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Challenges in Constructing the Professional Identity of Iranian EFL Teachers: A Narrative Inquiry

Seyyed Ayatollah Razmjoo¹, Saeed Fazli²

¹ *Corresponding author*, Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran, Email: arazmjoo@rose.shirazu.ac.ir

² M.A., Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran, Email: saeedarts222@gmail.com

Abstract

Many aspects of EFL teaching are negatively influenced by professional identity challenges which are not effectively responded to by EFL teachers. Considering this, few studies, however, have been conducted on EFL teachers' professional identity challenges, and especially on their gender-specific challenges, and factors which can facilitate their professional identity construction. Therefore, this study, benefitting from a narrative inquiry method and using semi-structured interviews, aimed to examine the professional identity gender-specific challenges of six institute EFL teachers. The findings of this study showed that EFL male and female teachers were different in relation to the professional challenges they faced and a number of factors had caused this. Based on the overall findings, it is recommended that EFL teacher educators become aware of the challenges faced by teachers and factors which can affect their professional identity construction. Additionally, they need to help EFL teachers reduce the destructive effects of professional identity challenges by facing them and turning them into opportunities for learning.

Keywords: gender-specific challenges, narrative inquiry, professional identity

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1. Introduction

Teachers play a crucial role in educational systems as individuals who provide education. Developing professional identity in teachers is a process that involves incorporating intimate knowledge, ideologies, views, norms, and values on the one hand and meeting professional expectations from educational institutions and schools on the other, such as generally accepted teaching ideals and standards (Beijaard et al., 2004). In becoming and being a teacher, one aims to align personal and professional activities (Olsen, 2010; Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). One motive for emphasizing teachers' professional identity is that it may be utilized as a tool for self-awareness (Coldron & Smith, 1999; MacLure, 1993).

Teachers' perspectives about their roles and beliefs affect their decision-making and everyday behaviors in various ways, so it is not surprising that they affect their work behaviors, feelings of well-being, and effectiveness. It is necessary to understand teachers to have a sense of who they are and the professional, cultural, and individual identities they claim or are assigned to in order to understand language teaching, learning in general, and how teaching is conducted in particular, as Varghese et al. mention (2005). One more explanation is that teachers' professional identity tends to be utilized as an insightful focal point for instructor learning and advancement (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Olsen, 2011; Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

A great deal of research has been conducted over the last two decades to discover what is going on in teachers' minds. The study of teacher identity, as Cardelle et al. (2007) contend, provides insight into teachers' motivations for entering teaching and their motivation to remain in the field.

For teachers to recognize the factors that influence their decisions in the process of teaching, Williams (2007) argues that teachers' professional identity is the key. In Enyedy et al. (2006) view, identity is a complex and extremely useful concept for understanding teaching as a profession. Hence, identity emerges as a distinct area of research (Knowles, 1992, Kompf et al., 1996, Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

It is rare that identity is defined properly, despite the many diverse conceptualizations and definitions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Although scholars differ on the definition of identity, it is generally agreed that it is an unstable and dynamic process that is influenced by social, cultural, and political factors (Atay & Ece, 2009). Based upon Mercer's (1990) definition of identity, anyone can shape and reshape their possible ways of exercising in a given environment based on the social, cultural, and political systems that influence all aspects of daily life. As a result of reinterpreting a person's professional experiences, they develop their sense of self and identity (Ghanizadeh & Abediostad, 2016). Professional identity is a means of categorizing teachers' roles, as defined by Lasky (2005). In Kerby's (1991) definition, identity is a process of interpreting and reinterpreting experiences, indicating an ongoing process of learning. Furthermore, having a balanced sense of individual identity is believed to be critical for the development of professional identity, according

to Friesen and Besely (2013).

Professional identity can be defined by four factors, according to Beijard et al. (2004, p. 108):

1. Every individual interprets and reinterprets their own experiences constantly.
2. The application of individuals' professional knowledge is corrected through negotiation and compromise between them and the work context.
3. A person's professional experience is justified through self-examination.
4. As a result of individuals' prior knowledge and beliefs, sub-identities are formed.

Based on a conceptualization of various aspects of teachers' professional identities, Kao and Lin (2015) created two categories:

1. Professional identity formation and development in teachers
2. Characterizing the professional identity of teachers

In order to establish one's professional identity as a teacher, both internal and external factors need to be considered. An internal factor includes a teacher's personal experiences, thinking about instruction, personal values, and expectations of the future, while an external factor involves the teachers' relationships with their peers, redesigning the work environment, organizing the structure, implementing teaching, reforming education, school leadership and professional development (Ghanizadeh & Abediostad, 2016).

"Teachers' professional identity is central to the profession of teaching," according to Ghanizadeh and Abediostad (2016, p.833). In order for teachers to understand the importance of their work and their role in society, they need to establish their professional identity. Sachs (2005) believes that teachers' identities are not fixed but negotiated based on their experiences and the senses they make of them. Komba, Anangisye, and Katabaro (2013) claim that the level of pedagogical training, academic training, and practical experience in academia significantly influence the formation of teachers' professional identities.

There has been an increase in the usage of English as a second or foreign language in recent years. According to Canagarajah (1999), Non-native speakers are the majority of English teachers around the world, and these non-native speakers bring different identities to the educational system.

Teachers may face challenges in adapting to the changes brought about by this process, particularly when they find themselves caught between what they perceive to be relevant to the profession and what they would like to be good, which can create difficulties within the teaching profession which might have a major impact on teachers' learning, leading them to leave teacher education or the profession entirely (Beijaard et al., 2004).

