



## **Investigating Iranian EFL teachers' Identity Development Processes**

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### **Abstract**

Teachers' professional identity has been the topic of abundant research in recent few decades. It has been defined as the knowledge a teacher has of himself/herself in teaching contexts, and relationships that manifest themselves in practical professional undertakings. This study aimed at investigating the factors that most likely influence identity construction of Iranian EFL teachers. In this convergent mixed-method study, the data in the quantitative and the qualitative phases were collected, respectively, through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The participants of the study were 75 English language teachers who teach in Iranian public schools. The quantitative data were analyzed by means of SPSS and the qualitative data were analyzed manually through thematic analysis. The findings showed that the majority of the participants believed that gaining experience has been the most determining factor in construction of their identities as EFL teachers. Other factors such as inspiration of previous teachers, peer learning and particularly the university programs, however, have been less effective or have had little effect in this regard. This study has implications for ELT stake-holders.

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## Introduction

Research on teachers' professional identities began in the late 1980s (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Different conceptualizations have, since the advent, been suggested for identity in more general literature and also in teaching and teacher education. In previous studies, professional identity referred to teachers' self-image, self-reflection (self-evaluation), or to teachers' roles, which are important in determining professional development (Beijaard et al., 2004). In more recent literature, however, identity formation is seen as a dynamic and ongoing process (Lee, 2013) influenced by such factors as teaching context, teaching experience and the biography of the teacher (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000; Estaji & Shafaghi, 2018).

The concept of identity is defined vis-a-vis a distinctive set of an individual's characteristics understood in contrast with that of others. Accordingly, identity is connected to individuals' understanding of who they think they are, and what others think them to be (Gee, 2000; Pennington, 2015; Pennington & Richards, 2016).

Various researchers acknowledge that the teachers' thoughts about teaching and learning, as well as their roles in education, will impact their teaching experiences, as well as their classroom environment (Flores & Day, 2006; Joseph & Heading, 2010; Mantei & Kervin, 2011; Stets & Burke, 2000). It can regulate teachers' behaviors in classroom and their efficiency in teaching (Abednia, 2012; Ashforth & Tomiuk, 2000) and also constrain their professional development (ZainadinyMofrad, 2016).

Teacher's professional identity has been defined by various researchers. Gee (2000) defines it as one's self-report of what consists of his or her, rather temporary, dominant identity as a teacher. Lasky (2005) defines it as how teachers explain their professional roles as teachers. Timoštšuk and Ugaste (2010, p. 1564, in Atai & Khazaei, 2014, p. 3) define it as "the person's self-knowledge in teaching-related situations and relationships that manifest themselves in practical professional activities....". That is, identity is context-specific and culture-bound. Further, Tan (2017) defines professional identity as "the self that has been developed with the commitment to perform competently and legitimately in the context of the profession", and which can carry on during the individual's career (p. 2).

Atai and Khazaei (2014) maintained that the variety of definitions offered for professional identity indicate a lack of consensus about the concept. This encouraged many researchers to identify the major components of professional identity. They cited three studies which have introduced various components for professional identity. Kelchtermans (1993), believed that it is the intersection of self-esteem, self-confidence, job-motivation, task awareness and future outlook. Hong (2010) introduced six determinants of professional identity, namely value, commitment, self-efficacy, knowledge and beliefs, micropolitics and emotions. Further, Flores and Day (2006) believe features such as demographic variables, teaching contexts, and teaching experiences also impinge on teachers' perceptions of teacher identity.

Since teachers' perceptions of their identity as professionals is important (Burn, 2007; Caihong, 2011; Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005), examination of teachers' professional identity perceptions can provide valuable insights and implications for different stakeholders in education.

Despite various studies which have been carried out on professional identity formation around the world, identity formation processes of EFL teachers based on self-report, particularly factors that determine and help shape teacher's identity, have not been thoroughly investigated. In Iranian context, particularly, little research has been reported in this regard. Research in this regard has mostly been of the views of teachers about who they think they are, rather than how they became the person they are. In addition, studies that have focused on identity development processes are mostly case studies based on analyzing historical events through teacher's narrative. Owing to the fact that professional identity is context-specific and culture bound, and at the light of the influencing factors and constituent elements of professional identity mentioned above, the present study aimed at investigating identity formation processes of Iranian EFL teachers and the determining factors/variables of teacher's identity.

### Conceptual framework

This study draws on a conceptual framework which scrutinizes the notion of identity vis-a-vis three concepts of discourse, practice, and activity (Gee, 1996, 2004; Lee, 2013; Miller, 2009). It includes a case study design utilizing interviews and self-reports to collect data.

Identity-in-activity draws upon Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1987; Leontiev, 1981, in Lee, 2013). In this view, as Lee (2013) explains, teachers construct their identities while they act within different social, cultural, and historical relations in which they teach. Identity is a discursive construct, i.e., language is employed to explain or convey a specific kind of information. In education, as teachers grow and develop, they shape new identities for themselves and learn new modes of discourse for their work. Identity-in-practice, denotes people's practice in the daily routines and practices. It, therefore, can be perceived vis-a-vis both narrated identities (i.e., what teachers express) and enacted identities (i.e., what can be observed). In addition to the individual dimension, identity as discourse and identity as practice have a social dimension as well. In other words, a combination of these two are used to do social activities, i.e., identity is also activity in social relations.

