data, 'teacher biographies' were identified as a major determinant of PI. This theme consisted of four sub-themes namely their own learning of English, other teachers' observation, the influence of family, and their first encounter with English. The way teachers learned English was identified to be an effective factor in forming teachers' conceptualization of their PI. This sub-theme included learning English in private language institutes, watching movies, practicing authentic English, and reading English books.

I learned English in private language institutes and by watching English movies and series. (P3, P4, P7)

According to the interviewees, observation of other teachers could help the participants conceptualize their PI in terms of using their experiences and teaching methods and developing their self-confidence.

Observing other teachers has improved the quality of my teaching and motivated me to redesign my teaching method. (P8, P11)

Furthermore, by analyzing the gathered interview data, the participants' family was found to be an influential factor in forming their PI mainly by transferring their ideas and mindsets.

Learning English as a global language has always been my parents' main concern since my childhood. They believe that my brother and I should learn English because it will bring about new opportunities in our future career. (P3, P11)

Regarding the main theme of teacher biographies, teachers' first encounter with English can be of importance in determining the teachers' PI. The obtained data demonstrated that most first encounters took place in language institutes and at school.

I can still remember my first English teacher who was a very pretty and friendly lady. She was really so impressive that I chose my future job as teaching English. In fact, she was the most impressive and supportive teacher I have ever had. (P9)

I have always admired my English teachers. In the EFL context of Iran, I think of them as extraordinary characters who open up windows to a new horizon (I mean a new language, a new culture, and a new world). To tell the truth, my professional career was greatly impressed by my English teachers. (P6)

TEACHER COGNITION

As implied by the obtained interview data, 'teacher cognition' was a major determinant by which EFL teachers conceived their PI. It consisted of four sub-themes namely instructional decisions, critical incidents management, qualities of a successful teacher, and future prospects about teaching career in Iran. All the interviewees put emphasis on the students' needs, age, and English proficiency level in order to make their instructional decisions. The needs analyses were done by either searching, studying, or consulting with their supervisor.

I try to understand their needs, age, and English proficiency level. (All participants)

I use a kind of eclectic method based on my students' needs, age, and proficiency level. (P3, P11)



Likewise, the way teachers handle critical incidents in their classes was identified to be an effective factor in forming teachers' cognition. Considering the collected data, all participants admitted that they managed the situation based on their knowledge and experience.

I manage the critical situations based on my knowledge and experience; therefore, I try to have a plan B for the unexpected incidents in my classes. I try to analyse the incident and do not let it happen again. (P1, P4)

Based on the compiled interview data, having a high level of English proficiency, being up-dated, and having a good rapport with students were the most cited qualities of a good teacher. In addition, being patient, kind, compassionate, and punctual were mentioned respectively as the most important qualities of a good teacher.

I believe a successful teacher is one who knows the theory and practice and applies them hand in hand. An English teacher needs to be proficient and interacts with students effectively. Being punctual and disciplined are also the most important qualities for a good teacher. (P8)

How teachers anticipate their future career was a key factor in teachers' cognition. According to the collected data, six participants had a positive attitude toward their future in Iran. Other participants, on the other hand, had a negative prospect toward their future mostly due to the economic situation of their country.

I am very optimistic about the future of English teachers who improve their skills through new technology and artificial intelligence. In the context of Iran, the number of English language learners has been increasing sharply and this means more job opportunities for me and my co-workers. (P2, P3, P5, P8, P9, P11)

I believe low income in this job has a negative impact on its future. I can never make ends meet with this much inflation. (P1, P4, P6, P7, P10)

TEACHER LEARNING

As denoted by the gathered data, 'teacher learning' was identified as a crucial factor through which EFL teachers conceived their PI. All participants asserted that not only did they learn from their experience, but also they used it to redesign their teaching methods. They also believed that by sharing their knowledge and expertise they can have a strong effect on students' learning.