These challenges might be different for males and females. Researchers have proposed that males and females approach the identity task differently. According to some reviews (Waterman, 1982), the use of the processes in most reported studies is similar between the genders. Females tend to achieve identity more easily, while males tend to be excluded from it (Orlofsky, 1978; Waterman, 1977). The only aspect that differs greatly among the sexes is sexuality itself.

Traditionally, research on the professional development of teachers has focused primarily on terms such as the acquisition of assets, which refers to the knowledge, beliefs, and competencies teachers acquire (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). In part as a result of this one-sided focus, teacher educators and researchers have become progressively engaged in the transition from student to teacher and how beginning teachers view themselves as professionals (McLean, 1999). In light of this, rising interest has been shown in teachers' professional identity, especially in answering questions such as who they are and what kind of teachers they want to become (Beijaard et al., 2004).

Professional identity is defined and studied differently by researchers who study teachers' identities. However, most professionals recognize that professional identity is not a static process, but one that constantly changes, is active, and never stops. A consensus exists that teachers' professional identities are shaped not only by their personal characteristics, learning histories, and prior experiences but also by their professional contexts, including coworkers, knowledge, skills, and educational attitudes (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Cooper & Olson, 1996). Research has determined that a teacher's professional identity involves the integration of their personal identity and their professional identity in performing duties in a particular field (Beijaard et al., 2004; Slegers & Kelchtermans, 1999). In this sense, professional identity is a concept that sheds light on the complexity of becoming and being a teacher and can be used in this context as a theoretical framework or lens for studying it (Olsen, 2011).

A teacher's professional identity is often difficult to develop at the beginning of their career. In order to ensure that beginning teachers develop their professional identity well, they must connect their ideologies and professional selves, otherwise, the personal and the professional may clash (Beijaard et al., 2004, Alsup, 2006). A teacher's professional identity can be shaped by challenges in many ways (Alsup, 2006). To become a good teacher, beginning teachers must be challenged to become open to questioning their own identities and beliefs (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). In his statement, Olsen (2010) stated that tensions could offer beginning teachers new hope and challenges. Nevertheless, if beginning teachers are unable to cope with their tensions, tensions might become critical if they have harsh consequences on their emotional well-being. Smagorinsky et al. (2004) described a student-teacher who dealt with several teaching approaches: She was taught constructivist teaching at her university but forced to teach 'traditional' teaching at the practice school. Her emotional state was severely affected by this tension. Despite her desire to teach in the way that she wanted to, she was prohibited from doing so due to a lack of opportunities. Being a traditional teacher was not something she wanted to be.

Volkman and Anderson (1998) can reveal the more harmful consequences of challenges when analyzing the professional identity construction of a chemistry teacher. The challenges she had to face stemmed from the fact that her teaching ideas did not align with what it takes to be a professional teacher. Chemistry was one of her dilemmas because she believed the subject was difficult and boring, while she tried to make it fun and understandable for the students. The

challenges she faced at the time made her decide to leave for a couple of years so that she could return better later on. Likewise, the findings (Alsup, 2006) indicate that three of six preservice teachers left the profession because there were too many differences between the two sides of their personal and professional lives.

Accordingly, the concept of studying beginning teachers and learning about the difficulties they may confront surrounding professional identity, as well as the differences that may exist between challenges males and females could face, is significant because if the challenges they face could not be handled properly, it could have severe consequences such as leaving the profession. Although many studies focused on professional identity challenges (e.g., Izadnia, 2013; Meihami et al., 2019), there has been little research on whether these challenges differ for males and females or if any gender-specific challenges may exist.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to identify the major influential factors and professional identity challenges EFL teachers face when attempting to construct their professional identities during the first two years of teaching and to check whether any gender-specific challenges exist.

1.3. Research Questions

This study tried to find answers to these questions:

1. What are the major factors in the construction of professional identity in Iranian EFL teachers during the first two years of teaching? (retrospective explanation)
2. What are the major professional identity challenges Iranian EFL teachers face during the first two years of teaching? (retrospective explanation)
3. Which professional identity challenges are specific to male EFL Iranian teachers, and which are specific to females?

1.4. Significance of the Study

According to Varghese et al. (2005), research and teacher education need to focus on ways to gain a better understanding of teachers, and to achieve this, Trejo Guzmán (2010) states that knowing and understanding language teachers is better done by taking the time to get a clear sense of their identity. Challenges that EFL teachers face could be related to so many aspects and some might be internal and more personal and some external and relate to their work context etc..As described in the studies conducted by Smagorinsky et al. (2004) and Volkmann and Anderson (1998), EFL teachers who are not able to cope with tensions can suffer severe consequences such as leaving the profession. The teachers in the mentioned studies faced challenges and they could not deal with them emotionally so they decided to let go and surrender. Therefore, studying these

challenges could help teacher educators and EFL teachers recognize the most common challenges and become more familiar with the ways to deal with them which if not taken into consideration could have irrecoverable outcomes so this study suggests that policymakers try to transform the professional identity challenges into learning experiences for beginning teachers to reduce their destructive effects.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

Professional identity: A teacher's professional identity is defined as 'being recognized as a certain kind of person' by the teacher as well as other members of the situated communities of practice (Gee, 2001).

Gender-specific Challenges: In the literature, the challenge is defined as the assemblage of sub-identities as the result of opposing forces, such as teachers' perceptions of professional identity and commitment, their sense of self-efficacy, and institutional constraints and gender-specific challenge refers to challenges that exist exclusively for males or females (Mishler, 1999; Alsup, 2006).

Narrative inquiry: Narrative inquiry is a research method that emphasizes human-centered storytelling as a way to 'present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness' (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.10).

2. Literature Review

This section reviews the topics of teachers' professional identity, and challenges in professional identity, while presenting studies of similar topics and finally, stating the gap.

