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Research Paper

EFL Teachers' Challenges and Strategies in Developing and Maintaining Their Professional Identity: Voices from Public and Private Schools

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Abstract
Over the past decade, considerable research has been conducted on teacher professional identity (TPI) in second or foreign language (L2) studies. However, little attention has been paid to the identity challenges that English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers encounter while working in public and private educational institutions. Moreover, their coping strategies in developing and maintaining their professional identities are underexplored. To bridge this gap, this study examined Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of professional identity challenges and their coping strategies for addressing them. To this end, 15 EFL teachers (7 from public schools and 8 from private

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schools) were purposefully selected to participate in a semi-structured interview. The results of the thematic analysis, obtained using MAXQDA software, revealed multifaceted challenges stemming from institutional, cultural, emotional, and pedagogical sources. Also, coping strategies such as time management, peer collaboration, and reflective practices emerged as vital tools for overcoming challenges and enhancing professional identity. The implications of our findings are significant for educational institutions and policymakers, suggesting the need for comprehensive professional development programs and supportive policies that address the diverse challenges faced by EFL teachers. By fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment, stakeholders can help educators cultivate resilient professional identities.

***Keywords**:* Challenges, Coping strategies, Private schools, Professional Identity, Public schools

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, teachers' professional identity (TPI) has become a significant area of research (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004). This interest is paralleled by the growing focus on language teacher identity (LTI) in empirical studies. The emphasis on LTI stems from the consensus that it is a crucial aspect of second language teachers' development and performance (Varghese et al., 2005). Researchers have sought to conceptualize and characterize TPI (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard, 1995), as well as understand how this identity develops (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). TPI can be conceptualized as a particular strand of teacher identity, marked by and shaped by challenges and contexts linked to language teaching (Mulu et al., 2022). It thus informs the beliefs, assumptions, values, and practices of teachers and what they do both within and outside the classroom (Farrell, 2011). It encompasses subjective self-constructions influenced by various aspects of personality and

educational background and is dynamically constituted by personal experiences, social contexts, educational policies, and professional development. Furthermore, scholars identify that as an individual trait, identity is not fixed (Drummond, 2021; Olson, 2009). The changing nature of identity and its dynamism do not go unnoticed when conceptualizing TPI across various educational settings.

In the context of English language education, aspiring educators in Iran needed to acquire and follow the outlined framework of the teaching competencies and standards set up by language institutions to be employed as English instructors. As a result, they are led to the inevitable tensions and shifts that personal identity undergoes as a result of these disparities.

TPI has been shown to have a positive correlation with several teaching-related factors, such as self-esteem, satisfaction, and commitment (Motallebzadeh & Kazemi, 2018). Pedagogy was featured to be one of the most important aspects influencing teaching quality (Labbaf et al., 2019). There appears to be a moderate positive association between professional identity and autonomy, which suggests that for people who have a higher self-definition, there will be greater freedom in decision-making (Dilek & Altaş, 2022). Pillen et al. (2013) indicate that a well-established professional identity enables teachers to cope with stress and enhances their capacity to be resilient by using adaptive coping skills like help-seeking and self-monitoring. However, as highlighted by Hanna et al. (2022), who stated that the tensions in professional identity could come from fieldwork intertwining with one's philosophies toward teaching, strong teacher identities have less stress than "weak" ones.

Despite the significance of TPI, research on EFL teachers' challenges in developing and maintaining their professional identity and their coping strategies is limited and often context-specific. Further studies are needed to

explore how various teaching contexts influence EFL teachers' professional identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teachers' Professional Identity

Most researchers believe that developing one's professional identity is an ongoing process (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). Teachers' professional identity (TPI) is a complex and dynamic construct that refers to how teachers perceive themselves and their roles to their students, colleagues, school, and society, reflecting their pedagogical philosophies, emotional experiences, and the socio-political context in which they operate (Beijaard et al., 2004; 2023; Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Rahimi et al., 2019; Wang & Dai, 2024). It is influenced by various personal, contextual, and relational factors, such as teachers' beliefs, values, emotions, experiences, knowledge, skills, motivations, expectations, challenges, opportunities, curriculum change (Ren & Pan, 2024), and interactions (Day et al., 2006), as well as autonomy, creativity, and emotional regulation. Teacher autonomy and creativity significantly influence professional identity, leading to greater success and satisfaction in their roles. Innovative teaching approaches further enhance this identity (Wang & Dai, 2024). Emotional factors, such as teacher immunity and emotion regulation, also play a vital role, as they are linked to work motivation and overall well-being, further shaping professional identity (Cheng, 2021; Namaziandost et al., 2024).