I believe we learn from our experiences. As we gain more experience through years, we achieve more improvement in our profession. (P1, P10)

Regarding critical incidents, I learned a lot from my own experience in the course of time. I also shared the critical incidents in my classes with my colleagues and supervisor and they helped me a lot with their strategies. (P5)

While teaching, I also learn new things in English and review what I have already learned. (P4)

I learned how to integrate technology into my classes in CPD courses and now I am very happy that I can successfully use it in my classes. (P9)

TEACHER EMOTIONS

As revealed by the data, 'teacher emotions' were identified as a significant contributor to EFL teachers' PI. It consisted of two sub-themes including job satisfaction and teaching efficacy. Five teachers asserted that they are not happy with their teaching career in Iran due to insufficient income and appreciation. On the other hand, what made teachers satisfied were witnessing their students' success, having an active class, and working in a peaceful environment. All



the interviewees believed that they could evaluate their teaching efficacy by receiving feedback from students and noticing their progress.

I am not satisfied with my salary, but I am happy when my students learn something, so I can say I am partially content with my job. (P3, P9)

I feel very dissatisfied when I face some students' misbehaviour. I will quit this job as soon as I can find a better job with more income. It is a pity that we do not receive enough appreciation either. (P4, P6, P10)

Getting positive feedback from my students and witnessing their progress implies my success which entails my job satisfaction and boosts my energy and effort. (All participants)

However, two teachers added other factors including job promotion and becoming a well-known teacher in their city could enhance their PI. In addition, all participants believed that job satisfaction could escalate their energy level; therefore, teachers will put much more effort into their class and convey this positive feeling to their students.

PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

'Participation in Communities of Practice' was identified as a key determinant of PI. It consisted of two sub-themes: the impediments and the motivations. All participants considered macro levels such as political and cultural context as obstacles to learning and teaching English. They all believed that English is considered a foreign language and language of enemies in the context of Iran, thus the policymakers are reluctant to provide the ideal circumstances for its learning and teaching. Regarding micro levels, teachers seemed quite motivated and tried to compensate for the political, cultural, and administrative shortcomings of macro level.

In the context of Iran, there are few professional communities or associations for English language teachers through which we can share our knowledge, experience, classroom management strategies, critical incidents, etc. with other teachers. All we could do with my colleagues as EFL teachers was just using social networks and sharing teaching ideas there. (P4, P6, P10)

RESULTS OF THE SECOND RESEARCH QUESTION

To address the second research question (What types of CPD activities do Iranian EFL teachers engage in?), two pertinent themes_ personal and contextual participation factors_ were explored. Regarding personal participation factors, all the research interviewees agreed that they all had the general tendency to participate in available CPD courses offered to them; nevertheless, teachers' personality traits, autonomy, individual differences, and free time were identified as facilitating or hindering factors for their participation in CPD endeavors. Meanwhile, group participation in CPD courses was preferred over individual participation in such courses.

I prefer group participation over individual attendance. I think I can learn more through interactions with other participants. (P3, P9)

For CPD activities, my main problem is procrastination. I usually postpone everything and my professional development is no exception (Laughing). (P4)

No matter how busy I am, I will engage in a sort of CPD at least once a month. I am passionate about my profession and I think if I don't update myself, I will be substituted by other teachers very soon. (P5)

Regarding contextual participation factors, all the interviewees had the experience of participating in at least one CPD course. Undoubtedly, the mandatory teacher training course (TTC) that every teacher needed to pass in order to teach at the English institute was the most available and consequently the most attended CPD course among the



interviewees. Among other CPD courses and activities, workshops and webinars were the most popular ones in which the majority of participants have already engaged in. Other minor CPD courses and activities which the interviewees referred to included seminars, free discussion sessions, recorded video courses, and CELTA course.

Regardless of the CPD courses that EFL teachers took part in the past, there were contextual limitations in terms of the available choices of CPD courses and activities in workplaces. According to all participants, the accessible courses and activities to EFL teachers included TTC, workshops, free discussion sessions, and online materials. Teachers indicated that highly standard and international courses like CELTA are very expensive and they are not available in Iran; consequently, teachers have to attend internationally-recognized courses such as CELTA in neighboring countries like Turkey which costs a lot of money quite beyond the teachers' affordance. Consequently, the cost and distance were two main obstacles for CPD among Iranian EFL teachers.