2.1. Teachers' Professional Identity

In Izadnia's (2013) study, the researcher examines four major factors affecting teachers' professional identity including reflective activities, learning in communities, context, and prior experience. As Korthagen (2004), Sutherland, Howard, and Markauskaite (2010) point out, reflection is viewed as an important part of teachers' identity construction, as it allows students to build upon their beliefs, their prior knowledge, and their experiences in order to create their own learning (Lin et al., 1999). Especially when learning is a result of collaborative effort and happens through shared activities, the effect of membership in a community of practice on identity development is emphasized. According to a study by Assaf (2005), teachers' instructional decisions are influenced when they negotiate multiple discourses with their learning community. Similarly, Farensworth (2010) identified the benefits of community-based learning for teachers by providing new resources that enable them to explore an aspect of professional identity that is less well known.

Other studies have also explored the importance of a collaborative atmosphere and its impact on teachers' professional identity construction (Franzak, 2002; Trent, 2010; Seidl & Conley,

2009). Context has an impact on professional identity formation and a role to play in teachers' development. According to Smagorinsky et al. (2005), human development occurs in social settings and is a result of social practice in those settings. A study by Olsen (2008) was conducted to investigate the reasons why teachers enter educational programs, and the results indicated that prior events are significantly related to the type of teacher individuals seek to become. According to the results of a study by Cook (2009), teachers' previous experiences are implicitly reflected in how they make sense of events in educational contexts at the end of their first year of teaching.

An analysis of Iranian EFL teachers' identities in language institutes was conducted by Rahimi and Askari Bigdeli (2014). Using semi-structured individual interviews, it was found that teachers identified themselves as vendors of particular teaching methodologies as the most recurrent role identities. By examining the relationship between the components of teachers' professional identity, Ganizadeh, and Abediostad (2016) aimed to describe the profile of English as a foreign language teacher's professional identity. They used Kao and Lin's (2015) model of teachers' professional identity to measure the relationship among those components. From different language institutes in Mashhad, Iran, 110 EFL teachers were selected. The results indicated that self-expectation was of the highest importance and external influential factors were of the lowest value, with instructional skills, knowledge, and pedagogy having the highest correlation, followed by teachers' duties and pedagogy. Furthermore, it was also found that all the elements of teachers' identity were significantly correlated with teachers' teaching experience.

The possibility of individual differences as well as contextual variables influencing Iranian EFL teachers' classroom management orientations, was investigated in Rahimi and Asadollahi's (2012) study. Teachers' management orientations were not affected by their age, gender, type of school, or experience but by their educational level and the district of the school where they worked. Additionally, they explained that teachers with higher academic degrees and working in privileged areas exhibited a lower degree of intervention and control.

Based on Poulou's (2007) study, teacher anxiety decreases as they gain more experience, whereas Timostuk and Ugaste (2010) report that student teachers' stress remains high as classroom conditions continuously change and there is a lack of experienced teachers who are able to help novice teachers find alternatives for the challenges they face. According to (Lougharn & Berry, 2005; Brown, 2006) that challenging situations can be a promising learning opportunities, it is imperative that student teachers' emotions and decisions are analyzed and directed by an experienced teacher in the early stages of their teacher education since student teachers do not have time to think during teaching.

The study by Coelho and Gomez (2014) investigated teachers' workload, as well as its possible consequences, ambiguity, and confusion, and reported that teachers in Portuguese secondary schools have experienced an increase in their workload as a result of the national financial crisis, an increase in the number of students per class, and a more complex concept of teaching than simply learning or writing. The idea that teachers carry a soft profession, one that is

easy to handle and cope with, does not make sense in such a situation. It has been found that teachers are practically neglected in their professional evaluations when they have excessive work time and not updating professionally. In their view, work diffusion now a day would have advantages if it provided teachers with the autonomy to decide how to respond to constantly changing class conditions (Perrnoud, 1998; Giroux, 1998 cited in Coelho & Gomes, 2014).

Interviewing seven teachers, analyzing their reflection journals, and observing explicit shifts in their perceptions of themselves, Abednia (2012) explored the contribution of a critical EFL teacher education course to identity formation. It appears that these teachers were quite accustomed to a rather imposed theory of ideologies (e.g., by school leaders, textbook authors, etc.) at the pre-course stage. Eventually, they redefined the concept of a standard teacher and constructed a new version of themselves as educators. According to Abednia's (2012) study, student teachers were interested in crossing over limitations to remain themselves. During the initial stages of training, Abednia's student teachers believed they were unable to participate in the content selection or teaching methodology, an issue which results from instrumentalist views and is justified as being in accordance with standard movements and accountability (Ben-Peretz, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2001, Salehizadeh et al., 2020). However, after the training course, student teachers seemed to reset their priorities by having a tendency to be helpful to people and society, as well as raising awareness among students.

2.2. Challenges in Professional Identity

To be challenged means to be faced with a situation that requires great mental or physical effort to be done successfully, testing a person's capabilities (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Kumaravadivelu (2014) states that identity may be complex in either ESL or EFL contexts. This may be due to the challenges non-native English language teachers face in their careers. As a result of obstacles or resistance, (Zembylas, 2005) states that first-year EFL teachers face negative psychological effects, especially when there is an enormous gap between what they think they would feel in acknowledging their status as a teacher and how they actually feel. When beginning teachers' tensions are interpreted through the lens of their professional identity, they can understand what it means to be and to become a teacher. In the initial period of becoming a teacher, beginning teachers can expect different challenges regarding their identity as professionals. In a study conducted by Fuller and Bown (1975), they noted that one of the challenges for new teachers is that they perceive themselves as students but are expected to behave like adults. Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) presented another challenge that beginning teachers could encounter: The perception that taking control of the class may sacrifice the close student-teacher relationship. According to (Kälvemark et al., 2004), another challenge that beginning teachers might face is that they lack time when trying to accomplish all their tasks. In the study by Fuller and Bown (1975), beginning teachers also encountered an additional challenge related to their attachment to their

students, which made it difficult for them to distance themselves emotionally; however, they also recognized the need for this distance to survive. During the first years of teaching, teachers might be able to identify these challenges by narrating their personal stories.