### EFL Teachers Education in Iran

Iranian educational system from beginning up to high school level falls under the auspices of the Ministry of Education which is the main authority responsible for all planning, curricula and policies (Safari & Sahragard, 2015; Safari & Rashidi, 2015a). All the educational policies and decisions up to high school level including textbooks preparation, curriculum development, educational standards, examination system are regulated and overseen by the Ministry of Education (Ghorbani, 2007; Aslanabadi & Aslanabadi, 2013; Safari & Rashidi, 2015b). Obviously, the Ministry of Education follows the higher order policy making bodies who determine the main policies and make the topmost plans and major decisions with regard to education in general.

However, tertiary education in all fields is directed by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, except for education in medicine and related areas that is carried out by the Ministry of Health and Medical Education.

Teachers in the mainstream education in state-run schools (both primary school and secondary school, that includes junior high school and high school) are currently the graduates

of Farhangiān (teachers) University that immediately enter schools and start teaching. But in previous years teachers were trained by different education centers such as Dāneshsarā (initial teacher education (ITE) programs literally meaning knowledge house), Tarbiat-e Dabir (teacher training universities) and Tarbiat-e Moalem (usually two-year teacher training centers).

Some of the teachers who currently practice in the state-run education system are those who were, in the late 1980s and early 1990s and after passing junior high school and from the first year of high school, admitted for ITE programs in teacher training centers called Dāneshsarā (through an entrance exam from all of the subjects in junior high school and also interviews), which aimed at preparing the candidates to teach in primary schools. They were then given a degree equivalent to a diploma. Some of these teachers would later continue their studies in different disciplines through in-service courses or in various universities and junior high school and high school teachers; as some of these teachers became secondary school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers.

Also, there were (some still are) teacher training universities (Tarbiat-e Dabir) which admitted some students after high school through the nation-wide university entrance examinations (Kunkoor). Their aim was to train high school teachers in various disciplines including EFL. The graduates received a BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree. These comprise a good number of the teachers who are currently teaching in secondary schools.

Moreover, there were teacher training centers (Tarbiat-e Moalem) which likewise admitted students from after high school through Kunkoor. These centers were specially designed to train teachers in two-year courses and the graduates received an Associate of Arts (AA) degree. These centers were changed into and upgraded to universities called Farhangiān University all across the country. Currently this university works similar to the teacher training universities mentioned above and their graduates are given BA degrees in education.

Further, if more teachers were needed, university graduates in the requested majors are employed directly through an entrance examination.

Also, some of the current teachers are invited part-time teachers who have been officially employed after some years of part-time teaching. Further some are part-time teachers who worked in Literacy Campaign (Nehzat-e Savād Āmoozi). This is a department in the Ministry of Education and aims at providing illiterate citizens (mostly adults and senior citizens) with basic reading and writing training. Most of the teachers who used to teach in this program were employed by the Ministry as full-time primary and secondary school teachers.

### **Literature Review**

A relatively large number of studies in the literature emphasize the significance of investigating teachers' identity. These studies underscore the significance of teacher professional identity in teaching and highlight their implications for classroom practice (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). In fact, studying teacher identity is crucial to increase understanding of the factors that affect teacher's decision-making processes, their attitudes, and beliefs (Fogle & Moser, 2017). As Gee (2000) maintained, teacher identity is "an important analytic tool for

understanding schools and society" (p. 99). It can be applied as an analytical lens to explore teaching and learning features (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Since the late 1980s, abundant studies have been carried out on language teacher identity (Abednia, 2012; Atai & Khazaei, 2014; Beijaard et al., 2000; Beijaard et al., 2004; Derakhshan, Coombe, Arabmofrad & Taghizadeh, 2020; Ghanizadeh & Ostad, 2016; Ha, 2008; Johnston, 2003; Labbaf, Moinszadeh & Dabaghi, 2019; Mirzaei & Aliakbari, 2017; Mora, Trejo & Roux, 2014; Morgan, 2004; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko, 2003; Varghese, 2000). These studies have focused on different aspects of professional identity, e.g., its elements or components, how it forms, its effects on other characteristics or issues, or its relationship with other features or topics. In addition, some studies deal with teachers' perceptions of their professional identity.

Beijaard et al. (2000) delineated three features of teachers' professional identity: subject matter expertise, pedagogical expertise, and didactical expertise (p. 751). Subject matter expertise assumes that teacher's work requires specific subject-related knowledge, and one of the primary duties is to support the development of students regarding the subject matter. Didactical skills are mainly connected with the planning, execution, and evaluation of their work. Pedagogical goals help support broader emotional and moral development in the students. Furthermore, Beijaard et al. (2004) asserted that in designing future studies, concepts such as "self", "identity", context, and perspectives other than cognitive needs should be considered.

Focusing on educational duties and responsibilities, Buchanan (2015) defined teachers' professional identity as a flexible entity formed by background knowledge and present events as teachers think about their professional performances. Similarly, Varghese, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) stated that teachers' professional identity describes how teachers connect themselves to their professional responsibilities in the teaching contexts that might change in response to changes in the context. Personal and professional sides of teacher identity are chosen by Alsop (2006) and Day, Kington, Stobart, and Sammons (2006) to investigate. Later Mockler (2011) added the political feature to the personal and professional features. By political feature he means the factors outside the teaching context such as governmental and educational policy that influence the teaching career.