Last year I attended CELTA course in Turkey. Course fees plus accommodation expenses were quite high. Although paying that much money was hard for me, I did it any way since I have always wished to pass CELTA course. When I look back, I feel happy that I attended this course. (P8)

All participants believed that contrary to the macro level, the micro level (such as teachers, classrooms, and institutions) contributed to enhance teaching and learning English in Iran. Teachers also confirmed that the mismatch between macro and micro levels has brought about a sort of ambivalence for language teachers. Three key motives were mentioned by participants to take part in CPD courses. Other reasons the participants mentioned for their CPD endeavors were job promotion, getting certificates, and learning beneficial content.

RESULTS OF THE THIRD RESEARCH QUESTION

As discussed earlier, PI is generally affected by six main elements of contextual factors, teacher cognition, teacher learning, teacher emotion, participation in communities of practice, and teacher biographies. On the other hand, teachers' participation in CPD courses and activities was, to a great extent, determined by personal and contextual factors in Iran. Therefore, to address the third research question of this study, 'How does engagement in CPD endeavors interact with the professional identity of Iranian EFL teachers?', it is necessary to further explore PI factors and the results and outcomes of CPD courses and activities as overlapping factors that bridge the two concepts of CPD and PI to reveal the existing intricate connection between teachers' engagement in CPD activities and their PI. Results of the third research question were explored in four different themes including pedagogical knowledge, professionalism, positive working atmosphere, and personal growth.

PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Collected data from the interviews showed that CPD engagement had a great impact on teachers' pedagogical knowledge which consists of the following eight sub-themes: becoming updated, increasing skills and knowledge, boosting performance and efficiency, revealing teachers' strengths and weaknesses, gaining teaching experiences, having more qualifications, improving their teaching quality, and learning new methods.

In general, participation in different CPD courses makes teachers more updated and successful in their career. It has many positive effects one of which is increasing your teaching competence and expertise. In fact, when we attend CPD courses, we come up with innovative teaching ideas. Now that I participated in these courses, I think I have more qualifications for teaching. Besides, such courses familiarized us with the rules of institute and taught us classroom management. (P2, P3, P5, P9)

Participation in various courses like CELTA has improved my performance and efficiency as a teacher. When I participated in CELTA and other professional development courses, I noticed my strengths and weaknesses in teaching. Participating in various courses like CELTA has improved my teaching quality. Although it cost a lot for me, it was a worthwhile experience. (P8)



PROFESSIONALISM

As EFL teachers declared, engagement in CPD endeavors could greatly assisted them to become professional and resilient. Regarding the importance of CPD courses in EFL teachers' professionalism, the following excerpts were extracted from the interviews with the participants.

I think I am taking great steps toward professionalism as I get exposed to professional content in CPD courses. After being engaged in such courses, I adjusted my teaching strategies in response to my students' needs, curriculum changes, or unexpected classroom situations. (P3)

CPD courses motivated me to pursue my career more professionally. When I started my job, it was just a matter of bread and butter. Now it is a matter of becoming a professional. Now I try to seek support from my colleagues and build professional networks. (P9)

POSITIVE WORKING ATMOSPHERE

Interviews revealed that CPD engagement had a positive impact on working atmosphere. Participants affirmed that such activities led them to job satisfaction and promotion. The following excerpts were selected from the interviews with EFL teachers.