Although several studies have been conducted on the challenges EFL teachers face in constructing their professional identities, few have analyzed whether or not these challenges are similar for both genders or whether there are any gender-specific challenges, thus this study aimed to shed light on the issue.

3. Method

This section presents the design of the study, settings and participants, instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures.

3.1. Design of the Study

In this study, the mentioned research questions were investigated through the narrative inquiry of the qualitative method because it reveals in-depth details of a situation or life experience. As suggested by Safari (2018), focusing on teachers' identities, through narratives and stories, can also aid educators in understanding pre- and in-service teachers' perspectives and beliefs which affect their pedagogy and teaching actions.

3.2. Settings and Participants

Participants in the study were chosen through convenience sampling. The convenience sampling technique, also called Haphazard Sampling or Accidental Sampling, entails enrolling members of the target population who can easily be accessed, geographically nearby, and available during a given period (Etikan & Alkassim, 2016). The participants included six Iranian EFL institute teachers, both males and females. Their ages ranged from 23 to 37 years old, they all have a BA in Teaching and all of them taught at least for two years in English institutes.

3.3. Instruments

In this study, semi-structured interviews with three open-ended questions (Appendix), served as the means to collect data since these interviews are all well suited for exploring the perceptions and opinions of respondents about complex and sometimes sensitive issues and allow the investigator to explore more information in addition to clarifying answers. In line with the research questions, the first interview question was concerned with the factors influencing the construction of EFL Iranian teachers' professional identity. The second interview question addressed the major professional identity challenges Iranian EFL teachers faced during the first

two years of teaching. Finally, the third interview question touched on the effect of gender on the process of identity construction and challenges the participants went through. According to Gordon (1975), the questioning format and sequences in a standardized interview are the same for all respondents, so any differences in the answers can be attributed to the people who take part in the interview rather than to the questions themselves. As Norton and De Costa (2018) assert, with the emergence of technology as a central component of identity studies, it becomes increasingly hard to escape its influence. Therefore, a social media called Google Meet was chosen to communicate with the participants and to collect the data because some of the participants did not reside near the researchers or some of the participants did not find a face-to-face interview possible due to personal reasons. Each interview took between 30 to 35 minutes and participants were interviewed by the researchers one by one each meeting was recorded with the aid of a software called Bandicam which allows recording of the screen. For their consent, participants were all informed of the meeting being recorded and that the interviews were going to be in English. Rigour and trustworthiness in qualitative research entail credibility, transferability, and dependability of the research findings (Ary et al., 2019). To confirm the credibility of the findings, low-inference descriptors were employed. The use of low-inference descriptors entails directly quoting the interviewees' responses (Ary et al., 2010). In this study, along with each theme, several quotations were provided to observe credibility issue. Transferability refers to showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts. According to Ary et al. (2019), the criterion for establishing transferability is thick description. Therefore, a rich and detailed description of the research participants, data collection, data analysis, and findings was provided, so that the readers could judge the similarity and relevance of the study to their own situations or interests. With regard to dependability, member checks were used to check this characteristic of the findings. Member checking involves verifying the accuracy of interpretations with the interviewees in order to ensure that their statements have been correctly understood (Ary et al., 2019). In this study, when the themes were extracted, some themes were randomly checked with the participants to be sure about the interpretation of their sayings.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

As the initial step, the interview questions were prepared in line with the objectives of the study, so in this step, the researchers designed interview questions that would lead to finding answers to the research questions and to check the validity of the questions, they were reviewed by five experts in the field of teachers' professional identity. Afterwards, invitations were sent to six EFL teachers who were experienced in teaching and had been teaching for several years in institutes through the social media *Instagram* and were informed about the purpose of the research and whether they wanted to participate in the study.

Once each participant mentioned a suitable date for the interview, a login link was generated

in the Google Meet platform and sent to them through Instagram so that they could enter the meeting for the semi-structured interview.

First, the title of the study was explained again, and each of the key terms, the teachers' professional identity and what we mean by the challenge in the study were clarified through some examples. Moreover, the participants were allowed to ask any question they had on the topic of the study.

After everything was clear, three questions (clarified above) were asked and each question was clarified by some examples to prevent misunderstanding and participants gave detailed and rich responses to each question.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

According to Ary et al. (2019), the data analysis spiral would occur in 3 steps:

1. Familiarizing and organizing

Once all the participants replied to the interview questions, the audio files were transcribed verbatim to avoid any bias in data interpretation.

After the completion of transcriptions, the participants were provided with copies of the transcripts and were offered the opportunity to comment or make amendments where they felt appropriate. Then, the data were read several times to become familiar with the data, and memos were written to capture thoughts as they occurred and the data were organized through sorting the transcripts based on the gender of respondents.

2. Coding and reducing

After getting familiar with the data, open coding was conducted where transcripts were inserted in individual Word documents for each participant and the raw data were broken down into smaller pieces by coding and using the comment feature in the MAXQDA software. Then the initial codes were compared across interview transcripts. This time, axial coding was used to develop core categories and find codes of a similar nature. Finally, through selective coding themes were extracted from transcripts. To achieve inter-coder reliability, dual coding was done by paying someone familiar with the concept of the study to check the coding procedure. Next, Spearman correlation test was run and inter-coder reliability was calculated .90.