Using the six-domain content Model, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) tried to identify the core and peripheral elements that shape teacher's identity. Accordingly, they highlighted the following influential features in teacher's identity formation: teachers' characteristics, experience, occupational and worker requirements, occupation-specific information, and workforce characteristics.

Likewise, Lee (2013) investigated how EFL teachers construct and negotiate their identities as they learn to become teachers of writing. Using 'identity' as an analytic lens, he analyzed data gathered from interviews with four teachers and their classroom research. The cases of the four teachers showed that writing teachers' identity is a discursive construct (i.e., identity as discourse and practice), mediated by the teaching's historical, social, and cultural relations (i.e., identity as activity). The study also highlights that identity is a dynamic and unstable concept. It concludes that teacher educators can encourage teachers to be aware of their multi-faceted

identities, the influential factors in shaping and developing more robust preferred identities so that they will be less susceptible to external threats that pose hazards to their identity development.

Focusing on teacher training context, Gu and Benson (2014) investigated the teacher identity formation within the current social structures. They found that identity formation is enacted individually; however, it is also mediated by teachers' contextual factors and socio-economic experiences. Leijen, Kullasepp, and Ots (2013) also conducted a study among teacher-students and discovered that teacher experience could provide a way to more recurrent self-perception. They found that the answers provided by those with teaching experience showed the adopted professional role expectations more frequently than those of students without experience.

Jephcote and Salisbury (2009) investigated the formation of education teachers' professional identity in order to understand how teachers perceive their professional identity. The findings revealed that the teachers saw their professional identity mostly in terms of establishing rapport with their students (i.e., pedagogical expertise) rather than transmitting a body of knowledge. Similarly, Han (2017) explored how five Korean EFL teachers perceived their professional identity as they reacted to the Korean national curriculum. Narrative inquiry approach was used to collect data. Han concluded that seven types of identity, namely "national identity", "English teacher identity", "teacher identity", "learner identity", "public servant identity", "gender identity", and "person identity" (p. 14) constitute and affect the professional identity of Korean English teachers. Moreover, Cohen (2010) studied reflective talk in teachers' perception of professional identity via conversation with colleagues. The results illustrated that teachers' reflective talk was a discourse strategy to mediate their professional identity. Using semi-structured interviews, Timoštšuk and Ugaste (2010) explored student teachers' perceptions of their professional identity. They found that personal experiences in the classroom, rapport with students and administrators, and positive and negative emotions were the core factors, among other features, that can affect the teachers' perceptions of their professional identity.

Among few studies conducted on EFL teacher professional identity in Iranian context, Namaghi (2009) explored how five EFL public school teachers from Mashhad, a large city in the Northeast of Iran, defined their professional identity. Based on analysis of interviews data, he found out that Iranian EFL teachers in public high schools have little freedom in their teaching and they have to 'teach to the test'. Namaghi concluded that in this type of context, teachers are given little chance to improve their professional identity because they hardly find time to reflect on their professional self as they should behave as they are told. Similar results were reported by Mirzaee and Aliakbari (2017) who studied the identity construction processes of an EFL teacher in Iran. Their data were gathered through a life history approach focusing on critical-event and analyzed via social ecology of identity. The results revealed that the teacher's identity is constructed and constrained socially, leaving no room for personal agency.

Similarly, ZainadinyMofrad (2016) tried to understand how language teachers identify themselves in their profession. He studied the professional identity of the language teachers,



relationship between teachers' gender and work experience, and their professional identity in Iranshahr city, Iran. The participants consisted of 79 language teachers from different private language institutes in Iranshahr. The results showed that teachers identify themselves mostly as didactical experts, then as pedagogical experts, and least as subject matter experts. There was no significant relationship between the participants' gender and experience and the three sub-scales of professional identity, except for a meaningful relationship between subject matter expert and teachers' experience.

Regarding the effect of teacher training courses, Abednia (2012) developed an EFL teacher education course and tried to bring about some changes in the identities of seven Iranian EFL teachers. He applied the principles of critical pedagogy and used grounded theory to analyze data. The findings revealed that significant changes (e.g., in autonomy) occurred in the teachers' professional identities induced and mediated mostly by class discussions and critical reading materials. A further study conducted by Izadinia (2012) who reported on the reflective account of experiences she gained through her MA and PhD studies. She discussed several critical events that led to formation of her identity as a teacher-student she was and became. She discussed three major themes of her reflection - relationships, voice and confidence - that seem influential in construction of student identity.

To explore the relationship between professional identity and teaching quality, Labbaf, Moeinzadeh, and Dabaghi (2019) explored the professional identity of EFL teachers in Iran to find out the effects of the identified professional identity factors on their teaching quality. They identified four clusters that account for nineteen variables that indicate the professional identity profile of EFL teachers. Among these Personal Characteristics were found as the most important cluster. Therefore, five clusters had a significant effect on teaching quality, among which Pedagogical Knowledge was the most influential cluster.