Research indicated that EFL teachers construct their identities through interactions with students, colleagues, and educational policies, often navigating conflicts between personal beliefs and professional expectations (Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Tran-Thanh, 2024). The development of TPI is influenced by teachers' experiences, with pre-service teachers exhibiting a

range of identities, such as flexible, student-centered, and reflective teachers, highlighting the diversity in their self-perceptions (Le et al., 2023). Additionally, teachers' investment in learners' identities can reinforce their own professional identity (Reeves, 2008); a similar result is also found in Marzban et al.'s (2023) study. Technology also plays a multifaceted role in shaping EFL teachers' professional identity. The integration of technology in teaching, particularly in flipped classrooms, has prompted the need for a nuanced understanding of professional identity that incorporates emotional factors like perceived anxiety (Luo & Zou, 2024). Additionally, the rapid shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the challenges faced by teachers, revealing that many were unprepared for the technical demands, which negatively impacted their professional identities (Abdalgane, 2023).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks of identity encompass both psychological and sociological perspectives. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development outlines eight stages of identity formation, emphasizing the critical crisis of identity versus role confusion during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Building on this, Marcia (1966) introduced the identity status theory, which categorizes identity development into four statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement, reflecting varying levels of exploration and commitment. Additionally, Tajfel and Turner's (2004) social identity theory highlights how individuals define themselves through group affiliations, impacting their attitudes and behaviors (Hogg, 2016). This theory distinguishes between personal identity, based on individual traits, and social identity, rooted in group memberships. From a sociological perspective, Cooley's (2017) looking-glass self theory suggests that identity is shaped

through social interactions and perceptions, while Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism emphasizes the role of communication in identity formation, distinguishing between the spontaneous "I" and the socially constructed "me." Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical approach further illustrates that individuals perform various roles in different contexts, with identity being a product of these performances influenced by societal norms.

This research examines the professional identity development of Iranian EFL teachers by triangulating sociological theories with psychology. Cooley (2017), Mead (1934), and Goffman (1956) offer a sociological perspective that examines the effects of social interactions, roles, and the larger society on teachers' identities. From the psychological side, Kelchtermans (2009) and Hermans (1996) look at a range of self-images and self-positions that influence identity construction. Kelchtermans' (1993) model of teachers' professional identity outlines the various components teachers work with, including self-image, motivation, and their goals for the future. In addition, Herman's (1996) dialogical self-theory describes the relationships among the different self-positions and voices that shape teachers' professional identities. Employing such frameworks, the research will attempt to shed more light on factors that shape EFL teachers' professional identity development within the contexts of their personal histories and social experiences, along with their use of professional roles in English language teaching.

2.3 Challenges to Teachers' Professional Identity and Coping Strategies

EFL teachers face numerous challenges when it comes to developing their professional identity, both on a macro and micro level. On the macro level, globalization and colonialism play a significant role. Globalization profoundly impacts teachers' professional identity, especially expatriate English teachers who often face marginalization and acculturation issues,

affecting their legitimacy and career prospects (Howard, 2019; Torres-Rocha, 2019). Chinese language teachers also experience marginalization and unequal treatment (Widodo et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, globalization can enrich the teaching profession by providing access to diverse materials and fostering international collaborations (Moser & Kletzenbauer, 2019). However, the colonial legacy continues to influence teaching identities, creating a dissonance between global and local educational contexts (Guerrero & Meadows, 2015; Quintero Polo & Guerrero Nieto, 2013; Shohamy, 2009; Torres-Rocha, 2019).

Policy and ideological factors also contribute to the challenges faced by teachers. Identity conflicts can arise when national EFL policies influenced by political ideologies clash with the personal views of teachers (Eslamdoost et al., 2019; Fairley, 2020). Often, local contexts are excluded from teacher education programs, leading to the disengagement of teachers as foreign theories prevail (Guerrero & Meadows, 2015; Shohamy, 2009; Quintero Polo & Guerrero Nieto, 2013). Prejudice, bias, and favoritism further exacerbate identity problems (Golzar et al., 2022), and novice teachers frequently face conflicts related to mismatches between their personal and professional identity values (Fairley, 2020; Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2021; Pillen et al., 2013).

