



Research Article

An Exploration of Iranian Primary-Level EFL Teachers' Perceptions Toward Their Professional Identity

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ARTICLE INFO

Submission History

Received: 2025-03-17

Accepted: 2025-05-19

Keywords

Primary-level EFL teaching

Professional identity

Teacher identity

ABSTRACT

Although professional identity is a fundamental aspect of any educational system, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, little attention has been given to the professional identity of primary-level EFL teachers. Hence, investigating teachers' professional identity can alleviate some challenges they face as integral members of the education process. The aim of this study was to explore Iranian primary-level EFL teachers' professional identity and the role of gender in their perceptions of their professional identity. To this end, a qualitative thematic analysis design was used. Participants included 15 teachers (7 males and 8 females) from private institutes of Tehran and Tabriz who were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected through a face-to-face semi-structured interview. Based on the results of the thematic analysis, four main themes were identified: teachers' professional competence, teachers' professional learning, teacher-student relationships, and teacher-community relationships. Additionally, it was indicated that the gender of primary-level Iranian EFL teachers does not play any role in their perceptions of their professional identity. These results highlighted the multifaceted nature of teachers' professional identity, which is shaped by their expertise, continuous learning, and interactions within the educational community. This study has important implications for EFL teachers, EFL learners, and syllabus designers.



Introduction

In contemporary research, the focus on effective teaching has shifted from mere examination of specific teacher behaviors and competencies to the teacher's self and identity, which collectively influence their classroom conduct (Han, 2016; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Richards, 2008). In essence, recent scholarship acknowledges that effective teaching extends beyond predefined competencies, traits, and behaviors to include broader concepts that significantly impact teaching outcomes, with professional identity being one such crucial factor. The significance of teachers' professional identity is notably prominent in current trends within English teaching research and teacher education studies (Gaudelli & Ousley, 2009; Rots et al., 2013). Some studies have even suggested that the process of learning to teach entails the construction of a professional identity rather than the mere acquisition of knowledge (Nguyen, 2008).

Professional identity stands as an essential element within every educational framework, including English Teaching (ET). Over the past two decades, significant attention has been directed towards the formation of teachers' professional identity (Sadeghi & Sahragard, 2016). Kumaravadivelu (2012) believes that a comprehensive grasp of one's teaching persona necessitates a deep understanding of their professional identity, beliefs, and values. This perspective highlights the intimate relationship between professional identity and the role of teachers in the teaching process.

Teachers' professional identity is an individual factor with strong ties to social and contextual factors. This concept was proposed for the first time in educational research in the 1990s, and soon it was turned into one of the main topics in the ELT field. Gradually, this notion found its way into the research in the field, and consequently, concerns

about it increased as well. It seems that understanding teachers' professional identity and its effect on teachers' professional practices and activities depends on understanding teachers' self-image about themselves concerning their profession (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019).

He and Lin (2013) define teacher professional identity as teachers' professional self-concept and the way they perceive themselves as teachers professionally. For teachers, the concept of identity cannot be considered as separated from other factors in teaching including beliefs, knowledge, and self-efficacy (Collopy, 2003). In the same vein, Lave and Wenger (1999) argue that teacher identity is not separated from social knowledge and activities. Teachers' professional identity plays a crucial role in interpreting the curriculum and textbooks, teaching styles, and understanding of students' learning (Caihong, 2011). In light of this, the argument can be made that teachers' professional identity is fundamental to their teaching practice and commitment to the profession. (Burn, 2007). Exploration of teachers' professional identity significantly contributes to curriculum reform, classroom teaching, and student learning (Caihong, 2011).

The theoretical framework of this study is the identity framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002). According to Cheek et al. (2002), identity can be categorized into four aspects: personal, social, relational, and collective identities. Personal identity involves the formation of self as an independent and unique being characterized by a definite and clear boundary by which he/she can be distinguished from others in professional, personal, and individual life; relational identity is represented in interpersonal relatedness, intimacy, and interdependence, and is tied with a psychological sense of belonging; social identity is formed through interaction among the individual and the group and consists of central and constant

components; and collective identity refers to the self as defined as being a member of groups or social categories.

Among different factors influencing teachers' identity construction, learners' characteristics, including their English proficiency level, can be mentioned. Furthermore, according to Roberts (1998), teaching English at the primary level to young learners demands knowledgeable teachers who can deal with children. He believes that primary teachers should have psychological knowledge, considering the specific learning styles of young learners who may need different cognitive adjustments in teaching methods. The primary stage is crucial because it serves as a foundation for more advanced grades.. Therefore, authorities and school principals search for critically minded, creative, and responsible primary English language teachers (Roberts, 1998).