In a similar vein, Derakhshan, Coombe, Arabmofrad and Taghizadeh (2020) sought to understand the relationship between professional identity and professional achievement. They studied the impact of language teachers' professional identity and autonomy on their success. The results showed that professional identity could positively and significantly predict teachers' success.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Since teachers are the main practitioners and administrators of any education policy and plan, understanding and attending to their opinions, and studying the factors that determine their well-being is necessary. Professional identity influences teachers' classroom behaviors (Abednia, 2012) and their professional development; and helps them be creative in their teaching practice and tackle educational changes (Beijaard et al., 2000). Thus, a study of the identity formation processes and the factors that determine or influence it seems necessary because it can reflect the performance of teacher education programs. Few studies have been carried out in Iranian context in this regard and there seems to be lack of documentation. Accordingly, this study attempts to investigate identity formation processes and their determining factors in relation with Iranian EFL teachers who teach in Public schools. Accordingly, the following research questions were addressed in this study.

### **Research questions**

1. What factors the teachers think shape their professional identities?
2. To what extent are these factors efficient in Iranian EFL teachers' identity formation processes?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Altogether, 105 EFL teachers participated in the two phases of this study. First, as a pilot study, 30 teachers (17 males and 13 females) were interviewed about their identities as teachers, how their identities have been shaped, etc. Then, 42 teachers (19 males and 23 females) participated in the quantitative phase of the study and filled out the questionnaire. Then, 33 teachers (17 males and 16 females) participated in the qualitative phase, i.e., in the follow up interviews. The teachers' ages ranged from 25 to 55 years old. They comprised of BA, MA and Ph.D. holders. Further, they possessed from 6 to 26 years of experience in teaching English. Some of the teachers teach in junior high school and others teach in high school (now respectively called lower secondary and upper secondary) programs. Also, five of the teachers in the second group were head teachers (three former and two present heads), i.e., heads of the Education Office in Ilam province, and responsible to the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department. Concerning major field of study, most teachers studied teaching majors in BA, MA or Ph.D. programs (some others studied literature, linguistics or translation; some studied two majors at their different programs). They practice all around Ilam Province, west of Iran, except for a few who work in other provinces across the country.

#### **Instrumentation**

Two instruments were used in this study, namely a Likert-scale researcher-made questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, both in Persian. The questionnaire consisted of 52 items with answers ranging from fully agree to fully disagree. The items were arranged to answer seven main questions each of which aimed at seeking one aspect of teacher identity formation. These questions included self-description, identity formation, characteristics of a good teacher, similarity of practice with previous teachers, changes during years of service, the influence of each one of three determinants on identity formation including university programs, gaining experience as teachers, and inspirations from previous teachers. The reliability of the questionnaire was calculated by Cronbach's Alpha ( $r=.88$ ). The content validity of the instrument was approved by the pilot study. Also, a panel of seven researchers approved the content validity of the scale.

The semi-structured interview prepared by the researcher, as a follow-up, according the data gathered in the first phase of the study. It aimed at triangulating the data collection process, i.e., confirming and completing the data collected via the pilot and the questionnaire. The interview consisted of 3 main questions. The first question covered such issues as the role of different determinants on identity formation, e.g., university, experience as teachers, personal study, learning from colleagues and the university rank or prestige. The second question inquired whether the influence of each of the factors mentioned in the previous question has been on teaching method or on behavior, i.e., on didactic or pedagogical aspect of identity respectively (Beijaard et al., 2000). The third question was related to the problems and



shortcomings, or, merits and demerits of the factors mentioned above. The content validity of the interview was, likewise, approved through expert judgement, that is, by the same panel of seven researchers.

### *Data Collection Procedure*

A literature review of EFL teachers' professional identity formation was carried out at first. On view of the previous studies, an open-end pilot test was produced by the researchers and was given to 30 teachers. The pilot test contained questions regarding the teachers' self-descriptions as EFL teachers, the way they thought their identities as language teachers have been shaped, the way they have changed during years of teaching, and the effects of different factors they thought to be important on shaping their identity. The findings of the pilot test were then summarized, revised and validated to produce a questionnaire. The questionnaire was filled out by 42 EFL teachers. The test contained various dimensions of teacher identity as proposed by Kelchtermans's (1993) conceptualization, and Bolivar and Domingo's (2006) retrospective identity, and encompasses aspects such as self-description, self-image, self-esteem, evaluation of teaching abilities and skills, job motivation and commitment.

In order to assure the dependability of the data, follow-up semi-structured interviews were carried out with 33 EFL teachers. The interview questions, which developed by the researchers, contained the materials intended in the questionnaire. Every teacher was interviewed in a session of about 15 to 20 minutes and the answers to the questions, and additional notes, were recorded by the researchers. Then the interviews were transcribed and organized for analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

The data collected through the questionnaires was analyzed using SPSS. The data were analyzed using One-sample t-test and obtaining frequencies. One-sample t-test was run to find out how the participants agreed or disagreed with the items of the questionnaire, i.e., the differences between the teachers' responses. Frequency distribution were run to find out the mean differences of the provided responses.

The data gathered through the interviews were analyzed based on thematic analysis. The conceptual framework of thematic analysis is based on theoretical positions of Braun and Clarke (2006) who describe it as a method for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (2006, p.79). The coding procedure was performed manually. At first, the coding process was guided by the conceptual framework of the study which is activity theory. Initially, codes were generated from a number of the interviews. Then the generated codes were matched with the research questions and the purpose of the study, the inductive (data-driven) coding followed with a focus on identifying recurring patterns. Even though the coding was sequential in nature, the nodes and patterns were identified through going back and forth through the data. As a result, more nodes and sub-nodes were found that informed the patterns. In the third stage the themes were developed. Coded nodes were checked and rechecked to identify important wider patterns of meaning (themes). The preliminary analysis came up with 7 main categories, each with a number of sub-categories. Then, frequencies of reference to each category and subcategory were obtained. The initial 7 categories were reduced into 5 most referred categories.