At an institutional level, numerous barriers emerge. In a study, Hashemi Moghadam et al. (2019) acknowledged that the political and economic constraints in Iran's educational system have negatively affected EFL teachers' professional identities by limiting their autonomy, motivation, and commitment. It calls for reforms that recognize teachers' expertise and provide them with more autonomy to foster better educational outcomes. Restrictive rules and regulations from schools often constrict teacher agency, positioning teachers as "programmed robots" and challenging the

development of autonomous identities (Eslamdoost et al., 2019; Nazari et al., 2023; Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2025). Novice teachers, in particular, struggle to develop their identity when their institutional experiences do not meet their identity standards (Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). Additionally, teachers often face conflicts regarding their duty to stakeholders and the task of establishing demanding assessment systems (Ben-Peretz & Flores, 2018; Jiang et al., 2013). These challenges are further aggravated by a lack of exchanges, cooperation, and communication between teachers and managers, as well as a lack of resources and improper recruitment policies (Jiang et al., 2013; Nazari et al., 2021).

Socio-cultural factors such as conflicts, economic causes, and cultural norms also strongly bear on teachers' professional identities. Teachers are often compelled to reshape their identity in a new socio-cultural environment, challenging the management of cultural diversity at both the classroom and institutional levels (Aljuhaish et al., 2020; Howard, 2019; Xing et al., 2025). Language barriers and commercialized educational settings contribute to identity conflicts (Howard, 2019; Kim, 2012), and teachers in challenging environments, such as Afghan L2 teachers, face additional tensions from large, heterogeneous classes and heavy workloads. These teachers are both professionally and emotionally challenged to incorporate educational technology into their lessons (Golzar et al., 2022).

On the other level, teachers face several micro challenges that impact their professional identity, starting with pedagogical factors. These identity conflicts significantly influence teachers' pedagogical performance and relationships. Heterogeneous classes, a lack of administrative support, and overloaded curricula pose significant challenges (Zare-Ee & Ghasedi, 2014). Novice teachers, in particular, struggle with reality shock and emotional fluctuations due to institutional and cultural factors (Beltman et al., 2015;

Buendía-Arias et al., 2020; Raharjo & Iswandari, 2019). Such induction problems can lead to a decline in innovative teaching and professional growth (Flores, 2006).

Language and skill-based factors further complicate matters. Domain expertise, such as strong English proficiency (Aljuhaish et al., 2020; Raharjo & Iswandari, 2019; Zare-Ee & Ghasedi, 2014), adapting teaching techniques to new ICT environments (Huang, 2021; Laat et al., 2007; Zare-Ee & Ghasedi, 2014), and building new pedagogical knowledge present ongoing negotiating challenges (Huang, 2021; Raharjo & Iswandari, 2019). Novice teachers, identified as those with less than two years of experience, differ from experienced teachers in terms of knowledge, skills, and beliefs (Gatbonton, 2008; Rodríguez & McKay, 2010). These differences contribute to varying struggles in professional identity construction.

Based on the available literature, EFL teachers employ various strategies to navigate the challenges of developing and maintaining their professional identity. Novice teachers frequently confront identity conflicts related to their teaching philosophy and external appearances, while experienced teachers face issues like unequal power dynamics and imposed policies (Ghiasvand et al., 2023). To address these conflicts, strategies such as negotiating with colleagues, avoiding confrontations, and suppressing tensions are commonly utilized (Ghiasvand et al., 2023). Additionally, the exercise of agency plays a crucial role in identity transformation, allowing teachers to reconstruct their professional identities through reflective practices and emotional regulation (Wu, 2022). Participation in graduate programs further enhances teachers' critical engagement and social commitment, fostering a more reflective professional identity (Mosquera-Pérez & Losada-Rivas, 2022). Collaborative approaches, such as autoethnography, also contribute to identity development by promoting community building and shared learning experiences (Meilani

et al., 2022). Overall, these strategies highlight the dynamic nature of professional identity in EFL teaching contexts (Eslamdoost et al., 2019).

The conceptualization and measurement of teachers' professional identity are the primary focus of the majority of current research. Only a small number of studies (e.g., Eslamdoost et al., 2020; Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2021) have examined the challenges to TPI in Iranian EFL contexts. However, the identification and confrontation strategies for identity challenges have remained ambiguous. Using semi-structured interviews, this study addresses the scarcity of research on EFL teachers' professional identity challenges in Iran, particularly the distinct experiences in public versus private schools, which is a significant gap given the rising demand for English education in Iran. Understanding these challenges is crucial, as Iran's unique socio-cultural and institutional factors shape teachers' identities in ways that are underexplored globally. Insights from this study can inform targeted teacher education and policy, enhancing resilience and effectiveness in EFL instruction.

