Religious Teachers' Perceptions of Their Religious Identity: A Case of Iranian English Language Teachers

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Abstract: Teacher identity has turned out to be of great importance in teacher pedagogical practice. A number of factors are implicated in shaping and reshaping teachers' identities. Despite numerous studies on teacher identity, language teacher religious identity has remained under-researched. Therefore, the current study examined how Iranian religious English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers are identified. To do so, 30 religious teachers were selected through the purposive sampling method. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, developed based on Simon's (2004) six components of identity, namely personal features, physical characteristics, special abilities, behavioral qualities, ideological attributes, and group membership. The results demonstrated that religious teachers tend to manifest certain Islamic-based personal attributes like fairness and kindness and also adhere to some Islamic rules of physical features like head covering for females and dignified clothes for males. In addition, religious teachers' behaviors and performances were profoundly affected by their religious background, realized in their attempts to control their anger, to avoid insulting and backbiting, and to disregard or replace the materials which seem to be against the Islamic thought. The findings of the study can have practical implications for teachers, institute administrators, and other stakeholders whose cognizance of religious teachers' identity could help prevent possible identity tensions.

Keywords: Identity, Religious EFL Teachers, Religious Identity, Self-aspect Model of Identity.

Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed the rapid advancement of research on teacher identity in applied linguistics (Burn, 2007; Dikilitaş & Kaya, 2019; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Thomas, 2003). This concept has been viewed from two vantage points of visible and invisible features of teachers (Castañeda, 2013). Based on Castañeda's argument, although the former refers to what educators and practitioners do, for instance, syllabus design, classroom interaction, and assessment, the latter underlines more personal features such as cognition, beliefs, and emotions. These two domains seem to be covered in a long-standing argument conceptualizing identity as an internal (the self) or external (social) phenomenon (Castañeda (2013). According to James-Wilson (2001), whereas teachers' selves may result in an understanding of, for instance, their knowledge, beliefs, emotions, or motivations, the social component entails macro-cultural structures closely linked to the professional actions executed in their roles performance. As such, personal and social features can inform and complement each other (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006).

Reviewing the existing literature on teacher identity shows that most studies have highlighted teachers' professional identity (Gjedia & Gardinier, 2018; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Pinho & Andrade, 2015), the role of teacher education in promoting and establishing types of professional identity (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Geeta, 2016), and the link between situational features and professional identity (Brown & Heck, 2018; Cohen, 2008; Scherr & Johnson, 2019). However, scant research has targeted teachers' religious identity, which in turn can affect their classroom practices. Thus, a rationale for research into teachers' religious identity is that almost every teaching aspect, from the relationships with students to decisions about how to organize the classroom, can be affected by this religious background. It would be natural if value orientations affect teacher roles and classroom practices. This study sought to examine how Iranian religious English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers are identified. To this end, these teachers' perceptions of religious identity and its constituents were examined.

Literature Review

Teacher Identity

The notion of professional identity has been given a growing prominence within the last three decades. Professional identity generally refers to the way teachers view themselves as teachers and interpretations of their consistent interactions in the workplace (Beijaard, Meijer,

& Verloop, 2004). Kelchtermans (2009) speaks of developing an interpretative framework by teachers during their career, which is constructed and re-constructed through teachers' interactions with the cultural, social, and structural conditions of their workplace. Day et al. (2006) hold that teachers make a balance among three related dimensions in their work, namely personal, professional, and situational, since interactions between these three will form their identity.

The self-aspect model of identity (SAMI), proposed by Simon (2004), builds on and incorporates the distinction between collective identity and individual identity. Collective identity in this model refers to "the identity of a person derived from membership in a collective or group and is constructed when self-interpretation is based primarily on a single self-aspect that one shares with other, but not all other, people in the relevant social context" while individual identity relates to "self-definition as a unique individual and is constructed when self-interpretation is based on a more comprehensive set of configurations of different, non-redundant self-aspects" (2004, p. 50). Self-aspects are introduced as cognitive topics functioning as contributory factors in the organization of individuals' information about themselves in diverse areas including physical features (e.g., having certain hairstyles, wearing jeans, and shaving face), psychological features (e.g., being calm, being tolerant, and being kind), and group memberships (e.g., belonging to religious associations and being a member of accounting association). These self-aspects can act as mini-theories based on which one deals with his/her experiences. The features attributed by Simon to such self-aspects (e.g., social-cognitive, relational, simultaneously activated, interrelated, context-dependent, and complex) can also be employed in individuals' identities. This model merges both psychological and sociological approaches as identity is the result of a self-interpretation procedure happening at the meso-level consolidating micro-level referring to psychological experiences and macro-level pointing to societal processes.