It is generally argued that teaching English to young students at the primary level is a complex task that requires profound experience and professional development through some procedures, both formal and informal (Ahmed, 2003). Language teachers may encounter certain problems at the primary level, such as classroom management, students with learning disabilities, and a lack of teaching-related technologies (Ahmed, 2003). Another source of problem for primary-level EFL teachers is subject matter complexity because young learners may find the process of learning English demanding and may feel the need for teachers who are skillfully able to use English (Dajani & McLaughlin, 2009).

Even though a great deal of research has been carried out in the field of EFL teachers' identity (e.g., He & Lin, 2013; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Riahipour et al., 2020; Saphier & West, 2009), little attention has been given to primary-level EFL teachers' professional identity. In this way, investigating the professional identity of teachers

can lessen some problems of teachers as a key part of the education process. This motivated the researcher to conduct the present study with the main aim of exploring Iranian primary-level EFL teachers' professional identity. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. How do primary-level Iranian EFL teachers perceive their professional identity?

RQ2. Does gender of primary-level Iranian EFL teachers play any role in their perceptions of their professional identity?

Literature Review

Teacher Identity

Cooper and Olson (1996) state that teacher identity is constantly shaped and reshaped as individuals grow over time and interact with others. Teaching and the role of a teacher can be understood through two distinct perspectives: the process of becoming a teacher and the experience of being a teacher. Mayer (2002) suggests that learning to teach involves acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfill the duties of a teacher, as well as developing a personal identity as a teacher. In the former perspective, one embodies the role of 'being the teacher', while in the latter, one undergoes the process of 'becoming a teacher'. It is evident that prioritizing 'being the teacher', which focuses on the functions associated with the teaching role, can lead to the elevation of content knowledge and teaching strategies as primary objectives. Consequently, pre-service teacher education may become less relevant, with mere survival in the profession becoming a primary concern. These distinctions hold profound implications for the design and implementation of teacher education programs.

As it is clear from the quotation, becoming a teacher necessitates an identity change, while being a teacher implies being seen as having the role and identity. Becoming a teacher equates to forming a

professional identity. This entails more than gleaning teaching skills; since skills delimit how teachers function in their classes, but identity formation talks of the voicing of investments and commitments (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Accordingly, teacher education should focus more on building the inner image of being a teacher, i.e., identity and core beliefs, rather than just providing ways of performing the roles of a teacher.

Part of the teaching process involves continuously shaping a sustainable identity as a teacher. A teacher's identity is determined by their position within the realm of professional possibilities. However, teachers must discern between inherent traits, acquired qualities, and external influences, as some aspects of their identity are innate, some are cultivated, and some are imposed upon them (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Consequently, as individuals plan to become teachers, they receive certain roles from predecessors while simultaneously engaging in a process of personal growth and potential development (Boreham & Gray, 2005). In essence, teachers exist in the present as a culmination of their past experiences, while also projecting themselves towards a future filled with possibilities that can shape their professional lives.

Teacher identity stands as a crucial issue that warrants attention in teacher education and training programs. As Bullough (1997, p. 21) emphasizes, "Teacher identity - the beliefs beginning teachers hold about teaching and learning as it relates to themselves as teachers is of paramount importance in teacher education since it functions as the foundation for interpretation and decision-making." Therefore, to address this critical aspect, teacher education courses should begin with an exploration of the teaching self.

Teacher Professional Identity

In recent decades, the exploration of professional identity has become a focal point for numerous scholars and researchers across various educational domains. However, there remains no universally accepted definition of professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004). Beijaard et al. (2004), after examining twenty-two articles related to professional identity, categorized studies into three main groups: those focused on its construction, its characteristics, and teachers' narratives regarding their professional identity. Professional identity captures a teacher's self-perception and interactions with others within the profession. This perception is shaped by dynamic interactions between internal and external forces, particularly within specific educational contexts such as universities, colleges, or classrooms (Danielewicz, 2001).

The non-unification and multiplicity of professional identity are notable characteristics. These features stem from the fusion of personal traits and socially constructed roles through interactions (Varghese et al., 2005). Additionally, according to Gee (2001), individuals are labeled based on their behaviors and interactions within specific contexts, often embodying various roles simultaneously. Furthermore, teacher professional identity intertwines personal beliefs and widely accepted standards regarding the teaching profession (Beijaard et al., 2004). Through a combination of both aspects and continuous interaction, teacher professional identity evolves and takes shape (Beijaard et al., 2000).