With this study, we set out to address the following research questions:

1. What specific challenges do EFL teachers face in developing and maintaining their professional identity in English education?

2. What strategies do EFL teachers use to overcome challenges in developing and maintaining their professional identity?

3. Method

This qualitative study investigates a limited cohort of Iranian EFL teachers working in public as well as private schools, analyzing their professional identity challenges and the strategies they employ to address these challenges while instructing in the classroom. This multiple-case methodology allows researchers to capture each teacher's perspective inside their classroom environment and examine the intricacies of daily school life (Yin, 2017).

3.1 Participants

The study included 15 EFL teachers from diverse backgrounds, including gender, age, education, experience, and institutional type (public or private). This approach captured varied perspectives on identity negotiation across institutional contexts. Almost all participants were from northeastern and southeastern Iran, except one from the north, and all were native Persian speakers. Recruitment employed a purposive sampling strategy, specifically the maximum variation approach. Ary et al. (2018) define it as "a nonprobability sampling technique in which subjects judged to be representative of the population are included in the sample" (p. 177). Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, at which point no new insights emerged (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). Table 1 shows the demographic data for the participants.

Table 1.
Demographics of Respondents

Pseudonyms	Gender	Years of Teaching	Education	School Status
Leila	Female	5	M.A	Public
Amir	Male	7	M.A	Private
Sara	Female	5	M.A	Private
Reza	Male	5	M.A	Private
Niloofar	Female	13	M.A	Private
Kaveh	Male	7	M.A	Private
Arash	Male	5	M.A	Public
Navid	Male	5	M.A	Public
Yasmin	Female	10	M.A	Public & Private
Fatemeh	Female	15	M.A	Public
Hossein	Male	20	M.A	Public
Saeed	Male	25	M.A	Public
Farid	Male	5	M.A	Public
Omid	Male	5	M.A	Private
Shirin	Female	8	M.A	Private

3.2 Instruments

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions, which lasted 30 to 40 minutes each. The interview questions investigate the challenges EFL teachers face in developing their professional identity and the strategies they use to overcome them (see Appendix). This approach allowed researchers to analyze the detailed obstacles and possibilities in EFL teachers' professional development. Semi-structured interviews provided the necessary flexibility for sampling and yielded rich insights into participants' experiences (Ary et al., 2018; Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Moreover, the MAXQDA software facilitated data codification, while interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Skype and Google Meet. Additionally, the development of comprehensive interview questions utilized diverse strategic sources and methodologies to ensure relevance and depth, with foundational questions derived from extensive academic literature and consultations with practitioners. Pilot interviews refined the questions based on participant feedback, aiding in demographic targeting.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The researchers utilized prominent social media platforms (Telegram and Eita) to distribute 25 invitations to EFL instructors for the purpose of participant recruitment. The invitations specifically targeted EFL instructors who had teaching experience in public and private institutions, as these experiences were essential to the study. The invitation underscored the exclusivity of the research interview and the confidentiality of the responses of participants. 15 EFL instructors from Mashhad, Tehran, and Zabol consented to participate in the research in response to the invitation. Participants were provided with a comprehensive overview of the study's objectives and interview process prior to the interviews, and their assent was obtained to guarantee confidentiality.

In this qualitative research, semi-structured interviews enable the researchers to gather the necessary data. First, the research team developed a set of interview questions in light of the research objectives and theoretical foundations of TPI. An extensive examination of academic journals and associated literature led to the formulation of interview questions that have been utilized in similar research work, in conjunction with consultations with practitioners in the field, which ensured the validity and appropriateness of the questions. The focus of the research was first provided, after which participants were given information about what to expect regarding the content and concepts that would arise during the interview. Prior to the interviews, participants were given assent. All interviews (15) were conducted around 6 months (from February 5 to August 4, 2024). Each interview lasted an average of 30 to 40 minutes, but no data were collected without the explicit consent of each participant. Participants had the convenience of interviewing in Persian or English. A week later, all interviews were transcribed using AI and then corrected by humans to ensure accurate transcription. Finally, the data were inserted into MAXQDA software for qualitative analysis. The software made it easier to identify themes, recognize patterns, and extract crucial information.

3.4 Data Analysis

After data collection, thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive technique, was employed to identify and code patterns in the qualitative data, revealing elaborate stories and themes within the instructors' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding was done line by line, identifying fragments of text that captured critical incidents or elements of professional identity. A systematic review and refinement of codes were followed, ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced coding structure.