It should be noted that there is a difference between the two most related identities from a social-psychological aspect, namely collective and individual identity. The self-aspect model of identity announces that a collective identity suggests that self-interpretation relies on a single self-aspect shared with others in certain social settings (e.g., we are all EFL teachers at a conference on language assessment). Thus, collective identity, at its heart, concentrates on a special shared social dimension. Reversely, individual identity asserts that self-interpretation depends on a more detailed chain of distinguished self-aspects (e.g., I am a man, I wear a T-shirt, I love Iranian foods, I am an EFL teacher, I live in the north of Isfahan, and I play

football). The relationship between collective and individual identity is dialectical in the way that a permanent dynamic dialog is there between the two and that once each of them is activated, the other one remains as the background still playing a pivotal role.

Teacher Identity and Religion

The need to gain a better understanding of classroom activities and the realization of teachers' role in language education has convinced researchers to delve into the concept of teacher identity in recent years (Beijaard, 2019). According to Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000), educators construct their identities from "the ways they see themselves as subject matter experts, pedagogical experts, and didactical experts" (p. 751). In an investigation, Day et al. (2006) provided an overview of the changing attitudes in the literature toward the concept of teacher identity. Based on this overview, initial views that perceived teacher identity as a fixed concept unaffected by the context have evolved into different notions.

Although Beijaard et al. (2004) point out the absence of a clear-cut definition of the concept of identity, many researchers have come to an agreement on some key features (e.g. Garner & Kaplan, 2018; Thomas & Mockler, 2018). A widely accepted feature attributed to the concept is its dynamic nature (Garner & Kaplan, 2018). Another feature is that teacher identity involves sub-identities that constantly change in accordance with different contexts and relationships (Thomas & Mockler, 2018). One of such sub-identities is religious identity. According to Keyes and Reitzes (2007), religious identity refers to how one thinks of him/herself in terms of having religious beliefs and values. The significance of religious background lies in the fact that responses regarding the meaning, purpose, and sacredness of life are in the heart of religion (Dollinger, 2001). In addition, religious backgrounds make special beliefs and practices meaningful (Anthony & Ziebertz, 2012) for people marking themselves with a religious identity, and in this way make life more meaningful (Erkan, 2013).

A thorough analysis of the literature unfolded that there are three relevant directions with regard to the insertion of religious beliefs and practices into teaching. The first one relates to the bygone and contemporary challenges of religious diversity and pluralism in the era of globalization (Arber, 2015). The second deals with the linkage between religious identities and cultural or ethnic identities (Mitchell, 2006). The third one sheds light on the influence of religious background on teachers' knowledge and practices and challenges they may encounter in incorporating religion-centered topics into the curriculum (White, 2010). As a profession, teaching is imbued with interactions that bring about some ethical commitments due to the

adherence of teachers to values and beliefs. Higgins (2011) argues that such a set of beliefs and values are revealed in teachers' ties with students, colleagues, and other partners. By the same token, Barrett (2013) believes in both professional and personal lives as the origin of this set of beliefs. Thus, the religious background can be influential in determining teachers' actions and reactions in the classroom.

A large number of studies have been devoted to teachers' attempts to integrate personal and professional identities (Hendrix, 2020; Pennington & Richards, 2016). Religion and specific value orientations play a vital role in teaching roles and practices in many contexts such as in Iran; hence, religion and moral stances are vital to identity formation for many Iranians. Nelson (2010) examined the way teachers reconcile their religious identity with their professional identity by studying two teachers, named Jada and Gwen. The findings indicated that Jada sought to be a Christian teacher in a public school due to her tendency to consider religion as an open topic in the curriculum. Gwen, on the other hand, realized the negative effects of abandoning religion in the classroom to the effect that its avoidance would be destructive. In another investigation, O'Donoghue and Harford (2014) focused on the perception, formulation, and retention of the identity of Roman Catholic female religious teachers in Ireland within a time span of the mid-1930s and mid-1960s. Results unfolded that the professional life of these teachers was perceived by them as an integral part of their religious vocation. It meant that their commitment was initially to their religious life and that teaching was always in accord with, and where necessary took second place to, that life.