## Results

The quantitative data, gathered through the questionnaire, were analyzed through SPSS. One-sample t-test and frequency distribution were run to find answers to the research questions. The results are shown in Tables 1 to 5.

The results of mean differences (Table 1) show that, since all the mean values are greater than 3, most teachers agreed with the statements in the questionnaire. Further, the One-sample t-test results (Table 2) show that there were meaningful differences between the teachers' views with regard to the questions asked.

**Table 1.** Sample means of the seven main questions in the questionnaire

One-Sample Statistics				
Questions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
A	42	4.3433	.42140	.06502
B	42	3.9444	.47093	.07267
C	42	4.6645	.40581	.06262
D	42	3.5952	.50592	.07806
E	42	3.5173	.57091	.08809
F	42	4.5298	.81563	.12585
G	42	3.6667	.64181	.09903

**Table 2.** One-sample t-test of the differences between the teachers' answers

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 0						
Questions	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
A	66.796	41	.000	4.34325	4.2119	4.4746
B	54.282	41	.000	3.94444	3.7977	4.0912
C	74.492	41	.000	4.66450	4.5380	4.7910
D	46.055	41	.000	3.59524	3.4376	3.7529
E	39.927	41	.000	3.51732	3.3394	3.6952
F	35.992	41	.000	4.52976	4.2756	4.7839
G	37.024	41	.000	3.66667	3.4667	3.8667

Table 3 shows the answer for main question A, which queries "how the participants described themselves as EFL teachers?", the majority of teachers (above 70 percent) described themselves as having different tactics and strategies to deal with different students, being fine with students, trying to motivate students, building rapport and being friendly with every student, being meticulous, obeying the laws and having discipline, being patient, being energetic and effortful, being committed to ethics, having proper clothing and being neat,

having high conscientiousness, and studying the lesson (i.e., get prepared) before entering the class (items 1 to 12, respectively).

**Table 3.** Means and frequencies of the answers to the items in main questions A and B

Questions	Items	Mean		Frequency	Percent	Mean
A	1	4.35	Agree	37	88.1	4.3433
	2	4.42	Agree	38	90.5	
	3	4.38	Agree	37	88.1	
	4	4.07	Agree	32	76.2	
	5	3.78	Agree	30	71.4	
	6	4.45	Agree	37	88.1	
	7	4.35	Agree	37	88.1	
	8	4.38	Agree	37	88.1	
	9	4.64	Agree	30	95.2	
	10	4.59	Agree	42	100	
	11	4.42	Agree	37	88.1	
	12	4.23	Agree	35	83.4	
B	13	4.02	Agree	36	85.8	3.9444
	14	3.85	Agree	32	76.2	
	15	4.21	Agree	34	80.9	
	16	4.07	Agree	32	76.2	
	17	3.80	Agree	29	69.0	
	18	3.69	Agree	29	69.1	
Total				42	100.0	

In main question B (items 13 to 18), which inquires “how the teachers think they have developed an identity as EFL teachers?”, the majority (69 percent or above) reported that some factors have been influential on the development of their identities as EFL teachers, namely experience, i.e., continuous review and revision of errors (85%), study of teaching methods and classroom behavior in popular ELT textbooks, attending teacher training courses, learning from and being inspired by their previous successful teachers, learning from errors in their own teaching methods and trying to modify the method according to the students’ reactions and failure of the method, following the trial and error method, and trying to find the best strategies to teach.

Table 4 illustrates the answers to main questions C and D. In main question C (items 19 to 29), “which criteria best depict the identity of a good EFL teacher?”, more than 90 percent of the teachers agreed that a good EFL teacher has proper social behavior toward the students and shows respect to every student; has commitment and discipline; is patient and flexible; dresses

properly and neatly; is able in classroom management, time management and planning; is skillful and proficient in teaching and has adequate familiarity with different teaching methods and strategies; is skillful in testing and assessment; is eager, motivated and energetic; possesses high articulation and illustration ability; and is innovative, and uses various materials, teaching methods and strategies.

**Table 4.** Means and frequencies of the answers to the items in main questions C and D

Questions	Items	Mean		Frequency	Percent	Mean
C	19	4.61	Agree	41	97.6	4.6645
	20	4.73	Agree	39	92.9	
	21	4.73	Agree	41	97.6	
	22	4.76	Agree	41	97.6	
	23	4.73	Agree	42	100.0	
	24	4.66	Agree	41	97.6	
	25	4.61	Agree	39	92.8	
	26	4.61	Agree	41	97.6	
	27	4.69	Agree	41	97.6	
	28	4.66	Agree	41	97.6	
	29	4.45	Agree	38	90.5	
D	30	3.95	Agree	34	80.9	3.5952
	31	4.28	Agree	36	85.7	
	32	2.47	Disagree	24	57.1	
			Agree	10	23.8	
	33	3.66	No idea	12	28.6	
			Agree	24	57.2	
	Total			42	100.0	

In main question D (items 30 to 33), which asks “to what extent the teachers think they are similar to their previous teachers?”, above 80 percent stated that sometimes their previous teachers’ behaviors and teaching methods, techniques and strategies have been good examples for them. Also, 85.7 percent reported that they try to use the good points of their previous teachers’ performances in their own teaching practice. In item 32, more than half (57%) disagreed with the statement “I hardly perform similar to their previous teachers and have learned very little from them”, and only 23 percent agreed. In item 33, more than half (57.2%) of the teachers reported that they possess their own way of doing and try to be themselves rather than similar to others.