Overarching themes were synthesized and cross-checked against data extracts, supported by a literature review that contextualized them within broader disciplinary conversations. Themes and sub-themes were interpreted and refined to reveal insights into the professional identities of EFL teachers, resonating with or challenging existing paradigms. The reporting phase presented findings that showed how recognized themes responded to research questions and provided new insights into the difficulties of professional identity development for EFL teachers, validated by detailed, illustrative quotes from participants.

The researchers also took precautions to ensure the results and interpretations were as rigorous as possible. To confirm the validity of the study, the researchers employed bracketing, audit trailing, member verification, and peer debriefing. All the while, the reliability standards established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) remained secure. Participant evaluations included themes and codes, transcriptions, codebooks, memoranda, and supplementary notes for members to review and reference. The next step in determining inter-coder agreement was for two analysts to reassess the codes and interpretations. For the sake of confirmability, we had a professional qualitative researcher review and test all of the procedures used in the data analysis.

4. Findings

Public Schools EFL teachers' professional identity challenges

The results of the thematic analysis of interviews revealed that Iranian EFL teachers working in public schools tend to struggle more with teaching philosophy and societal norms mismatch, outdated materials, and rigid policies that conflict with their personal teaching philosophies. These challenges can slow their professional growth and affect their emotional well-being (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Public Schools Iranian EFL teachers' professional identity challenges*

In this regard, a participant expressed her uncertainty about professional identity formation, stating that "As an educator, it feels like I'm in a battle to maintain my passion and effectiveness in an environment that resists change" (Leila). Another public school teacher said, "When the tools we use feel so out of sync with modern materials, it's challenging to stay inspired and innovative in my profession" (Farid). In a similar vein, again, Leila argued, "I told you to open the seventh language book now... it does not teach language at all." Moreover, regarding societal expectations, one participant argued, "I have always tried to be what I am, and no one is 100% perfect. With all my efforts, there is too much expectation from me" (Navid). Additionally, public school teachers mentioned that their personal beliefs about language education contradict societal norms. "If one has to learn a language, one must learn the culture of the West, not only about English, but that's not the case" (Leila). This sentiment also indicates bureaucratic obstacles and limited recognition among public school teachers.

Furthermore, public school teachers declared that large class sizes and heterogeneous groups of students add more challenge and pressure to their professional identity development, stating, "It was the first time I entered a class full of students with different personalities and cultural backgrounds. It

was difficult for me to engage each of these students in the process of learning a new language" (Arash, Navid). Regarding emotional well-being and psychological support, one private school teacher who also had public school teaching experience stated, "One of the reasons why I don't go to school anymore is financial issues. And the reason was that I was working for myself. Well, economic factors have definitely been very effective, which has changed my work process a lot" (Shirin), which indicates psychological and economic pressure on public school teachers.

4.1 Private Schools EFL teachers' professional identity challenges

On the other hand, private school teachers expressed their uncertainty about professional identity, as one of them stated, "Almost from the first day of teaching until now, there is not a day that I don't think about whether it was right or I followed the right path. I doubt very much whether I am a professional at all!" (Omid). They also articulated the tension between personal beliefs and societal expectations. One of them stated, "Sometimes, there has been this challenge between my personal beliefs and society's expectations of a language teacher, especially in Iran, where I now think that an English teacher should be a lot" (Sara). Moreover, one private school teacher declared, "There is not much job security in institutions, unfortunately, in education, because as soon as you are employed in education, you know, for example, that you will be the secretary of education for thirty years, but in your institution... they decide every semester whether they want to continue or not" (Omid) which shows the transient nature of teaching in private institutions that challenges job security leading to professional identity tensions. Furthermore, concerning unrealistic expectations from stakeholders, one respondent mentioned that "One of the biggest expectations of me as a teacher is from the parents of the students, who expect that in a very short period of time, for example, one year, their

students will be completely fluent in English" (Sara). Along the same vein, one private school teacher noted the business-like models in private institutions, stating, "People who work in our profession are marketers. In order to earn more money, they are willing to grab anything and use false beliefs in order to attract the audience" (Kaveh), which causes doubt in professional identity development.