In a qualitative research project, Wadsworth (2015) explored how a teacher's organized religious opinions and beliefs may impact their performance and the decisions they make in the classroom. Five themes emerged from the gathered data. In sum, the teachers who perceived themselves to be Christian or Jewish appeared to be strongly affected by their religious beliefs while the atheist teachers were not as affected and inclined to keep religion out of their workplace as much as possible. Believing that studies on teacher religious identity have been centered on the postulation that public schools are religiously neutral, Addai-Mununkum (2018) carried out a qualitative case study of teachers in Ghana's religiously associated public schools to examine the ways they cope with the conflicts emanating from their religious. Results indicated that in the context of Ghana educators are knowingly or unknowingly situated as insiders or outsiders and their ensuing educational actions or inactions are profoundly impressed by such natural or unnatural religious background conflicts in their workplace.

A few studies have investigated Muslim teachers' religious identity. For instance, Brooks (2014) in a comparative case study targeted a Muslim teacher's performance in two different types of educational contexts, namely a public school and an Islamic private school (a school specifically for Muslim students). A conceptual framework comprising constructs of school culture, workplace links, and professional fit was adopted in this study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations at the public and Islamic private schools. Data analysis unfolded Natalie's failure to fit a public school due to the strong adherence to her Muslim identity. She felt a kind of exclusion from other colleagues and administrators. However, in a private Islamic school setting, Natalie felt more comfort seeing herself as an asset to the context and built active relationships with the community. Such a context allowed her to share a common value system with other colleagues and administrators. This sense of belonging can be crystalized, for example, in her recommendation to a Muslim man for marriage as an indicator of affiliating to a Muslim community. In another study, Shah and Shaikh (2010) studied Muslim male teachers working in London and concluded that religious discrimination had influenced their career development towards class leadership. Teachers in this investigation felt a kind of exclusion and being permanently monitored, unable to be linked to their co-religionist colleagues' networks or to connect to other visible Muslims in public.

The Place of Religion in Iran

In February 1979, the Iranian people overthrew the regime of Pahlavi and put an end to the Iranian 2500-year-old monarchy (Higgins, 2006). The main actors in this revolution were the Iranian Islamic sectors under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Based on the Islamic Revolution of Iran's Constitution, the official religion in Iran is Islam as the majority of the Iranian people (98%) practice Islam (World Factbook, 2011). It should be noted that there are two main branches of Islam in Iran, namely Shi'ite Muslims (96%) and Sunni Muslims (2%) (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006). As such, the official religion in Iran is Islam, and owing to the larger population of Shi'ite Muslims, Shi'ite is the official religion (Ansari, 2002).

A principal influence of this movement was to Islamize a lot of sectors in Iran, most particularly education curriculum including instructional materials and teachers' instructional methods and identities. Since religion often plays a strong role in defining personal identities in Iran, it is not surprising to find that many teachers integrate their religious identities and teacher identities. Iranian EFL teachers are not excluded from this rule. Their religious identity

can have a great effect on what they do in the classroom due to the strong affiliation of many of them with Islamic teachings and practices.

Thus, in view of the gap in the literature evident from the preceding review as well as the high place of religion in the post-revolutionary era, this study sought to explore the status of Iranian EFL teachers' religious identity. As stated earlier, foundational beliefs and values that teachers bring into classrooms influence their teaching. Similarly, deeply held religious beliefs affect teaching practice in subtle ways that cannot be grasped without a more nuanced view of religious beliefs. Overall, religion tends to be a key determinant factor of identity formation. Iranian EFL teachers are not excluded from this rule. Their religious identity can greatly impact what they do in the classroom due to their high affiliation with Islamic teachings and practices. Against this backdrop, the current study addressed the following research question: What are Iranian religious EFL teachers' perceptions of their religious identity and its constituents?

Method

Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 30 self-identified religious teachers (15 male and 15 female) who were interviewed regarding their perceptions of religious identity and its constituents. They were from different Iranian cities in Iran with different academic degrees in various programs including English Translation, Linguistics, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, English Literature, Management, Political Sciences, and Economics. Their ages ranged from 24 to 51 with an average of 33.5, and their teaching experience varied from 2 years to 24 years with an average of 13. These teachers were working at different language institutes across the country. They were all teaching English to learners with different language proficiency levels ranging from introductory to advanced. They mostly taught *American English File, Got It, and English Time* series used in their language institutes.