Participation in different CPD courses caused better job opportunities for me. The reason is that when you participate in more CPD courses, you have a stronger resumé which leads us to better job opportunities. (P3, P8)

Attending different courses has many effects on my overall working atmosphere like collaborative practices with my colleagues and positive mindsets about my students and workplace. I feel academic success as well as emotional well-being. To tell you the truth, CPD courses have helped me achieve job satisfaction. (P2, P9, P11)

The consequence of CPD participation for teachers in their workplace is that they will be considered well-informed and knowledgeable in the eyes of students as well as the institute administration and this causes their career advancement. (P5)

PERSONAL GROWTH

Based on collected data, CPD engagement had a great impact on teachers' personal growth by enhancing their self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-regulation. The interviewees expressed their ideas in terms of teachers' personal growth as it follows:

Participation in the CPD activities has increased my self-confidence in teaching and helped me achieve a higher professional identity. (P3, P5, P8, P9)

Well, participation in these courses can definitely have a very positive effect on the personal growth of a teacher especially it can lead to higher self-efficacy. (P2)

Participating in different CPD courses brings inner satisfaction to the instructors which has a direct impact on their professional identity. After attending CPD courses, I learned how to effectively manage my own learning, emotions, and behaviour. I can successfully set my goals, monitor myself, and regulate my emotions. (P8)

DISCUSSION

The first research question was intended to reveal how Iranian EFL teachers conceptualize their PI. As the results of the interviews indicated, Iranian EFL teachers conceptualized their PI with respect to six main factors: Teacher



biographies, teacher emotions, participation in communities of practice, teacher learning, teacher cognition, and contextual factors. These findings are in line with the studies by Behin et al., (2018); Freeman (2004), Ghanizadeh & Ostad (2016); and Kanno and Stuart (2011) who confirmed that teachers are regarded as individuals whose beliefs and teaching practices are formed by their previous experiences and encounters in learning English. Similarly, the result supporting that EFL teachers' PI is partly influenced by contextual factors is in line with Flores and Day (2006) as PI is considered to be context-bound and is crucially related to social, cultural, and political contexts—interlocutors, institutional settings, and so on. A possible explanation for such a finding is that Iranian EFL teachers consider, feel, settle, or even identify themselves as teachers within a range of specific contexts is intricately interdependent with their own beliefs, values, conceptualizations, and theories.

The second question aimed to investigate the types of CPD courses and activities that Iranian EFL teachers engage in. Participation in CPD endeavors was affected by personal as well as contextual factors. According to the findings of the present study, Iranian EFL teachers had the experience of engaging in a variety of CPD activities namely TTC, workshops, webinars, CELTA course, seminars, and free discussion sessions. However, TTC, workshops, and webinars were the most common CPD activities due to the specific context of Iran. One possible explanation could lie in the fact that CPD courses such as TTC, workshops, free discussion sessions, and online materials were the only CPD courses and activities available in the context of Iran. Besides, the cost and distance for some CPD activities such as CELTA and DELTA made them less popular among Iranian EFL teachers as only one participant had CELTA certificate. Such a finding is congruent with the study conducted by Amin and Saukah (2015) that both personal and contextual factors contributed to teachers' professional development. The result is also in agreement with Saberi and Sahragard's (2019) study which revealed that available CPD opportunities are context-sensitive which determine the type of CPD activities teachers engage in. More importantly, in the EFL context of Iran, teachers mostly rely on self-regulation factor rather than other-regulation factor due to the scarce CPD opportunities. Considering CPD approaches, top-down opportunities are quite few in the context of Iran as language institutes do not require teachers to attend such activities and rarely use CPD endeavors for teachers' promotion during their professional life. One should not overlook the fact that bottom-up CPD activities seem more popular only among those EFL teachers with high initiative and good financial status. No doubt, such teachers prefer to develop themselves professionally at their own convenience in order to enhance their own efficiency and assist students with better outcomes. The results can be explained by the fact that top-down approaches play a little role in teachers' professional development due to the paucity of CPD activities and courses in the context of Iran and teachers professionally develop themselves by appealing to bottom-up approaches.