Overall, public school teachers tend to struggle more with institutional rigidity, outdated curricula, and societal pressures that conflict with their personal teaching philosophies. These challenges can hinder their professional growth, which can directly impact their professional identity development. On the other hand, private school teachers face pressures related to competition, parental expectations, and institutional demands for quick results, which can lead to stress and a lack of authenticity in their professional identity. However, they benefit from greater flexibility and innovation in teaching practices, although this comes at the cost of increased job insecurity and higher expectations for efficiency. The challenges mentioned for private school teachers are illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. *Private Schools Iranian EFL teachers' professional identity challenges*

4.2 EFL Teachers' Coping Strategies for Identity Challenges

Various strategies became evident throughout our analysis. One educator said, "I believe studying and gaining more knowledge about the subject can help us navigate these challenges" (Omid), which is an indicator of gaining more experience. Similarly, other respondents declared the same opinion, stating, "Experience turned out to be a valuable tool for overcoming this challenge" (Reza, Leila, Kaveh).

Teachers often turn to their colleagues and supervisors for support, using mentorship as a vital tool for navigating professional challenges. Sara noted, "Often and almost always, I try to talk to my colleagues and use their experiences." Correspondingly, Saied mentioned, "I always tried to have my colleagues critique me. Wherever there was a flaw, it should be fixed." This emphasizes the collaborative spirit in addressing professional identity challenges. Amir also noted, "I always refer to experienced colleagues and ask them about the problems I have, and they always provide answers." Indicating community and networking engagement.

Professional development activities, such as attending training courses, festivals, and workshops, have emerged as significant coping mechanisms. Saeed, for example, shared that "I participated in more than two thousand hours of in-service training classes, and they have a significant impact on my professional identity." Sara also asserted, "Yes, I participated, but to say they were all excellent, not really, especially the university classes were not that great."

Flexibility in teaching methods was another critical coping strategy. Fatemeh reflected on this challenge, explaining, "We resolved this by combining various methods and adapting them to each class's needs," showing how flexibility can help manage conflicting teaching standards between theory and practice.

Several participants mentioned using time management strategies to cope with the demands of both their professional and personal lives. For instance, teachers with limited time for formal professional development engaged in self-study or personal reflection. Kaveh illustrated this approach: "I mostly try to do self-study and reflect on my own. I don't have enough time to attend various courses." In addition, Niloofar emphasized the importance of a positive mindset, declaring, "Positive mindset helps me. For example, if I face a problem in my work, I first grab a piece of paper and write about it." This practice of journaling allows them to process their thoughts and feelings, leading to a sense of relief. She noted, "After that, everything is okay because when I leave the class, I am satisfied." The joy derived from their students' smiles and satisfaction reinforces their positive outlook, illustrating how emotional well-being can be effective in facing professional identity challenges. Besides, Fatemeh shared her strategy: "Maybe if a challenge arises, I read a book on the matter or change my mood by reading a book or watching an educational film." This approach helps them cope with negative experiences and allows them to enter the classroom with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

Some teachers rely on their creativity to develop innovative teaching strategies. For instance, Sara shared her experience with a seemingly simplistic book for young children called "Pocket", which initially appeared to have little to offer: "On the first day I was given this book, I thought it had nothing in it, and I had to teach it. But gradually, I learned how to make use of it." Over time, she designed a teaching method for this book, incorporating games and activities aligned with its content.

Another teacher (Yasamin) reflected on her early career challenges and the importance of implementing new methods: "Whenever I feel another method might work, I implement it." They feared criticism for trying new

approaches in their first two years of teaching. To navigate this, they would reference non-existent websites to justify their methods, demonstrating a desire to innovate despite their inexperience. However, attending workshops later revealed that the methods they had developed were recognized in teacher training courses (TTC), which validated their efforts: "I found it fascinating and used it a lot" (Yasamin).

A strong connection with students was cited as a source of motivation. Teachers who struggled with engaging introverted or challenging students often relied on personalized strategies to build rapport and improve classroom dynamics. Leila shared a story of an introverted student whom she helped by giving him responsibilities as a class monitor, resulting in a significant improvement in his engagement and confidence.

Reflection and self-assessment are essential for educators seeking to enhance their teaching effectiveness and foster professional identity. As Omid noted, "Identifying problems in teaching, thinking about them, reading books and articles, and reflecting critically helps us see where we need improvement and strive to correct those areas effectively."

Moreover, maintaining a positive perspective during self-evaluation is crucial for fostering a constructive mindset. One teacher (Navid) shared, "I've tried to steer my self-evaluation in a positive direction. I analyze myself to find areas that need improvement and correction." By framing self-evaluation constructively, teachers can cultivate resilience and motivation, which are essential for ongoing professional development.