The participants were selected based on stratified sampling. To this aim, three criteria were taken into consideration. First, teachers' self-assertion on being strongly religious was considered in the selection of the participants. Second, colleagues' and administrators' opinions about religious teachers helped find those who are believed by their colleagues as being evidently religious. Another criterion was personal communication in which those teachers who proved to have had a clear religious background were chosen for this study.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews with the religious teachers were employed to collect data. The interview questions were reviewed by three experts in the field of applied linguistics who went through the items meticulously to refine the questions. With these interviews, the authors sought to examine the religious teachers' perception of aspects of their identity. To design the interview questions, Simon's (2004) model was adopted. This model is based on the belief that individuals are involved in the self-interpretation of meaning, implying that everyone attempts to perceive him/herself through the active formulation of coherence and meaning in his/her interactions with the physical and social setting. This self-interpretation is tightly dependent on the various numbers of self-aspects. In the self-aspect model of identity, Simon borrows the concept of self-aspects from Linville (1985, p. 66) as "a cognitive category that serves to process and organize information and knowledge about oneself, i.e., one's attitude and beliefs of own attributes." Self-aspects include personality traits, abilities, physical features, behavioral characteristics, ideologies, social roles, language affiliations, and group memberships. Thus, from the insight gained from this model, the interview questions were formulated, consisting of 19 questions to examine personality traits, abilities, physical features, behavioral characteristics, ideologies, social roles, and group membership of the religious Iranian EFL teachers (see the Appendix). Since all the participants were of the same linguistic background, language affiliation was not considered in formulating the questions. To this end, questions were categorized based on the above attributes.

Data Collection and Analysis

The required data were gathered in 2020 by interviewing religious teachers working in different cities in Iran. At first, necessary measures were taken to interview 30 religious teachers in different language institutes to investigate their perspectives on the attributes of a religious teacher. To do this, meetings with the supervisors of the target institutes were held to explain the purposes of conducting such an investigation. Following their permission, the interviews with the teachers were arranged and conducted individually by the third researcher. A meeting session was set for a face-to-face semi-structured interview with each of the participants. When the third researcher, as the interviewer, met them, they became aware of the exact focus of the investigation. Participants were asked to fill out the consent form to facilitate the relationship between researchers and participants in the research process. Each interview lasted from 16 to 27 minutes. Then, the interviews were totally transcribed to be analyzed in depth in order to extract the religious teachers' identity attributes.

Since the current study was qualitative, content analysis was conducted. After the interview sessions, the gathered data were transcribed with the most precision and an inductive content analysis was adopted to drive the codes directly from the transcribed data. Later, codes were partitioned into categories according to how they were related and linked in view of Simon's (2004) model of identity. The model consists of personality attributes referring to the Islamic-centered personalities of a religious teacher (e.g., kind), special abilities that make them distinct from the other teachers (e.g., referring to the Quran in due time), Islamic-based physical features (e.g., wearing long-sleeved shirts), Islamic-recommended behavioral characteristics (e.g., controlling anger), ideological attributes of a religious teacher (e.g., emphasizing religious values), and religious teachers' social roles and group memberships (e.g., Basij membership). To ensure inter-coder reliability, about 30% of the data were selected randomly and were checked by an informed expert. Results revealed a high degree of agreement (80%) between the coders. The remaining 20% of the data were discussed later on to be revised, resulting in removing the least agreed themes and merging the similar ones. Following data transcription, consisting of 30 interviews that lasted about 570 minutes in total, and ensuring the inter-coder reliability, relying on Simon's (2004) model of identity, religious teachers' attributes were listed and analyzed in depth. In transcribing the data, items related to the religious characteristics of the language teachers were extracted and other items were omitted.

Results

The present study aimed to examine the constituting attributes of Iranian EFL teachers' religious identity. For convenience, these teachers are codified as T1 to T30 in which T stands for 'teacher'.

Personality Attributes

The first section of the interview was about personality attributes. Our analysis helped identify an initial set of 23 attributes. After merging similar ones, 9 attributes were extracted, including being helpful in problems, being humble, behaving kindly, enjoying the profession, being orderly, being patient, being fair, and being intimate. The first attribute, as the most frequent one (n=28, 93.3%), was religious teachers' helpfulness in educational and non-educational issues. It was, for example, posited by T27:

In my opinion, a religious teacher should help the learners with both their educational and non-educational problems since teachers act as role models which form the learners' persona to much extent.