The fluid nature of teacher professional identity is another salient feature. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) argue that teachers craft their professional identities through reflective storytelling, drawing from past, present, and envisioned experiences. Identity evolves over a teacher's lifetime and is subject to continuous development through

accumulated experiences and introspection (Beijaard et al., 2004; Varghese et al., 2005). Considering these features, teacher professional identity comprises sub-identities. Beijaard et al. (2000) identified three sub-identities: subject matter expertise, didactical expertise, and pedagogical expertise. These components collectively shape the complex nature of teacher professional identity.

Conventionally, teachers' knowledge of subject matter is a pertinent segment of an instructor's professional knowledge core (Beijaard et al., 2000). Subject matter expertise, as the identity, would be highly critical for teachers. It means that it is essential for teachers to have mastery over the domain they teach. This knowledge entails having a profound and comprehensive perception of the concepts taught to learners and their connections. By mastery over the subject area, teachers would be able to modify curriculum and educational programs, generate productive exercises and assignments, describe things exhaustively, identify students' strengths and weaknesses, and address learners' misconceptions appropriately (Beijaard et al., 2004). Furthermore, mastery over the subject area permits teachers to have productive interactions with learners, encourage them to participate in the lessons actively, and provide clear answers to any subject-related questions being raised by students (Hotaman, 2010). So, researchers in the domain of education strongly argue that teachers must acquire subject matter knowledge during teacher training programs and before becoming a teacher (Bennett & Carre, 1993).

According to Gee (2001), discourse identity underlines that a person is identified as a specific individual due to their achievements and acceptance by other people. Therefore, to be recognized as a teacher, an individual must participate in teacher education programs and obtain certification; then, people would recognize

him/her as a teacher possessing knowledge in a particular subject area and is authorized to step into the classroom and practice the teaching profession.

Pedagogical expertise means teacher's knowledge, which helps him perceive issues related to non-technical and instrumental actions that lead to students' knowledge acquisition (Beijaard et al., 2000). In other words, teaching is not merely about knowledge transmission, and teachers should utilize their skills to consider their students' moral and ethical dimensions. For instance, teachers should acquire skills and knowledge that equip them to become involved in or engaged with learners. It includes understanding the personal problems that learners have and what is happening in learners' minds. Supporting the development of learners' social, emotional, and moral dimensions is related to pedagogical expertise (Beijaard et al., 2000). So, acquiring such expertise is essential for teachers since ethical, social, and emotional dilemmas are things teachers progressively encounter in postmodern societies.

The next type of identity is institutional identity. According to Gee (2001), institutional identity refers to "how actively or passively the occupant of a position fulfils his role" (p. 103). Regarding institutional identity, teachers, as occupants of the educational institute, actively perform their responsibilities regarding developing their students' moral, social, and emotional dimensions and developing their academic knowledge.

Having didactical expertise is another requirement for teachers. According to Beijaard et al. (2000), teachers have the required skills and knowledge for performing and accelerating learning tasks by attaining didactical expertise. In other words, these skills help teachers to prepare, implement, and assess learning tasks. The development of these skills is essential to assist students in becoming successful learners. This knowledge promotes the transfer of knowledge

efficiently and directs teachers towards process-oriented teaching in which students are actively involved knowledge construction and utilization (Vermunt & Verschaffel, 2000). So, attaining didactical expertise is assumed crucial in impacting teachers' perceptions of their professional identity.

Teachers, as didactical experts, try to deal with the organization of teaching-learning activities. Stenberg et al. (2014) studied teachers' identity through the lens of didactical position. They believed that teachers should orchestrate and encourage student learning. Regarding 'orchestrating position', teachers should learn how to organize their teaching activities to support students' learning. The teacher is a facilitator and should be aware of different ways that he can use to create an environment that leads to productive interaction among learners. Teachers consider students' diverse learning styles and use various methods to accommodate individual differences. Regarding 'encouraging position', teachers are motivators. In other words, in order to accomplish meaningful learning, they motivate and inspire students. They try to make learning processes a pleasant experience for students and encourage them to want knowledge.

An increasing body of research is investigating teachers' perceptions of their different dimensions of identity, including professional identity. In a study conducted by Nguyen (2016) in Vietnam, the ways English teachers attempted to make room for enhancing their practice as well as shape their identity in a local setting were scrutinized. Therefore, narrative interviews were administered to English teachers who worked in different primary schools. According to the results of the data analysis, at first, these subjects believed that self-education as well as learning from their colleagues in primary schools was inadequate for professional growth. Consequently, they sought other ways to enhance their professional identity by

forsaking pedagogical and epistemological restrictions to find new practices and identities. To put it another way, their professional growth was not merely limited to teaching expertise and concepts obtained from the co-workers in the primary schools but also extended to the instructional activities and discourses in other circles. Along with new activities, the teachers shaped their new professional identities due to engagement in different communities.