3. Interpretation and presentation

After the coding procedures were conducted and different categories were identified, the meaning was revealed. A pattern emerged for the professional identity challenges EFL teachers faced, but in qualitative studies, one should be careful while making generalizations based on connections and common aspects among categories because the sample size is limited due to the nature of this type of research.

4. Results and Discussion

This section addresses the results regarding research questions and the discussion. For confidentiality purposes, the six participants were given Alphabetic names in this chapter and each factor extracted are followed by participants' quotes to support the claims.

4.1. Results

The first research question was about the major influential factors in the construction of EFL Iranian teachers' professional identity and based on participants' responses, six major factors have been identified which are as follows:

1. Love and passion for teaching

As participants A, C, D, E and F mentioned:

A: "I myself always have loved teaching you know, I always loved teaching and I wanted to teach, to have a class of my own and to share my knowledge was always my passion"

C: "So teaching has always been what I loved but I wasn't trained for. It was kind of something I did based on my guts and something I thought is good to be."

D: "I was passionate to become a teacher and the challenges were good for me"

E: "When I was a child I didn't know why but I loved English and I told my mother for example what's the meaning of Ketab in English and she helped me in knowing the alphabet and to read and after that I went to English institutes and because I love English I continued and in university I studied English translation and of course, watching movies and listening music helped me very much and specially movies."

F: "I would like to begin with the start of my English learning which was interest and I practiced English as a hobby. After a while that I got a little bit better in English I got very interested in that area that I started to study it in university"

2. Having TTC classes

As participants A, C and D mentioned:

A: "I had some TTC classes, preparation classes, actually because they have a very big influence on what a teacher can be in future"

C: "I guess the TTC sessions and the observer's opinions every term for different classes was very useful actually they have been very useful always for me."

D: "Alright attending TTC classes was very helpful to me"

3. Learning from others' experiences

As participants A, B, C, D, E and F mentioned:

A: "To learn from other teachers about how to teach, some notes from another teacher some notes from even your friends and even your students, they can improve your teaching and abilities as I experienced them myself"

- B:** “One of my friends in university who was also my roommate was a teacher at that time, and I saw how she teach and how she behaves with students and I also learned something from her.”
- C:** “I had a friend who hold sessions for us and we studied together I can say you know? Not a teacher student or I don’t know an instructor there but we as teachers we worked together, we try to share our experience with each other and that was a nice experience for me you know? We listen to each other to our problems in the class and we try to share the solutions, or sometimes different suggestions and recommendations that if I were you I would do this or yeah I had such experience and I did this and it was successful or it wasn’t successful, we tried to help each other actually and share experiences in teaching.”
- D:** “Observing other teacher’s classes were very helpful to me because I learned how to handle situations as they did.”
- E:** “Yeahh beside going to the university I paid attention to how my teachers teach and learned from them.”
- F:** “At first I learned how to teach and I got how to be accepted by my colleagues so they trained me for a while and observing their classes helped me a lot, you know observing how your more experienced colleagues could be very crucial and vital for your teaching”

4. Having teaching in experience

As mentioned by participants A, D and F:

- A:** “Some experience in teaching classes themselves; for example, you are a teacher in a class but you are less experienced or you have more experience and it’s very important that how much experience you have in a class.”
- D:** “Having experience in teaching helped me because as I went to university I also started teaching in an English institute”
- F:** “So after being accepted in a university I got asked by institutes to teach there and one of my professors in the university asked me to teach in his institute and it helped me a lot because it made me prepared for my other classes and gave me a confidence boost you know?”

5. Knowing different teaching methods

As participants A, B, C and E mentioned:

- A:** “In my experience I think teaching books for teaching skills, for teaching approaches can be helpful because they prepare you for all kinds of situations in your class so that you can deal with them so you will not have a problem to deal with the situations”
- B:** “you know that we were familiar with methods in university and I studied English for four or five years in some institutes and I got familiar with some methods that my teachers used and in university also we studied all the methods”
- C:** “because I felt need of knowing more about different ways of teaching and different methods and so I here at university I learned a lot and it was very influential to me to study the teaching”

E: “going to the university and being familiar with different methods of teaching prepared me for my classes.”

6. Having a supervisor as class observer

As participants C, D and F mentioned:

C: “the observer’s opinions every term for different classes was very useful actually.”

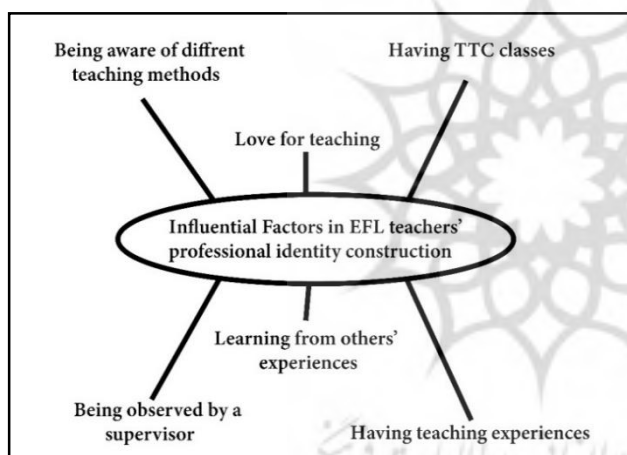
D: “being observed by a superior could be very helpful as well because they could tell you your mistakes and maybe, yeahhh it can be helpful.”

F: “you know I’ve always been one of the fans of being watched by the supervisor but really I didn’t want to be watched. I wanted to be watched because I wanted to improve myself, and I didn’t want to be watched because I was scared of being told off by the supervisor.”