Here, T27 believes that, nowadays, the teachers' role has changed drastically in the way that they are recognized as persons who play a very important part in molding learners' personalities. Thus, religious teachers are expected to pay special attention to learners' non-educational problems along with the educational ones.

The second attribute was teachers' humbleness and respect for others (n=26, 86.5%) as, for instance, announced by T19:

Humbleness is interpreted as the essence of Islam and the root of all virtues. Thus, it is an order for teachers to be humble with learners, colleagues, etc.

T19 stresses the importance of humbleness in teacher-learner relations as well as their relations with other partners like colleagues and parents. Actually, he holds that humbleness can act as a quality that constitutes the essence of all virtues.

The third attribute, believed by 23 participants (76.5%), was religious teachers' kind and sympathetic behavior with the learners and colleagues. This is reflected in the statement by T2:

Islam has ordered all believers to be kind to each other. This issue is of higher importance for teachers since they are not only sources of knowledge but also are guides whose behaviors are imitated by others.

As it is inferred from the above viewpoint, teachers' kindness is a crucial factor playing an important part in developing and promoting an optimum atmosphere in a learning context, which is highly valued in the Islamic doctrine.

Enjoying their work and not complaining in the workplace was the fourth attribute of religious teachers (n=20, 66.6%). For instance, T23 asserted: "the teacher should always enjoy his/her work and be totally committed to work so that s/he earns 'Halal' (pure) income." She refers to job commitment coupled with the Islamic practice of "Halal (legal) income" being seriously recommended to be attained by hard work.

The fifth personality attribute of religious teachers (n=18, 60%) unfolded to be their discipline and punctuality. For instance, T22 believed that "religious teachers should be on time, well-ordered, punctual, mindful, and attentive to impact the learners". Discipline is a code

of behavior and ethics that should be followed by teachers so that learners are provoked to adhere to such acts and rules. This, in turn, results in the betterment of the learning process.

The sixth attribute (n=17, 56.5%) was that religious teachers should be patient and tolerant. For example, one of the teachers argued "all teachers, in my opinion, should be patient because different kinds of tensions and conflicts are inevitable." The likely reason is that tolerance and adaptability in a teacher's act are very significant qualities in their interaction with a large number of learners with different beliefs, behaviors, cultures, and backgrounds.

The seventh attribute (n=15, 50%) was religious teachers' truthfulness in words and deeds. The following excerpt from T12 exemplifies the attribute:

A good teacher should abide by his/her promises and should act based on what s/he states in the class. If such a condition is not met, learners won't rely on the teacher anymore.

T12 refers to the necessity of utmost harmony between what teachers say and how they act. By seeing a nuance of discrepancy in teachers' words and deeds, learners may lose their interest and motivation, which is not desired in education.

Being fair in scoring and judging (n=14, 46%) was the eighth attribute of religious teachers. In this regard, T8 stated that "Islam is the religion of justice. In case you are a teacher, you should be highly meticulous in scoring learners so that no right of them is violated." Teacher fairness is highly recommended in teacher education and in the Islamic thought. Fairness is the virtue that can entail the subsequent betterment of the teacher-learner relationship.

Being intimate with their colleagues and being supportive to them was found as the ninth attribute of religious teachers (n=13, 43.3%). For instance, T14 stated:

Teachers in an institute, to have better performance and experience more joyful moments, should be intimate and supportive to each other and not downgrade each other as recommended by Islamic doctrines indicating that 'Oh do not elevate your position by degrading others'.

T14 believes that intimacy can lead to experiencing a more delightful time. Thus, more religious teachers are expected to act supportively and intimately in confronting their colleagues.