The third research question focused on finding the possible interplay between Iranian EFL teachers' PI and their engagement in CPD courses and activities. The obtained results from the analysis of the interview data demonstrated that teachers' engagement in CPD courses and activities influenced their PI through the positive impacts on teachers' pedagogical knowledge, professionalism, working atmosphere, and personal growth. These findings corroborate the studies by Abtahi and Motallebzadeh (2016) and Labbaf et al. (2019) in which the influential factors shaping Iranian teachers' PI highlighted the importance of personal characteristics, particularly professional interest and self-confidence in enhancing teaching quality. The results are also consistent with the study by Ghanizadeh and Ostad (2016) which delved into the professional identity of Iranian EFL teachers and identified key components of teacher professional identity including self-expectations, teaching responsibilities, and pedagogy. These findings further support Klechtermans' (2018) study that self-understanding emerges out of teachers' interactions.

Regarding the interplay between TPI and CPD endeavors, these findings agree with the study carried out by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) in that CPD activities can serve teachers as a terrific opportunity for further professionalization of their teaching career. In addition, the mentioned findings are consistent with the findings of Miller et al., (2018) and Sachs (2003) in that CPD courses and activities can result in teachers' efficacy by developing improved professional expertise influencing the teaching profession. Finally, Mahmoodarabi et al. (2021) confirms that TPI encompasses aspects such as self-development, language awareness, institutional practices, learner engagement, self-evaluation, and sociocultural considerations. Such a result can be justified by the fact that CPD opportunities play a pivotal role in teachers' conceptualization of their professional identity. Remarkably, teachers' participation in CPD activities can potentially affect the way TPI is shaped and developed by teachers' convictions,



beliefs, and backgrounds. Correspondingly, an established PI can leave an impact on EFL teachers' decisions in terms of what sort of CPD to follow.

CONCLUSION

The present study identified a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the specific nature of Iranian EFL teachers' PI and its intersection with CPD. This study sought to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' conceptualization of their PI, the popular types of CPD courses and activities, and the interplay between Iranian EFL teachers' PI and CPD. The results indicated that Iranian EFL teachers conceptualized their PI through teacher cognition, teacher emotion, participation in communities of practice, teacher biographies, contextual factors, and teacher learning. Additionally, the findings identified that the most common CPD courses and activities were TTC, workshops, and webinars which occur due to teachers' initiative via bottom-up approach to CPD. Furthermore, it was revealed that the types of CPD activities that Iranian EFL teachers engage in are mainly influenced by personal as well as contextual factors. Finally, the results indicated that Iranian EFL teachers' engagement in CPD activities can positively influence their PI since such courses can enhance teachers' pedagogical knowledge, professionalism, positive working atmosphere, and personal growth.

The current study has several multifaceted implications for teacher educators, educational institutions, and policymakers. Findings from the study could inform curriculum designers about the importance of integrating CPD-related courses into teacher education curricula. What is more is that courses could be designed to explicitly address aspects of professional identity formation, encouraging teachers to reflect on their beliefs, values, and teaching practices, and how these evolve through CPD activities. Furthermore, institutions could facilitate the formation of communities of practice where EFL teachers can collaborate, share experiences, and engage in beneficial discussions about PI and CPD. These communities could provide a supportive environment for teachers to learn from one another, exchange best practices, and collectively address challenges related to professional development. Also, the findings of the study may have implications for education policy at the national or institutional levels. Policymakers could consider implementing initiatives that motivate and support EFL teachers' participation in CPD activities, such as funding opportunities, and career advancement pathways tied to professional development achievements. Overall, the pedagogical implications of the study emphasize the importance of fostering a supportive environment that nurtures EFL teachers' professional identities and promotes their ongoing growth and development through CPD opportunities. By addressing these implications, educational institutions can enhance the quality of English language teaching and ultimately contribute to improved student learning outcomes. The current study could inspire further research into the intersection of professional identity and CPD among EFL teachers across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. Additionally, comparative studies between Iranian EFL teachers and their counterparts in different cultural contexts could shed light on the universality versus cultural specificity of PI development. Moreover, longitudinal research tracking the evolution of teachers' PI over time could offer invaluable perspectives for educational policy and practice.

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