Regarding influential factors in construction of professional identity the following pattern emerged:

Figure 1

Influential Factors



The second research question was about the major professional identity challenges Iranian EFL teachers face during the first two years of teaching and based on participants’ responses a number of 12 major challenges were identified which are as follows:

1. Difficulty of finding a job

As participant **A** mentioned:

“In early years of the teaching most of the teachers have problems to find a job to actually be part of an institute, school or other academic places. but this is normal and I think it is something that most of the teachers will face.”

Similarly, participant **E** mentioned:

“You want to start to gain experience and the first thing they ask you is how many years of experience have you got and won’t give you a chance.”

Participant **F** also mentioned:

“Where ever you go to apply for a job they say so how many years of experience have you

got? Ok you're handsome and bluh bluh bluh but what have you taught so far? and that's problematic because you have to start from somewhere."

2. Difference between the reality and expectation

As participant **A** mentioned:

"The expectation and the reality are very different, you know? Before you become a teacher and actually teaching becomes your career most of us have some teaching experience just for fun or for our friends but when it becomes your carrier actually before it becomes your career you have some expectations. Yes I go to the class, have some students, study everything and answer all my questions but when you become a teacher you go to your classes and you see that, ok some students are not motivated, some are not listening to you and such problems in your class, another example is maybe you expect that when you are graduated, ok now you can have a job and everyone wants to hire you but when you face it you see that the competition is very hard, everyone wants be part of this group and well it can be frustrating."

3. Teachers having to do beyond their responsibilities

As participant **F** mentioned:

"One of the other challenges was that when my students were without any motivation and I had to motivate them, you know it was not my job to motivate them I was a teacher and that was not my job."

Participant **A** also mentioned a similar point:

"You know it was really tough for me because I had to motivate my student's so that they gain interest in English and to listen more and that was a burden for me and really time consuming."

4. High expectation of parents

Participant **D** mentioned:

"Some parents really expected me to do magic you know? They kept saying to me that the reason my son has bad grades is that you didn't do your job as good as you had to without thinking of the fact that it was their son that didn't study and like English to even begin with."

Participant **B** also mentioned some similar experiences:

"Also parents had high expectations for example students joked with each other and once one of the parents came and told me it's your fault that the other students made fun of my son regarding his surgery, but it really wasn't, they were kids and were just having fun not big of a deal really."

5. Anxiety of not knowing

Participant **B** has mentioned:

"You know I used to get stressed very soon, for example I was scared that students ask me questions that I didn't know the answer to them. And to be honest my students were so naughty and

always wanted to challenge me even the youngest ones so they really liked to ask questions and hoped that I didn't know the answer to them."

6. Unfair salary

Participant **F** mentioned:

"And the other challenge that I had was the salary, it was the minimum wage and the only thing that made me keep going was gaining experience. So it was the hope for future that kept me going."

Participant **C** had some similar experiences mentioning:

"The salary for men and women no different isn't decent enough, ummm I see my male colleagues that who... I don't know quit teaching because of the salary."

Similarly, participant **B** mentioned:

"For example I had a class one time, there were 20 students in my class and my salary was just equal to the money that one of the students pay to enroll in the class you know?"

Participant **E** also suffered from the same challenge saying:

"The other thing was that they didn't give me any money for teaching. The institute didn't pay me anything for teaching and said because you didn't have any experience we just let you teach here just to gain experience and we won't pay you and that was when I really put teaching aside completely."

7. Limited time and so much to do

Almost all of the participants mentioned this issue:

Participant **C**: "I had only a limited time on each session and lots of students kept asking unrelated questions and that caused lots of problem for me for example I couldn't finish what I had to teach and I had to postpone some parts of today's lesson to the next and so on and so forth."

Participant **F**: "Students who don't understand the first and second time I explain something, you know? repetition and making more examples because I had to watch the time all the time."

8. High expectation of teachers

Participant **D** mentioned an interesting point:

"I was really not as patient as I had to be in the beginning with slow students and then I realized that different people learn in different speeds and that one could learn faster than the other and this made me become more patient towards my students."

Participant **E** had a similar view:

"I falsely taught that all students should be polite and smart. But it was a false thinking. Different people learn differently. I began to learn it gradually."

9. Students having the same or close age as the teacher

It was also one of the challenges that participant **D** mentioned:

“The main challenges ummm I had was when I started teaching I was 19 as you know and I had students and they were 17 and this few difference between our age was a bit challenging and it was so hard to control them as you know.”

The same meaning was meant by participant **A**:

“The age proximity was a big challenge for me. Students who were near to me in age did not respect me.”

10. Fixed method of teaching in institutions

Regarding this challenge participant **F** mentioned:

“The other challenge that I had was the fixed method in the institutes I used to work and even the one I’m working now, because they won’t let you use any other useful method.”

This was also recurrent in what was mentioned by participant **C**:

“That I was not permitted to teach based on my interest was a problem at the initial working years. I was obliged to stick to fixed teaching methods.”

11. very young students

As participant **E** mentioned:

“I teach to little children between four to six years old and nine to eleven years old and that was their ages and for example one of my students was only three years old and she didn’t know how even write in her mother language in Farsi and I didn’t know how to teach her when she didn’t know what’s that words meaning in Persian.”

It was also experienced by participant **F**:

“Dealing with very young learners was too difficult for me. They were naughty. Managing them was really demanding.”