Special Abilities

The second part of the interview dealt with the special abilities of more religious teachers, which may assist them in controlling the flow of instruction. As the only extracted theme in this regard, it was believed by 18 participants (60%) that religious teachers are able to refer to the Quran and Hadith (prophetic saying) in due time, as claimed by T20:

> *In our religion, teaching is of high importance because teachers undertake the hard task of framing the learners' personalities and instructing them. Thus, knowing the Quran and Hadith plays a pivotal role in molding the learners' personalities.*

Physical Features

The third part of the interview items examined the physical attributes of religious teachers. Following a thorough analysis of the participants' beliefs and merging similar codes, two attributes were extracted for male teachers and two others for female ones. The first attribute assigned to male religious teachers was their tendency not to wear open-collared and short-sleeved shirts, jeans, T-shirts, and tight clothes by male teachers. It was posited by all participants. For instance, T26 asserted:

> *Muslim teachers are highly recommended to wear dignified clothes and it is fundamentally stressed to wear clothes that are indicators of a Muslim and are not specific to the non-Muslim.*

As T26 holds, since teachers in the Muslim environment are considered to be role models for learners, it sounds reasonable to expect a highly religious male teacher to avoid wearing revealing and formfitting dress. Teachers are expected to be clothed in a modest way based on religious commands. Another attribute for male teachers was argued to be their using no gold ornaments as believed by nine teachers (30%). It can be related to the 'Halal' (permissible) way of clothing in Islam in which wearing gold ornaments by men are banned.

The first attribute conceptualized for female religious teachers (n=30, 100%) was having hijab (wearing chador) and not wearing tight and transparent dresses by them. It was, for example, asserted by T16:

> *We are firmly recommended to observe 'Hijab' (coverage) as Allah asserts in his Holy Quran: Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to wrap their outer garments around themselves. That is more suitable so that they will be known as pious women, and not be harassed.*

Based on the above statement by a female teacher, female religious teachers are recommended to wear a *hijab* (covering). Moreover, she points to the permissible way of clothing in a way that does not draw the attention of the opposite gender, i.e. males, which is highly discouraged in Islam. Avoiding heavy makeup, nail-varnishing, and long nails by female teachers was the second physical attribute of religious teachers (n=12, 40%).

Behavioral Features

The fourth part of the interview addressed the behavioral attributes of the religious teachers in which ten attributes were extracted, including controlling anger easily, suggesting religious topics for free discussions, avoiding offensive language, having minimum eye contact, and keeping conventional distance with the opposite sex, emphasizing religious values, observing religious ethics, helping learners with non-educational problems, being grateful to others, apologizing when making a mistake, and informing the parents about their learners' behavioral problems.

The first behavioral attribute of high religious teachers (n=22, 73.3%) was controlling their anger easily. as For instance, put by T4 stated:

Anger can have harmful effects on those who permit it to control them and, in fact, it can destroy the relationships of the teachers and learners. Teachers, based on Islamic thoughts, [should] be kind and patient with other people.

As it is believed by T4, teachers' negative emotions such as angriness can make learners humiliated and scared, which in turn can obscure the learning process. Thus, he believes that teachers should be able to control their anger easily to avoid having a bad effect on their learners.

The second behavioral attribute was suggesting religious topics for free discussions in class, as pointed out by 19 teachers (63.3%) teachers. For example, T23 stated that "I personally prefer to suggest Islamic topics to be discussed to make the learners aware of some Islamic rules and thoughts". Such a belief clearly confirms the drastic role of teachers in recent years to have their own voice in the curriculum. Thus, it is quite natural for a religious teacher to determine religious topics to be discussed due to their attachment to the Islamic doctrine.

The third behavioral attribute was avoiding cursing, insulting, and backbiting, as proclaimed by many participants (n=19, 63.3%) as Islam has strongly banned such behavior.

T16, for instance, argued that "a religious teacher must be against any kind of cursing. S/he should be informed of the bad effects of insulting others. Also, based on our religious teachings, we should not backbite others in our classes. Generally, this statement suggests that teachers should not use offensive words in their classes as Islam has strongly banned such behavior.

The fourth behavioral attribute of more religious teachers expressed by the participants (n=18, 60%) was having minimum eye contact and keeping their conventional distance from the learners of the opposite sex due to their adherence to the Islamic practices. For example, T24 stated that "Islam has a strong recommendation for controlling our eyes and the way of communicating with the opposite gender in the way that you should keep distant from the opposite gender".

Eye contact plays an important role in building positive relationships between teacher and learner and then offers learners chances to be more motivated and engaged. But, as it is evident from what was stated by T24, religious teachers are expected to have less eye contact due to commitment to Islamic practices.