Han (2016) endeavored to conceptualize the professional identity of English teachers through a socio-psychological lens, aiming to unveil the characteristics and dynamics of professional identity by analyzing Korean English teachers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions to their national English curriculum and associated policies. In a similar vein, Yazan (2018) proposed a conceptual framework elucidating the interconnectedness between language teacher identity and essential constructs, including teacher learning, teacher cognition, participation in communities of practice, contextual factors, teacher biographies, and teacher emotions.

Nazari and Molana (2020) delved into the developmental journey of a TESOL teacher during their inaugural year of teaching. The study revealed that a myriad of interconnected factors and stakeholders influenced the teacher's identity evolution, ranging from policy-makers to students and their families, colleagues, and the teacher themselves. Sara, the subject of the study, ultimately left her teaching position, citing isolation from administrators/managers as a primary reason (personal communication). The findings suggest that managers should acquaint themselves with the intricacies of novice teachers' identities, as the diverse array of internal and external influences they encounter significantly shapes their professional sense of self. Moreover, managers should offer increased emotional support and

tolerance to novices to enhance teacher retention and be prepared to implement adjustments as necessary. This emphasizes the intricate and multidimensional nature of novice teachers' identity development, which is deeply intertwined with various contextual factors that highlight the complex nature of their role and its continuous evolution in terms of identity formation and professional practice.

Parsi and Ashraf (2020) explored the interplay among pedagogical practice, professional identity, and criticality among EFL teachers. Participants included EFL teachers from various language institutes and public schools who completed the Critical Thinking Scale and the Teacher Professional Identity Questionnaire developed by Honey (2000) and Liou (2008), respectively. Convenience sampling was employed to select participants whose teaching experience ranged from 4 to 23 years. The study found significant correlations between EFL teachers' critical thinking and teaching experience, as well as between teaching experience and professional identity, and critical thinking and professional identity. Moreover, multiple regression analysis revealed that teaching experience could predict participants' professional identity. Based on these findings, the study suggests that policymakers and practitioners in the EFL field should prioritize initiatives aimed at promoting the development of critical thinking skills and professional identity among EFL teachers.

Although recent decades have seen substantial growth in observing identity formation of teachers in their actual-life settings, there is scarce data on the online identities of the teachers as well as shifts in identities from their real-life to virtual space. Nazari and Seyri (2021) dealt with this matter through probing identity changes of teachers from physical learning to e-learning classroom conditions. Focus groups, semi-structured

interviews as well as questionnaires through which the participants reported their educational practices were utilized to obtain the study data. The data showed that professional inexperience, teaching mastery, and technology inaccessibility are the main problems teachers experienced in teaching path.

Amiri Shayesteh and Baleghizadeh (2022) addressed English teachers' perceptions of their professional identity. The findings showed that merits and challenges of professional development are the key components of EFL teachers' professional identity. Coşgun and Savaş (2023) sought to investigate the professional identity development of EFL teachers. The findings confirmed that some expectations and fears play the most important role in the professional identity formation of high school teachers.

Method

Design of the Study

In line with the nature of the objectives of this study, the researchers used a qualitative thematic analysis design to explore primary-level Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their professional identity. Six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Clarke and Braun (2013) include: Step 1: Become familiar with the data, Step 2: Generate initial codes, Step 3: Search for themes, Step 4: Review themes, Step 5: Define themes, and Step 6: Write-up.

Participants and Setting

The statistical sample of the research included primary-level English teachers from both genders teaching at private institutes of Tehran and Tabriz. From this sample, 15 teachers (7 males and 8 females) voluntarily took part in the study by participating in a face-to-face semi-structured interview. They were selected through convenience sampling. They had from 3 to 15 years of teaching

experience. They held MA and PhD degrees in TEFL. Their native language was Persian. They were 25-50 years old. They were informed of the purposes of the present research. Moreover, they were assured about anonymity and lack of leakage of their personal information.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview was administered to explore primary-level Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their professional identity. It consisted of 4 open-ended questions, which were developed by the researchers through consulting the existing literature and the research supervisor. That is, the researcher delved into similar studies and triangulated the results with her supervisor's comments. The questions started from general questions and continued to specific ones. The interview was done face to face and one by one. Audio recording and transcription of interviews were done for the purpose of further data analysis. The interviews were conducted in Persian. To check the dependability of interview data, member checking was used. That is, the researchers showed some parts of the analyzed interviews to the interviewees to see whether their perceptions were the same as the extracted themes. The credibility of interview data was confirmed by using low-inference descriptors. That is, some direct quotations from the interviewees were provided in presenting the results of thematic analysis. Moreover, inter-rater reliability ($r=.90$) was checked by asking an expert in qualitative data analysis to analyze the interviews for the second time. To encourage participants to cooperate, a gift was given to them.