The results of the teachers’ answers to main questions E, F and G are presented in Table 5. The results show that, in main question E, which deals with “how the teachers think they have changed?”, more than 75 percent reported they have changed greatly in terms of teaching and

proficiency, and classroom and time management (items 34 and 35). However, almost 62 percent believed they have not changed much in terms of clothing (item 36). Above 60 percent believed that, respectively, they have become more meticulous in terms of assessment and evaluation; presently, they study more before entering the class; and they attend more to the students' feelings (items 37, 38 and 39).

Just above 40 percent agreed they have become more rigid and inflexible than before, have become demotivated and disheartened, and have lost energy. More than 40 percent disagreed and almost 19 percent had no ideas (items 40 and 41). Almost 62 percent disagreed that their friendly behavior and their building rapport with students have decreased compared to the earlier years in service (item 42). Further, 81 percent reported they have become calmer and more relaxed than before and have grown self-confidence (item 43). Yet, only close to 36 percent held they have become tired of the uninteresting, repetitious work; almost 36 percent others disagreed and the rest (almost 29%) had no ideas.

**Table 5.** Means and frequencies of the answers to the items in main questions E, F and G

Questions	Items		Frequency	Percent	Mean
E	34	4.00	Agree	34	80.9
	35	3.97	Agree	33	78.6
	36	3.52	Agree	26	61.9
	37	3.69	Agree	27	64.3
	38	3.85	Agree	28	66.7
	39	4.02	Agree	32	76.2
	40	3.09	Disagree	17	40.5
			Agree	17	40.4
	41	3.02	Disagree	17	40.5
			Agree	17	40.4
	42	2.42	Disagree	26	61.9
	43	4.04	Agree	34	81.0
			Disagree	15	35.7
	44	3.02	No idea	12	28.6
			Agree	15	35.7
F	45	3.11	Disagree	13	30.9
			No idea	13	31.0
			Agree	16	38.1
	46	3.76	Agree	27	64.3
	47	3.64	Agree	26	61.9
	48	3.83	Agree	29	69.1

G	49	3.76	Agree	27	64.3	3.6667
	50	4.50	Agree	40	95.2	
			Little	6	14.3	
	51	3.42	Average	19	45.2	
			Much	17	40.4	
			Little	15	35.7	
	52	3.07	Average	10	23.8	
			Much	17	40.5	
	Total			42	100.0	

Main question F (items 45 to 49) asked “to what extent do the participants believed the university and teacher training programs help build an identity in EFL teachers?”. Almost 38 percent of the teachers agreed that the university and the teacher-training programs have helped develop an EFL teacher identity in them; nearly 31 percent disagreed, and almost 31 percent had no ideas (item 45). More than 60 percent of the teachers (items 46 to 49 respectively) believed that in university and teacher training programs only theoretical materials are presented and teacher identity is not shaped in those places (64%), little attention is paid to behavioral training and nurturing (62%), only a few credits are given during university and training programs and they are not effective (68%), and universities and teacher training centers (TTCs) only issue (graduation) degrees and do not raise teachers (64%).

Main question G (items 50 to 52) queried the percent (share) of the effect of three factors, namely experience and correcting errors, inspiration of previous teachers, and university and teacher training program in developing EFL teacher identity. More than 95 percent reported that gaining experience (and correcting errors) has had the biggest role in developing their identities as EFL teachers (item 50). Almost 85 percent believed they have, somehow, learned from and been inspired by their own previous teachers (item 51). And finally, almost 64 percent believed their university programs and years they spent in teacher training centers (might) have had a role in development of their identities (item 52).

With regards to the data collected through interviews, due to the nature of the questions, some parts of the data collected were analyzed quantitatively and some parts qualitatively. The first interview question asked the way the participants assess the impact of different variables on their identity formation, such as universities and teacher training centers from which they graduated (in terms of practical training in teaching and being prepared to enter the class), studying language teaching and pedagogy books (free study based on self-interest not university credits), learning from and being inspired by previous teachers, gaining experience, peer learning, i.e., from colleague teachers, and rank or prestige of the university where they graduated from. The results are shown in Table 6.



**Table 6.** The impact of different variables on identity development

Variables	Impact				
	Very much	Much	Average	Little	None
University & TT programs	9	8	9	5	2
Studying books	4	13	10	5	1
Learning from previous teachers	8	11	6	3	5
Gaining experience	<b>22</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	0	0
Peer learning from colleagues	4	6	8	11	4
University rank & prestige	5	4	11	8	5

The table reveals that, out of 33 EFL teachers, 17 (51.5%) believed the universities and teacher training courses have had much or very much impact on development of their own identities (and they cannot deny their roles); 17 teachers (51.5%) believed studying books in teaching and pedagogy have had a role in developing their identities; and 19 teachers (57.5%) believed learning from their own previous teachers had been effective. More importantly, 28 teachers (almost 85%) thought the experience they have gained from years of teaching had been the most determining factor in developing their identities. However, 10 teachers (30.3%) thought learning from colleagues (peer learning) has much or very much impact; and 23 other (69.7%) believed peer learning has had average or less effect on developing their identities. Further, 9 teachers (27.3%) thought the rank and prestige of the university from which they have graduated has been effective.