The fifth behavioral attribute of religious teachers (n=16, 53.3%) was to emphasize religious values in their teaching. The following excerpt exemplifies this attribute:

> In my opinion, religious teachers need to talk about religion-related topics in their classes to both teach English and stress ideological issues and as a result to teach them life lessons. (T22)

It is evident from this teacher's statement that Islam is considered to be more than just a religion, but rather, a way of life. Generally, values function as a criterion for all those that human beings desire. They indicate the direction and specify the decisions taken by religious teachers in the classroom.

The sixth attribute posited by the participants (n=15, 50%) was to observe professional ethics, and to encourage moral standards and discourage immoral ones on behalf of religious teachers. In this regard, T8 commented:

> Teachers not only teach learners language but also convey invaluable life lessons through their behaviors. In our society, a teacher is of high position and respect. Religious teachers, as role models, are expected to teach profound character traits like respect, fairness, etc.

As it is evident from the above statement, T8 not only sees religious teachers as transmitters of knowledge but also thinks of them as models who could be imitated. Thus, it is expected from a religious teacher to have special attention to learners' behaviors so as to have a positive impact on their partners.

The seventh behavioral attribute articulated by the participants (n=12, 40%) was that religious teachers help learners with their non-educational problems. The following excerpt exemplifies this attribute.

As a teacher who lives in an Islamic society, one should help his/her learners with all their problems as long as s/he can. For example, non-educational problems should also be paid special attention. (T15)

The above excerpt suggests that a religious teacher's role and his/her mission does not terminate in the classroom, but the significant role is trying to solve the learners' non-educational problems that might impede their educational progress.

As the eighth behavioral attribute, the participants (n=11, 36.6%) pointed to the religious teachers' gratefulness to others' favors. For example, T12 stated "Allah, the Almighty, has granted us the nature of being grateful and we should therefore express our gratitude not only to our creator but also to others whom we are living with." It clearly refers to the virtue of thankfulness in the Islamic thought, which is of a very respectable value.

As the ninth attribute, about one-fourth of the participants (n=8, 26.6%) believed that religious teachers apologize when they make a mistake. For instance, T17 argued:

Islam highly recommends apology when a Muslim commits a mistake. Thus, as a believer, a religious teacher should not be reluctant to apologize in due times to earn back the trust.

Here, T17 refers to a virtue strongly emphasized in the Islamic doctrine known as the apology. It is, as believed by this participant, a reliable and honest way to eradicate any resentment a learner or a colleague may feel about the teacher.

The tenth attribute (n=6, 20%) was informing the parents about their young learners' behavioral and ethical problems. The following statement is revealing:

A good teacher shouldn't just pay attention to the educational affairs of the learners. They should be sensitive to learners' ethical issues and let the parents know, too. (T13)

T13 highlights the crucial role of the teacher in learner identity construction and cultural development. He believes that teachers can do such a task by enhancing parental involvement and informing them of their children's ethical problems.

Ideological Features

The fifth part of the interview addressed the ideological features of religious teachers. In this part, two features were pointed by the interviewees. The first revealed quality was that religious teachers are expected to ignore or replace parts of the textbook which is not compatible with religious beliefs, as stated by many participants (n=19, 63.3%). For instance, T19 stated that:

> *It is not a surprise that religious teachers check the texts and exercises earlier and decide on their replacement by appropriate ones which are compatible with our religious thoughts. (T19)*

This excerpt suggests the integration of spirituality in foreign language teaching by certain teachers. Since Iran, as a Muslim country, encourages the incorporation of religious values into education, it is quite logical to expect that a religious teacher tends to be very sensitive to foreign texts.

The second ideological attribute of religious teachers was found to be their attention to learners' observation of religious values (n=7, 23.3%). In this regard, T17 asserted:

> *One of the salient features of a true believer mentioned repeatedly in the Holy Quran is enjoining good and forbidding evil. Thus, it is of high significance for me to train learners to observe religious values.*

T17 points to the high place of values or manners in Islamic training. Personality, from her perspective, is developed when a person adheres to the values set forth by Islam. Thus, it is a true expectation of a religious teacher to ensure the observation of Islamic values by learners in the classroom.

Social Roles and Group Membership

The last part of the interview addressed the social roles of the religious teachers and their group membership. For this part, the participants pointed to seven cases of probable membership or refusing membership of religious teachers in different groups and institutions. Thus, expecting religious teachers to be members of groups and institutions like Basij (a paramilitary

organization), charity institutes, mosque board of trustees, relief operation groups, environmental protection groups, and Islamic associations and organizations as well as their restraining membership in music groups, as posited by the interviewees, seems to be rooted in Islamic doctrines. For instance, T25 stated:

I personally as a religious person believe that people keep an eye on the teachers, most notably religious ones and pursue their behaviors. Thus, we should not be present in the contexts which are against our religion and culture. For example, I have never been in music groups.