12. Too much anxiety when being observed

Participant **F** had this challenge specifically saying:

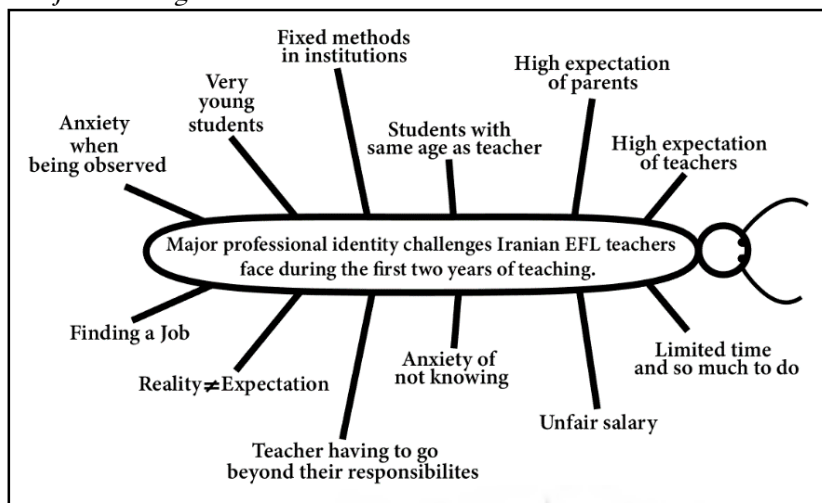
“One of my biggest fears which I believe is not only mine and many of my colleagues had it too is the fear of being watched by your supervisor which is very scary. Because you are teaching and your supervisor is supposed to make a report based on how you teach, he comes to you class sitting in the back and you start blushing and you get all sweaty and you are handling two things one not being embarrassed and two is teaching and these two combine and the sweat come out and you know.”

Similarly, participant **A** mentioned:

“When supervisors wanted to observe my class, I became overloaded with stress and anxiety. I didn’t know how to cope with this state. It was a bad challenge.”

Related to the challenges that Iranian EFL teachers faced during the first two years of their teaching, the following pattern emerged:

Figure 2

Major Challenges

Related to the third research question which was about gender-specific challenges the following challenges were identified:

1. Less salary for females

Almost all of the participants mentioned this issue:

A: "this is what I see and it's really not ethical I believe that females get paid less for the same job"

B: "I don't really like teaching in institutes because they pay me less than my male colleagues"

E: "I find it quite disrespecting that I have to get paid less for the same time and energy I put in the work"

2. Institutions tend to hire more female teachers

F: "I see that for example most of the institutes hiring just female teachers, I don't know why but they just ask for female teachers. maybe because of the appearance and I really don't know why"

B: "What I see is that in most institutes and mostly in institutes not universities or schools that managers intend to hire women because they know that they can give less, much less salary to women than to men so when you go there for an interview you are there and another female teacher is there and even if you have more experience than the girl but they tend to hire the female teacher because as I said they know give less salary to her."

3. Low salary much tougher for males

C: "You know when you are a male teacher the salary is really problematic but its ok for females you know? But men have more responsibilities because they handle the family."

B: "The salary for men and women no different isn't decent enough, ummm I see my male colleagues that whooo I don't know quit teaching because of the salary, maybe for women in Iran at least because they are just a help in the income of the family and we are not the main

source of the money that the family is based on, yess because we are a help these small salaries seem to be ok, it's not ok but because we are a help that small money can help but for men as the main in Iran I mean the main source of the expanses its very problematic because it make them quit their job because of this specially they were good teachers and unfortunately they quit because the salary was not enough.”

4. Female teachers not as strict towards boy students

C: “In running classes specifically when we have classes with boys I have had this problem. You know I try to be nice and strict but I can't control the balance I guess. Yeahhh I think that was the problem I and my colleagues faced.”

E: “A problem that was gender-based was that I could not practice rigidity with male students. Handling male classes was difficult for me.”

5. Male teachers controlling female students

D: “Sometime I had very young students and specially when they are female students I can't control them, because once in an exam one of them started crying out loud and I couldn't really handle the situation because there needed to be a female teacher there for example to give her a hug and calm her down but there was nothing I could do because you know how it is in our country.”

C: “Male teachers face some challenges in teaching females. Females are sensitive by nature. Understanding feelings and affections of female students are not that much easy for male teachers.”

6. Females could take the day off easier

F: “Females sometimes could take the day off with or without any reason but males could not do that, I had such experience in where I was teaching and my female colleagues could take the day off but I couldn't because I was a male.”

B: “I think female teachers have an advantage over male counterparts. I repeatedly have seen that female teachers can make a day off but authorities do not let male teachers do this.”

7. Discriminations in giving classes to male teachers

F: “Any female teacher could teach any class of males but not all males could teach any class of females. And this discrimination is not nice. I had female classes as well after I gained the trust of the manager of the institute and I think that's a little bit disrespectful too because I don't know why?”

A: “There exists bias against males in assigning classes. Unfortunately, the public belief is that females are better at teaching than males with no good reason.”

Based on the mentioned responses the following pattern emerged for gender-specific challenges Iranian EFL teachers go through:

Figure 3

Gender-Specific Challenges*4.2. Discussion*

With regard to the first research question, ‘*What are the major factors in construction of professional identity in Iranian EFL teachers during the first two years of teaching?*’ six major factors have been identified (Figure 1):

- love for teaching
- learning from others experiences
- having TTC classes
- having teaching experiences
- being aware of different teaching methods
- being observed by a supervisor.

One of the influential factors was love for teaching as a reason why teachers coped with their challenges and tried to construct and reconstruct their professional identity. This factor was consistent with Hamman et al. (2010) who argued for the role of interest and willingness in the construction of the professional identity of teachers. The second influential factor was learning from others' experiences which were in line with Wegner's (1998, as cited in Wang, 2020) concept of communities of practice in which he explains that individuals learn from one another and also confirms Wang's (2020) findings as he mentioned one of the serious challenges his participants mentioned was having “Non-helpful seniors”. Having TTC classes as the third influential factor resonates with the study by Simon-Maeda (2004) wherein training courses were enumerated as influential factors in teachers' professional identity building. Teaching experience and awareness of teaching methods were congruent with the studies by Gu and Benson (2014) and Mora, Trejo, and Roux (2016) wherein experience in and awareness of teaching methods have been stated as factors with a key role in the formation of professional identity of teachers. Being observed by a supervisor was unique to the present study because it was not supported by any similar study in the literature.