Data Collection

To launch data collection, sample selection was done first, observing ethics. Then, the researchers implemented the interviews as explained above and

audio-recorded them with the permission of the interviewees. Afterwards, audio-recording of interview was done. Finally, recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for subsequent analyses.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through the qualitative manual thematic analysis through open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding entailed highlighting specific phrases and sentences and assigning corresponding codes to encapsulate the content of the emphasized portions. Axial coding included categorizing all similar codes under a main theme. Selective coding involved categorizing all the themes under a main category, namely, Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their professional identity.

Results

With regard to the first research question (*How do primary-level Iranian EFL teachers perceive their professional identity?*), the following themes were identified about primary-level Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their professional identity:

Theme 1: Teachers' Professional Competence

This theme means that teachers need professional competence for formation of their professional identity. This theme was supported by four main codes of classroom management, knowledge of teaching methods, knowledge of testing methods, and knowledge of subject matter.

The teacher's professional identity is classroom management. Classroom management is one of the important components of English language teaching. The language teacher must have the necessary knowledge to manage the class and use it in their class. I believe that classroom knowledge is one of the most important knowledge for the professional identity of a language teacher. (participant 7)

Classroom management creates professional identity. Class management is a difficult task. Some things can be difficult to manage. The teacher must have high knowledge in this matter. This is what is known as classroom management. A teacher cannot play the role of a full-fledged teacher without classroom management. (participant 14)

The participants pointed out that professional identity cannot be formed in the absence of classroom management skills of teachers. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), social issues play a significant role in professional identity formation. Classroom management is considered a dimension of social issues that influences professional identity.

Professional identity can be considered the knowledge of teaching method. The teacher needs to know different teaching methods. To know which teaching method is useful for which class and which students. It is in this way that it can have a proper teaching. (participant 3)

Professional identity means teaching knowledge. This knowledge is obtained through increasing information about various teaching methods. We have several different teaching methods that are used in different contexts. First of all, the English teacher must be familiar with different teaching methods. (participant 12)

According to the participants, knowledge of teaching methods is a key to professional identity formation of teachers. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), personal matters play a significant role in professional identity formation. Knowledge of teaching method is considered a dimension of personal matters that affects professional identity and is related to the teachers' professional competence.

Knowledge of testing methods is also one of the necessary knowledge types. Making tests and

designing suitable tests is necessary for every teacher. A teacher, like other jobs, has its own dimensions. Teaching evaluation methods are one of its most important dimensions. These constitute the teacher's professional knowledge. (participant 2)

Evaluation can be considered equal to the teaching method. The teacher should have the knowledge of evaluation and different evaluation methods. Evaluation cannot be limited to an exclusive method. (participant 6)

As remarked by the participants, knowledge of testing methods has the potential to affect teachers' professional identity. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), personal issues are of significance in shaping professional identity. Knowledge of testing methods is considered a part of personal issues that influence professional identity.

The professional identity of a teacher means specialized knowledge along with general knowledge. Specialized knowledge means teacher's knowledge about different categories and disciplines. For example, in addition to teaching, a teacher should also know about computer science. A language teacher must also know math. (participant 13)

Professional identity means subject knowledge in different fields. That is, the teacher must have average historical, geographical, cultural and general knowledge. The content of the courses is related to different knowledge. The language teacher must strengthen this knowledge. Professional identity means professional knowledge. (participant 2)

The participants believed that knowledge of subject matter is a main link in the chain of professional identity. Similar to what was stated about the previous theme, according to the

framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), professional identity formation is affected by personal dimensions. Knowledge of subject matter is a personal matter that impacts professional identity.

Theme 2: Teachers' Professional Learning

According to this theme, professional learning leads to generation of professional identity of teachers. This theme was supported by three main codes of professional development programs, formal learning, and informal learning.

Professional development transforms professional identity. To have a stronger professional identity, teachers are better to take part in different programs targeted at professional development and training. They can be workshops, seminars, webinars, etc. (participant 10)

Professional identity requires professional development. That is, teachers should be professionally developed through a variety of programs. Such programs help them reconstruct their professional identity. (participant 13)

According to the perceptions of the participants, professional development is a prerequisite to professional identity. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), professional identity and personal development (professional development can be categorized as a part of personal development) affect each other dynamically. Thus, professional development is necessary for professional identity.