Another educator (Farid) stated, "I believe every teacher should self-evaluate. This critical perspective helps in professional growth. Without self-evaluation, one cannot identify and correct their mistakes, thus hindering professional development." This assertion underscores the necessity of self-

assessment for continuous improvement and coping with professional identity challenges.

EFL teachers employ a variety of coping mechanisms to address professional identity challenges. These strategies range from gaining experience, seeking mentorship, community, and networking engagement, and participating in professional development programs to implementing innovative teaching methods, fostering teacher-student relationships, and maintaining emotional well-being. A summary of strategies is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. *Iranian EFL Teachers' Coping Strategies*

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate EFL teachers' challenges in developing and maintaining their professional identity and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. The findings provide nuanced insights into the interplay of institutional, cultural, emotional, and pedagogical factors shaping teachers' professional identities, extending and challenging existing theories while highlighting context-specific dynamics unique to the Iranian EFL context.

The results revealed that EFL teachers in public schools struggle with mismatches between their personal teaching philosophies and societal norms,

outdated curricula, and restrictive policies. These findings are aligned with the literature, which emphasizes the role of institutional constraints and societal expectations in shaping teachers' professional identities (Eslamdoost et al., 2019; Beijaard et al., 2004). Teachers in public schools reported feeling restricted by rigid, outdated materials and policies that hindered their ability to innovate or adapt to modern teaching methods. This, in turn, slowed their professional growth and negatively impacted their emotional well-being, as seen in Leila and Farid's reflections on outdated teaching tools. Such challenges echo the work of Jiang et al. (2013) and Nazari et al. (2021), who pointed out that restrictive institutional environments can severely constrain teacher agency and creativity.

Private school teachers, on the other hand, faced different challenges. They reported feeling uncertain about their professional identities due to job insecurity, societal pressures, and a business-oriented educational environment. These findings corroborate the research of Omid and Sara, who mentioned job insecurity and unrealistic expectations from stakeholders. The pressure to deliver quick, efficient results within a competitive, market-driven environment was a source of stress for private school teachers, which, while different in nature from the challenges faced by public school teachers, had a similarly negative impact on their professional identity development. This aligns with Ghiasvand et al. (2023), who found that societal expectations and institutional demands in EFL settings often create tensions between teachers' personal beliefs and professional roles.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research in several ways. The literature review highlighted the complexity of professional identity, which is shaped by personal beliefs, emotional factors, and external pressures (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day et al., 2006). However, this study extends these frameworks by foregrounding the socio-cultural and

economic dimensions specific to Iran, which add layers of complexity to TPI. Like earlier studies, this research found that teachers' professional identities are influenced by their interactions with students, colleagues, and institutional policies (Tran-Thanh, 2024; Ghiasvand et al., 2023). For instance, public school teachers in this study reported challenges with large class sizes and heterogeneous groups of students, which have been similarly documented by Golzar et al. (2022) and Aljuhaish et al. (2020). The pressure to manage diverse classrooms exacerbates teachers' struggles with maintaining a coherent professional identity.

However, some findings diverge from previous studies, particularly concerning the impact of job security and market-driven education in private schools. While much of the existing literature focuses on teachers' emotional and pedagogical challenges (Beltman et al., 2015; Flores, 2006), our study highlights private school teachers' economic and job security concerns, which are less frequently discussed. The transient nature of employment in private institutions emerged as a significant factor undermining professional identity, with Omid emphasizing the lack of long-term job security; this contrasts with findings from studies in more stable teaching environments, where professional identity struggles are more often linked to institutional rigidity or curriculum challenges (Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2021).

Moreover, the results underscore a challenge unique to the Iranian context: societal expectations that EFL teachers should not only teach the language but also act as cultural brokers. The societal pressure to align language teaching with Western cultural norms, as mentioned by Leila, reflects the deep-rooted tensions between globalized English teaching practices and local cultural values, a conflict similarly noted by Guerrero and Meadows (2015) and Torres-Rocha (2019). The intersection of globalization, societal expectations, and cultural identity is particularly salient in the Iranian

context, where language education is often intertwined with broader ideological and political debates. The findings challenge Kelchtermans' (1993) model of TPI, which emphasizes self-image and motivation, by highlighting how external societal pressures, such as expectations to act as cultural brokers, exert a stronger influence on identity formation in Iran than individual self-perceptions alone.