The second interview question concerned whether the impact of the university programs and teacher training courses, books, previous teachers, and peer teachers have influenced their teaching practice or on their classroom behaviors. Table 7 shows the results.

**Table 7.** Results of influence of variables on teaching or classroom behavior

	Behavior	Teaching	None
University & teacher training programs	11	<b>16</b>	6
Studying books	1	<b>29</b>	3
Learning from previous teachers	20	6	7
Peer learning from colleagues	6	14	13

The results show that, 16 teachers (49%) believed the university programs have affected their teaching and 11 others (33%) believed they have influenced their classroom behavior. 29 teachers (88%) thought studying language teaching books have mostly influenced their teaching rather than their behavior. However, 20 teachers (61%) thought learning from their previous teachers has affected their classroom behavior, and only 6 teachers (18%) reported the influence on both. Further, 14 teachers (42%) believed the rank or prestige of their university has influenced their teaching and 6 others reported it has affected their teaching and behavior (e.g., their self-esteem and self-confidence). 13 teachers (39%) believed the university

rank or prestige is not much related to, and has little to do with, teaching and or classroom behavior.

The third interview question concerned the issues and problems of the variables mentioned above (see Table 6) concerning their impact on identity development. The data in this question were analyzed through thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Their approach suggests performing analysis of qualitative data through the process of coding in six phases to create meaningful themes. These steps include familiarization with data, generating primary codes, searching for themes in the codes, rereading the themes, defining and specifying themes, and generating the final product (Braune & Clarke, 2006). Accordingly, after going back and forth through the data several times, the following themes were identified (Table 8).

**Table 8:** Themes of issues and problems of the variables in relation with identity development

Variables	Dimensions	Themes
University & TTCs	Education degree	The higher the degree, the higher the self-confidence
	Teaching pedagogy & assessment	-lack of practical teaching and mostly theoretical materials;
		-lack of relationship between modules and real classroom;
		-insufficient attention to teaching, testing and assessment;
		-lack of speaking and listening activities;
	Ethical training	-lack of teaching teacher autonomy and training the teacher to raise student autonomy;
		-not teaching teacher’s classroom behavior;
	Teachers/lecturers	-selection pressures and excessive emphasis on selection issues;
		-excessive attention to and emphasis on ethical than pedagogical training;
		- lecturers have unrelated majors to what they teach;
-lecturers were not scientifically update;		
Facilities		-lack of facilities like language lab, audio/video equipment and the Internet;
	Books	-lack of familiarity with efficient ELT books; lecturers do not introduce books;
-high prices of the books;		
-unavailability in the market;		
-scattered materials in the books;		
Cultural conflict	-little correlation with real class conditions and difficulty in implementing the suggestions provided in the books;	
	-cultural, religious and ideological difference of ELT materials in textbooks written by English speaking countries with the realities in societies like Iran;	
Previous Teachers	Teaching	-teaching practices (methods) were mostly old, outdated and wrong;

	Scientific capability	-teachers were generally low and outdated scientifically;
	Parrot-like imitation	-some new teachers might copy or totally imitate their previous teachers without attention to differences in time and location; -lack of correspondence between old teaching practices (methods) and behaviors with present realities of Education system (in Iran);
	Refusing to help	-teachers are hardly willing to pass their experiences and knowledge to students
Experience	gained late, maybe with negative effects	-experience is gained late and maybe at the expense of demotivating or harming the students in early years;
	Lack of teacher autonomy	- teacher do not have autonomy in the education system (they must follow the books and methods prescribed by the system);
	Being fossilized or forget materials	-teachers be fossilized because they do not have opportunities to use their knowledge and abilities especially in speaking and listening;
	Reduction of motivation /energy	-after spending some years in the education system, the teachers get demotivated and lose energy;
Peer learning (from colleague teachers)	Unwillingness	-most teachers do not have motivation and willingness to consult; -there is little time to exchange ideas and experiences;
	Lack of opportunities	- recently Telegram channels have been made and teachers consult and exchange ideas and experiences there frequently;
	Negative appraisal	-if a teacher insists on consulting and exchanging experiences and asks questions frequently, he or she is thought to lack enough scientific qualification and knowledge, and is called "illiterate";
	Not being up to date	-most old and experienced teachers are not up-to-date;
	Difference in teaching methods	-old teaching practices (methods) are different from new methods, and old teachers are different from the new generation of teachers;
University rank or prestige	False self-confidence	-may bring about false self-confidence;
	Higher the rank, better the teachers	-the higher the university rank, the better are the teachers; -some universities have better performances;
	No direct relationship	-university rank or prestige is not (directly) related to teaching and behavior (and so to identity development);

## Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the factors that most likely affect construction of identity in Iranian EFL teachers. Activity theory was used as the theoretical framework in this study. The data were collected through both qualitative and quantitative methods, i.e., by means of a questionnaire and interviews. The results lead us two six variables that can determine the formation of identity in teachers. They include: university and teacher training programs, studying books, learning from previous teachers, gaining experience, peer learning from colleagues, and university rank and prestige. These are comparable to the aspects on teachers' professional identity introduced by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) who emphasized the role of factors such as teachers' characteristics, occupational and worker requirements, experience

requirements, occupation-specific information, and workforce characteristics as influential elements in shaping teacher's identity.