Professional identity is not formed without teachers' informal learning. Among these factors, we can mention teaching experience and teacher's knowledge. When the teacher has high knowledge and experience, they will have a stronger social identity. (participant 14)

Teacher learning contributes to professional identity through the skill of innovation and creativity. It is a mistake that everyone thinks that the formation of a professional identity has a certain and fixed routine. The teacher should get used to breaking creativity and establish new methods. Professional identity is affected by teacher learning. (participant 7)

The meaning behind the saying of the participants was that informal learning of teachers leads to the formation of their professional identity. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), professional identity and learning affect each other dynamically. Thus, professional identity is influenced by informal learning of teachers.

Language knowledge is necessary to form a professional identity. A teacher must have a high level of general language knowledge to be able to teach English effectively. Knowledge of English language contributes to professional identity. It means that the teacher's knowledge of speaking, listening, writing and reading English must be high. Linguistic knowledge is a prerequisite for language teaching. (participant 5)

Professional identity is formed with language knowledge. Language knowledge is the knowledge of the four skills of the English language. The teacher urgently needs these four skills: listening, writing, reading and speaking. (participant 8)

According to the participants, language knowledge (which can be considered formal learning) is necessary for professional identity construction. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), professional identity has different aspects, including personal aspects. Language knowledge or formal learning is

a dimension of personal aspects of identity that is necessary for professional identity.

Theme 3: Teacher-Student Relationship

As meant by this theme, the nature of teacher-student relationship is influenced by professional identity. This theme was supported by three main codes of motivation, teacher-student rapport, and students' engagement.

Professional identity plays an important role in motivational skills. Motivational skills also play an important role in teaching English. Teachers should be able to motivate students. In my opinion, motivation has the greatest impact on teaching and learning. The teacher must be motivated and motivate the children as well. (participant 1)

The important role of professional identity is to strengthen the skill of motivation. My point is that since learning is not possible without motivation, the language teacher must be able to motivate the students. Otherwise, the classroom becomes an unmotivated and soulless space. (participant 5)

The participants perceived that professional identity equips teachers with motivational skills. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), professional identity formation and collective issues are mutually tied. Motivational skills are a branch of collective matters that are tied to professional identity in a two-way manner.

In my opinion, teacher-student rapport strengthens the teacher's professional identity by creating a social image for the teacher. When the teacher is socially justified, he plays a more useful role in the teaching profession. In my opinion, in environments where the teacher's social status is higher, the teacher's professional identity is also stronger. (participant 5)

Professional identity is related to factors such as rapport. The teacher is inevitably influenced by

rapport and this is inevitable. Because in this situation, the teacher has more job satisfaction and job satisfaction has a very important effect on professional identity. (participant 11)

The meaning conveyed by the participants was that teacher-student rapport influences teachers' professional identity. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), professional identity is influenced by social issues. This is why it was perceived by the participants that teacher-student rapport is necessary for professional identity.

Professional identity and students' engagement are interdependent. If the students are involved, teaching will be much more dynamic and beautiful. Professional identity and students' engagement in combination lead to creativity and innovation. (participant 2)

Professional identity is built upon engagement of students. In my opinion, students are tired of existing methods and teachers should invent new methods with creativity and innovation. In fact, new methods should engage students more. (participant 6)

The opinion held by the participants was that students' engagement is necessary for the professional identity of teachers. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), professional identity influences collective issues and is influenced by them simultaneously. Therefore, professional identity and students' engagement (as a collective issue) are interdependent.

Theme 4: Teacher-Community Relationship

According to this theme, the relationship between teacher and the community shapes teachers' professional identity and is shaped by it. This theme was supported by three main codes of teachers' public relationships, teacher

collaboration with colleagues, and teacher collaboration with parents.

The role of professional identity is to strengthen public relations skills. If a teacher cannot establish strong public relations, it will be difficult for him to achieve success in teaching. Expression style is important in teaching. (participant 11)

Communication with colleagues and its bold role should not be ignored in the process of professional identity formation. A creative teacher is someone who have good relations with his counterparts. Colleagues are a good source of learning for teachers. (participant 2)

Professional identity shapes interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills are among the most necessary teaching skills. Interpersonal communication is necessary for proper transfer of content and educational materials. It means

everything. Even collaboration of teachers with the parents of students is placed in this category. (participant 15)

The view of the participants was that everything related to the relationship of teachers with the community influences their professional identity and is influenced by it. According to the framework proposed by Cheek et al. (2002), professional identity and relational matters influence each other inevitably. Therefore, professional identity is necessary for relational skills, and relational skills are necessary for professional identity.