EFL teachers employed several strategies to navigate these professional identity challenges, including gaining experience, seeking mentorship, and engaging in professional development activities. These strategies align with those identified in previous research, where teachers have sought to mitigate identity conflicts through reflection, collaboration, and continuous learning (Wu, 2022; Meilani et al., 2022). For instance, mentorship emerged as a key tool for addressing challenges, with several participants mentioning that they turned to more experienced colleagues for guidance and support. This finding aligns with Ghiasvand et al. (2023), who similarly identified mentorship as a crucial strategy for identity development.

Professional development activities, such as workshops and training courses, also played a significant role in helping teachers navigate identity challenges. Participants, such as Saeed, emphasized the value of in-service training. Participation in workshops contributed to teachers' professional identity by enhancing their self-perception as skilled educators within their institutional role. This is echoed by Mosquera-Pérez and Losada-Rivas (2022), who found that programs and professional courses also contribute. However, some participants in this study, like Sara, expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of these programs, indicating a need for more effective professional development opportunities. This finding suggests that while professional development can be a helpful strategy, its success is contingent upon the quality and relevance of the training provided.

Another key coping strategy was flexibility in teaching methods, with participants adapting their approaches to meet the diverse needs of classrooms and pedagogical standards; this aligns with previous research, which emphasized the importance of teacher agency in professional identity development (Wang & Dai, 2024; Eslamdoost et al., 2019). Flexibility in teaching methods, as exemplified by Sara's innovative use of a simplistic textbook, reflects teachers' exercise of agency, resonating with Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism, where the "I" (spontaneous self) creatively adapts to institutional demands to construct a coherent "me" (socially constructed self).

While our study extends existing theories by emphasizing the interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and ideological factors in shaping EFL TPI in Iran, it challenges models that focus primarily on individual or pedagogical dimensions, and some discrepancies arise. For instance, the role of job security in shaping professional identity appears to be more prominent, particularly for private school teachers. Previous research has tended to focus more on pedagogical challenges and emotional factors (Beltman et al., 2015; Cheng, 2021; Namaziandost et al., 2024) rather than economic concerns. The competitive, business-like environment in private institutions, where teachers feel like "marketers," as described by Kaveh, may reflect broader economic pressures in the Iranian education system that are less emphasized in other contexts. This discrepancy could be due to the unique socio-economic conditions in Iran, where private education is often less secure and more market-driven compared to other countries. The coping strategies employed, mentorship, flexibility, professional development, and emotional regulation demonstrate how teachers navigate these challenges through a dialogical and agentive process, rooted in both psychological (Erikson, 1968; Hermans, 1996; Kelchtermans, 1993) and sociological (Cooley, 2017; Goffman, 1956; Mead, 1934) frameworks.

6. Conclusion

Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed how professionals within these institutions are highly susceptible to institutional, cultural, emotional, and pedagogical influences. For example, Iranian EFL teachers experience constant pressure from society to self-develop, which increases the emotional strain that comes with their work. Among other coping strategies, collaborative time management with other teachers and other reflective practices emerged as helpful in these teachers' efforts to negotiate challenges to their professional identities. This investigation sheds light on the professional identity struggles and coping mechanisms of Iranian EFL instructors, yet several limitations must be acknowledged. The purposive sampling design, while enabling access to varied perspectives from 15 teachers in both public and private institutions, constrains the extrapolation of the results to wider educational populations or differing national contexts.

Furthermore, the semi-structured interview format, although yielding nuanced qualitative data, remains vulnerable to bias stemming from participants' desire to present themselves favorably or from memory lapses. The exclusive emphasis on the Iranian socio-cultural and institutional landscape shaped by particular ideological and economic pressures further confines the relevance of the outcomes to EFL milieus where educational policies and cultural constellations diverge. Our findings further emphasize the need for action on the part of institutions, policymakers, and other players in the EFL field. There is a gap that needs to be filled by more comprehensive professional development programs that prioritize emotional and cultural sensitivity at the center of their objectives in order to foster a more supportive environment for teachers. Policymakers have the responsibility to design initiatives that will support EFL teachers, helping them manage their professional and personal responsibilities while reflecting

on their lives on both levels. This can be further developed through the promotion of collaboration and networking among teachers, which fosters stronger professional and social identities within the teaching community. Longitudinal studies, complemented by comparative studies of various educational contexts, offer a more comprehensive understanding of EFL teacher identities and may ultimately serve as the basis for educational reforms aimed at enhancing educators' resilience and achieving greater satisfaction.

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