As for the second research question ‘*What are the major professional identity challenges*

Iranian EFL teachers face during the first two years of teaching? 12 major challenges have been identified (Figure 2):

- Difficulty of finding a job
- The difference between reality and expectation
- Teachers having to go beyond their responsibilities
- Anxiety of not knowing
- Unfair salary
- Limited time and so much to do
- Anxiety when being observed
- Some students being very young
- Fixed methods in institutions
- Students with the same or close age to the teacher
- High expectation of parents
- High expectation of teachers.

Concerning the 12 challenges identified, four of them stood out because almost all of the participants stated similar stories which are: the difference between reality and expectation; finding a job; fixed methods in institutions and unfair salary. More specifically, they expected teaching to be as they perceived would be, for instance, they thought that after graduating from university they would be accepted in an institution easily as a teacher but they found out that the competition for applying to institutions are high among teachers. Moreover, institutions expected them to have some years of experience or to be let down by the fixed curriculums in the absence of any creativity. This finding was congruent with Wang's (2020) study in which he mentioned that his participants felt like teaching robots because they were not given the permission to teach any other useful materials. Moreover, the salary was really low and not even close to what they expected and this is similar to the results from Lomi's (2020) study.

Related to the third research question *'Which of the professional identity challenges are specific to male EFL Iranian teachers and which ones are specific to females?'* seven gender-specific challenges were identified (Figure 3) five of which were male-specific challenges and two of them female-specific:

Male-specific challenges:

- Institutions having a tendency towards hiring more female teachers because they know they could pay them less for the same job
- Low salary is much more challenging for male teachers because they are the bread winners of the family
- Male teachers controlling female students for instance when a student cry a male teacher would not be able to give her a hug in order to calm her down based on Islamic regulations.
- Female teachers were given permission to take the day off easier.
- The discrimination of letting female teachers teach classes of both genders but male teachers

should earn the trust of the institution first then be allowed to teach female students.

Female-specific challenges:

- Less salary for female teachers
- Females teachers not as strict towards boy students for example they could not commonly create a balance between being kind and serious.

Being aware of the challenges identified in this study could help reverse their effects from negative and destructive to positive and constructive for beginning teachers which is consistent with the results of several studies (Kılıç & Cinkara, 2020; Farrell, 2012).

5. Conclusions and Implications

As one of the positive outcomes of the study, interviewees expressed their desire to learn from their challenges. For example, participants C and D both mentioned that the challenges they faced made them stronger and more confident in the long run. When faced with similar situations to the ones he experienced, participant A said experiencing his challenges helped him become more alert. These stories suggest despite the negative feelings they often accompany, professional identity challenges can have positive outcomes.

The intense emotions that new teachers must cope with will make them more committed to teaching, according to Meijer (2011). According to other researchers, challenges can have positive effects on teachers' professional identities and have potential positive consequences (Alsup, 2006; Meijer, 2011; Olsen, 2010; Smagorinsky et al., 2004).

Thus, teacher learning can be facilitated by professional identity challenges. Therefore, there is a need to make an attempt to transform professional identity challenges into learning experiences, considering that this study suggests they are very common.

The educators and mentors of beginning teachers need to be capable of recognizing professional identity challenges and making them visible and observable, for example, by presenting examples of challenges mentioned by the interviewees in this study. Some challenges could be quite personal and might never be mentioned by some teachers. In light of this, beginning teachers must realize that they are not alone in experiencing such challenges.

Therefore, to make student teachers aware of the difficulties they may face, sharing challenges with others seems important and should be normalized. By sharing challenges, we may also gain a deeper understanding of different coping mechanisms. There are many ways to handle challenges in a classroom, but becoming familiar with coping techniques might encourage beginning teachers to address challenges at an earlier stage. It is evident that beginning teachers would benefit from support in managing their challenges based on the accompanying negative feelings and the possible severe consequences for their professional development. As a result of this, teacher educators should be able to help student teachers turn challenges into learning opportunities instead of the counterproductive effects that challenges have when they are experienced.

6. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

As with the majority of studies, the design of the current study had some limitations; first, the sample size of the study was small and based on this, one should be careful in generalizing the findings of the study. Therefore, other researchers could replicate this study but with a larger sample size or with a quantitative method. The second limitation of the current study was that the sampling was done conveniently in the absence of random sampling. Thus, future research can replicate the current study with random sampling.

Future research could also further investigate the effects of age on professional identity challenges that might emerge as mentioned by the participants in this study that as they became more mature, their challenges also evolved.

For future research, it could also be interesting to include not only beginning teachers but also more experienced teachers as well to see if the challenges that arise are similar to the ones found in this study.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to gain insight into the ways in which beginning teachers cope with challenges since the interviews showed that they coped with them differently.



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Appendix

Interview questions:

The following interview questions have been prepared to address the research questions under the supervision of an expert in the field of teachers' professional identity:

1. During the first two years of your teaching, what factors have been influential in construction of your professional identity as an English teacher? How? (For example, your past language learning experiences, your educational background, teacher training sessions, past teaching experiences, your current professional teaching experiences, reading books, etc.)
2. What were the main challenges in your identity construction during the first two years of your teaching (for example change in role from student to teacher, any contrast between expectation and the reality, etc.)?
3. Do you believe that one's gender would affect the process of identity construction and challenges they go through (please explain why yes or why not.)?