Concerning the second research question *Does gender of primary-level Iranian EFL teachers play any role in their perceptions of their professional identity?*, some randomly selected quotations of male and female teachers were compared to each other as illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1

Male and Female Teachers' Perceptions of their Professional Identity

Number	Male teachers' quotations	Female teachers' quotations
1	<i>The teacher's professional identity is classroom management. Classroom management is one of the important components of English language teaching. The language teacher must have the necessary knowledge to manage the class and use it in his class. I believe that classroom knowledge is one of the most important knowledges for the professional identity of a language teacher.</i>	<i>Classroom management creates professional identity. Class management is a difficult task. Some things can be difficult to manage. The teacher must have high knowledge in this matter. This is what is known as classroom management. A teacher cannot play the role of a full-fledged teacher without classroom management.</i>
2	<i>Knowledge of testing methods is also one of the necessary knowledge types. Making tests and designing suitable tests is necessary for every teacher. A teacher, like other jobs, has its own dimensions. Teaching evaluation methods are one of its most important dimensions. These constitute the teacher's professional knowledge.</i>	<i>Evaluation can be considered equal to the teaching method. The teacher should have the knowledge of evaluation and different evaluation methods. Evaluation cannot be limited to an exclusive method.</i>
3	<i>Professional development transforms professional identity. To have a stronger professional identity, teachers are better to take part in different programs targeted at professional development and training. They can be workshop, seminar, webinar, etc.</i>	<i>Professional identity requires professional development. That is, teachers should be professionally developed through a variety of programs. Such programs help them reconstruct their professional identity.</i>

Number	Male teachers' quotations	Female teachers' quotations
4	<i>Language knowledge is necessary to form a professional identity. A teacher must have a high level of general language knowledge to be able to teach English effectively. Knowledge of English language contributes to professional identity. It means that the teacher's knowledge of speaking, listening, writing and reading English must be high. Linguistic knowledge is a prerequisite for language teaching.</i>	<i>Professional identity is formed with language knowledge. Language knowledge is the knowledge of the four skills of the English language. The teacher urgently needs these four skills: listening, writing, reading and speaking.</i>
5	<i>Professional identity plays an important role in motivational skills. Motivational skills also play an important role in teaching English. Teachers should be able to motivate students. In my opinion, motivation has the greatest impact on teaching and learning. The teacher must be motivated and motivate the children as well.</i>	<i>The important role of professional identity is to strengthen the skill of motivation. My point is that since learning is not possible without motivation, the language teacher must be able to motivate the students. Otherwise, the classroom becomes an unmotivated and soulless space.</i>

According to Table 1, male and female teachers' perceptions of their professional identity revolve around similar issues. That is, they convey similar meanings. This shows that gender of primary-level Iranian EFL teachers plays no role in their perceptions of their professional identity.

Discussion

This study investigated Iranian primary-level EFL teachers' perception of their professional identity and the role of gender in this regard. The results showed four main themes including teachers' professional competence (main codes: classroom management, knowledge of teaching methods, knowledge of testing methods, and knowledge of subject matter), teachers' professional learning (main codes: professional development programs, formal learning, and informal learning), teacher-student relationships (main codes: motivation, teacher-student rapport, and students' engagement), and teacher-community relationships (main codes: teacher collaboration with colleagues, teacher collaboration with parents, and teachers' public relationships). Moreover, it was shown that gender of teachers plays no role in their perceptions of their professional identity.

The results show that the process of identity construction is dynamic and is affected by different contextual factors (Nazari & Seyri, 2021). According to Gee (2001), professional identity is a dynamic process that emerges from teachers' internal dispositions and their outward performances, representing a blend of self-understanding and external perceptions as professionals.

The findings are consistent with the studies by Amiri Shayesteh and Baleghizadeh (2022), Coşgun and Savaş (2023), Henry (2019), Nazari and Molana (2020), and Nazari and Seyri (2021). According to Banegas et al. (2023), language knowledge plays a pivotal role in the professional development of teachers. It empowers teachers in different aspects of teaching. It gives them self-confidence and enables them to present a positive image of themselves as a language teacher. All of these help them construct and reconstruct their professional identity. These findings align with identity theory, according to which professional identity is a dynamic, socially constructed, and evolving aspect of a person's self-concept (Gee, 2001). Hence, teachers' professional identity can be shaped by teachers' interactions with students, colleagues, and community, as well as their

engagement in different professional development programs.