Further, the results revealed that the majority of the teachers who participated in this study believed that gaining experience, i.e., constant review and revision has been the most effective factor in their identity construction; and other factors such as inspiration of previous teachers, peer learning and particularly the university programs have been less effective than gaining experience. This is comparable with the findings of Timoštšuk and Ugaste (2010) who reported that personal experiences in the classroom, among other factors, can influence the teachers' perceptions of their professional identity.

Moreover, only less than half of the teachers approved that the university programs have helped grow an EFL teacher identity. Many of the teachers thought that in university programs merely theoretical materials are presented; teacher identity is not grown during the courses and little care is given to behavioral training; universities and teacher training centers (TTCs) only issue licenses rather than raise teachers.

The teachers believed that a good EFL teacher is capable in classroom management, time management and planning; is skillful and proficient in teaching and has adequate familiarity with different teaching methods and strategies; is skillful in testing and assessment and is able to innovative and to use various materials and teaching methods and strategies. The same question is at stake: do the university and teacher training programs raise and prepare properly the graduates with regards to these criteria? The answers provided by the teachers who participated in this study show otherwise. More than half were dissatisfied with university and teacher training programs because only theoretical, rather than practical, materials are presented and they do not help build an identity as an EFL teacher; and insignificant care is given to behavioral training. Almost all participants reported that experience and correcting errors has had the biggest role in developing their identities as EFL teachers; which according to the assertions made by the teachers during the interviews, lack of experience and competence in the beginning years of teaching results in demotivation of the students and perhaps their damage, and thus damage to the entire program.

Results of the interviews, more or less, corroborated the findings achieved from the data gathered through the questionnaire. The results indicated that the participants showed dissatisfaction with the performance of universities and teacher training centers due to inefficient performance with regard to teaching language pedagogy and assessment, lack of facilities, noncompetent trainers, inadequacy in teacher behavior training, and inappropriate materials and textbooks.

Concerning free-study ELT books in teaching, the participants reported unavailability of most books in the market, their often-high prices, scattered materials in the books and lack of time as the most important hurdles to self-study aimed at increasing knowledge and awareness of language teaching.

As with previous teachers' inspiration, it was reported that a lot of old teaching methods were problematic and currently outdated; previous teachers were often unwilling to share their experiences; the majority of old teachers were not sufficiently knowledgeable and proficient; and many might imitate their previous own teachers in a parrot-like and baseless manner. The

lack of peer negotiation found in this study is opposite the findings of Cohen (2010) who showed that teachers' use of reflective talk was a discourse strategy to negotiate professional identity.

Regarding teaching experience, the teachers believed it takes time to achieve experience and it might possibly be gained at the expense of demotivating and wasting the time and energy of quite a number of students in the beginning years of teaching. Also, lack of teacher autonomy and strict adherence to the textbooks and regulations prescribed by the system demanded by the Ministry of Education hampers gaining efficient teaching experience.

Regarding peer learning, the participants reported EFL teachers' unwillingness to consult, fear of being labeled as incompetent or illiterate, lack of opportunities have been the most important hurdles. However, virtual groups and regular meetings are arranged and developed in recent years which help increase consultation and brainstorming and thus improve the effect of peer learning among EFL teachers.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The findings of this study bring about some tentative questions: 1- do university programs in general, and teacher training centers and programs in particular, really have such dissatisfactory performances as stated by the teachers in this study? And 2- do the university graduates in every field of study, including teacher training programs, gain proper education in teaching and get ready to enter the education workforce? 3- Does the system perform proper program evaluation?

These questions need to be dealt with and considered by policy making officials, curriculum developers, material and textbook designers, the Education Ministry, teachers and other stakeholders in the Iranian education system. Further comprehensive research and program evaluation might be needed to find answer to these questions. Although university and teacher training programs have some effect on EFL teachers' identity formation processes, they do not, based on the teachers' views, prepare student-teachers (and or university students) properly to enter the classroom immediately after graduation. Thus, new teachers need to recall the proper performances and good points in the teaching practices of their previous teachers, and also learn more from studying teaching books, from peers, and gain experience and learn from their own errors during teaching practice. That is, they need to follow trial and error processes sometimes at the expense of having detrimental effects on some students in the early years and perhaps demotivating them, and more importantly damage to the entire program.

To overcome these problems, teacher training centers and university programs must undergo proper revision and appropriate plans be made through consulting experts in ELT. It is suggested to attend more to the opinions of the teachers and give them more autonomy with regard to selecting materials and teaching practice. Education offices, schools and teachers are suggested to arrange meetings and discussion sessions through which teachers can learn more from peers.

Finally, this study had some limitations, among which was lack of willingness of many teachers to participate in the study. In addition, some responses might have not been clear and blatant enough and the participants might have provided a kind of harmless response to avoid personal embarrassment or subsequent repercussions.

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