The role of classroom management in the formation of professional identity is also justifiable from different angles. Classroom management consists of different dimensions, including teacher self-efficacy, which can be directly or indirectly in relation to professional identity. When teachers have higher self-efficacy, their professional identity will also be different from their counterparts with lower self-efficacy (Amiri Shayesteh & Baleghizadeh, 2022). Other dimensions of classroom management can also contribute to the change of professional identity in a similar manner. Similarly, other aspects of classroom management can directly or indirectly contribute to changes in teachers' professional identity (Coşgun & Savaş, 2023). Meanwhile, the role of teaching and testing methods in construction of professional identity is crystal clear for different reasons. Firstly, methods of teaching and testing used by teachers is influenced to some extent by their personality. Therefore, it affects their professional identity as well. Secondly, the strategies teachers use in their teaching lead to learning and exploring new things. This contributes to the transformation of their professional identity because identity is sensitive to learning and knowledge construction. Thirdly, teaching and testing methods place teachers in the path of self-reflection and self-study to check whether the methods used are working or they need revision and change. This, in turn, leads to reformation of the professional identity of teachers (Beauchamp, & Thomas, 2009).

Studies indicate that teachers' professional knowledge, especially their subject matter knowledge is influential in shaping their professional identity in the sense that knowledge construction and identity construction are connected mutually. Knowledge of subject matter equips teachers with new ideologies that can orient

teachers toward new ways of thinking. Rethinking and new ways of thinking unconsciously or consciously contribute to the reconstruction of the professional identity of teachers (Ngan, 2021).

On the role of professional identity in motivational skills and public relations of teachers, it can be argued that those teachers whose professional identity has been well-developed are willing to develop professionally. This gives them motivation to be more active and engaged in public relations. Willingness to participate in professional development programs encourages teachers to use motivational and public strategies (Benegas et al., 2023).

A justification for the finding that gender did not play any role in teachers' perceptions of their professional identity can be that EFL teaching is a profession wherein a set of transgender factors plays a role. It does not mean that the role of gender in EFL teachers' professional identity is completely ruled out. But it implies that the role of other factors that are independent of gender is apparently more dominant. It is documented by the arguments that professional identity is rooted in a set of diverse factors that are shared by males and females, among which personal, social, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive factors can be mentioned (Lee et al., 2013). While diversity and variety are there in these factors, they act similarly in both genders in professional elements (Day & Kington, 2008). In comparing these findings with those of the previous studies, consistent with the present study, in the research by Henry and Cliffordson (2013), male and female teachers' professional development was found to be similar.

All in all, the findings showed that professional identity is a complex notion with multiple layers that should be considered in the construction and reconstruction of teachers' professional identity. Looking at professional identity as a linear concept hides its multi-faceted and dynamic nature.

Conclusion and Implications

The results showed that Iranian EFL teachers' professional identity revolved around four themes of teachers' professional competence, teachers' professional learning, teacher-student relationships, and teacher-community Relationships. This implies that it is in the light of professional competence, professional learning, relationship with students and relationship with the community that teachers' professional identity is constructed and reconstructed.

Besides, it is concluded that Iranian EFL teachers should invest in their language knowledge, classroom management skills, teaching methods and testing methods, and subject matter knowledge for their professional identity to be developed. Moreover, if EFL teachers enhance their professional identity, their motivational skills are also enhanced. Additionally, teachers' attempts to enhance their professional identity lead to better public relations skills. Besides, professional identity and social identity are intermingled in a mutual way.

It can also be concluded that teachers' professional identity, at least as far as their perceptions of it are concerned, is independent of teachers' gender. That is, probably some universal factors underlie teachers' perceptions of their professional identity that transcend the boundary of gender-related issues.

The findings' implications extend to teacher educators and teachers. Teacher educators should use different strategies and appropriate materials to enhance teachers' professional and social identity. Moreover, they should train teachers to work more on enhancement of their professional identity. Besides, teachers should be attentive to the reconstruction of their profession. They should be involved in professional learning activities, practices, and strategies that contribute to the

enhancement of their professional and social identity.

Some limitations are imposed in this study. First, this study used a qualitative method to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their professional identity. Other studies can use a mixed methods design to deeply investigate EFL teachers' professional identity in different cultural and social contexts. Second, this study used a semi-structured interview to collect the data. Other studies can use other data collection strategies, such as narrative inquiry and focus group interviews, to collect the data. The third limitation refers to the data analysis method. This study used thematic analysis to analyze the data. Other studies can use other data analysis methods, such as content analysis, to increase the credibility of the data.

Accordingly, future researchers can replicate the present study taking these limitations into account, so that the validity of the findings is corroborated. For instance, using other qualitative tools, including narratives and observation, they can triangulate the findings remarkably.

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