Here, T25 speaks of the effectiveness of people in view of Islamic thoughts. Actually, T25 believes that membership in different groups is an indicator of one's identity and a way of thinking. Thus, she prefers to be a member of the group that is beneficial and plausible from her perspective.

Discussion

The current study was conducted to explore the constituting factors of Iranian EFL teachers' religious identity. Regarding the first section of the interview, which focused on the personal attributes of religious teachers, interesting findings emerged. Teachers' fairness while teaching learners from different sociocultural backgrounds proved to be of great importance for positive learner emotion in a learning context. This finding echoes Molinari, Speltini, and Passini's (2013) study, arguing that teachers' fairness plays a significant role in learners' cognitive and social development. In addition, religious teachers' sympathy greatly influences their effectiveness. This is in accord with Stronge, Tucker, and Hindman's (2004) position that sympathetic teachers respect the learners and their emotional needs and that such an action plays a vital role in learners' progress.

Caring about learners' non-educational problems was another attribute of religious teachers, as posited by the majority of the participants. In line with a number of related studies (e.g., Guess & Bowling, 2014; Maulana, Opdenakker, & Bosker, 2014), it could be postulated that in educational contexts, caring teachers can positively contribute to instilling good values besides imparting knowledge and skills to students. The teacher's care is an essential factor for learners' cognitive development and progress (Guess & Bowling, 2014). It can also be argued that good teacher-student relationships can motivate students to excel academically and that

they can have better personal and academic achievement if teachers show caring qualities (Opdenakker, Maulana, & den Brok, 2012).

Another finding of the study was that religious teachers are kind, patient, and friendly. Tajeddin and Alemi (2019) also argued that effective teachers tend to be patient, kind, and friendly to language learners. Respectfulness, as another attribute of teachers, refers to respecting all learners regardless of their proficiency levels and degrees of achievements. Similarly, Rubio (2009) argued that respect is one of the prerequisites of influential instruction from learners' perspectives. It is crucial to establish the optimum atmosphere for influential teaching and learning. Teachers' commitment and job satisfaction as another attribute of religious teachers are consistent with the findings by Altun (2017), suggesting that job satisfaction is a psychological adherence to an institution in which individuals are loyal to its values and aims. Finally, teachers' punctuality as a personal attribute indicating their sense of responsibility was also reported by Zhang (2004). That is, punctual teachers feel they are responsible for being on time, organizing materials and exercises appropriately, and being available to the learners even after class time.

The second extracted theme was the religious teachers' recourse to Quranic verses and Prophet sayings when needed. More specifically, it can be argued that religious individuals appeal to quotations from Imams and the Prophet or recite a verse from the Quran to convince people to do or to avoid doing something. For instance, to encourage language learners to learn a foreign language, the teachers usually refer to the Quranic verse of "Are those who know equal to those who do not know? Only they will remember [who are] people of understanding" (Quran, 39: 9). Overall, it can be posited that such an ability allows religious teachers to have a better portrayal of the classroom policy. Thus, it can be argued that in an Islamic society, like Iran, knowing the Quran and Hadith plays a pivotal role in molding learners' personalities and framing their behaviors.

With regard to the physical features of the religious teachers, the participants believed that female teachers need to wear hijab (covering) and not to have tattoos and heavy makeup. However, male teachers need to wear formal suits and not to wear tight clothes and have tattoos. This finding reflects a narration from Imam Sadegh (A Shi'ite Imam) suggesting that "from Allah's perspectives showing a blessing is more beloved than keeping it. So do not go out except in the best way your people like." This finding can also be attributed to the high place of modesty in Islam as Allah asserts that "O children of Adam! Surely we have bestowed

upon you a garment to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you, and the garment of piety is the best" (Quran, 7: 26).

As to behavioral attributes, interesting themes were disclosed, which are mostly in line with the previous studies on effective teacher characters. Examples include controlling anger (Zamani & Ahangari, 2016), helping learners with their non-educational problems (Eisner, 2002), accepting mistakes (Thompson, Greer, & Greer, 2004), and informing parents about their young learners' behavioral and ethical problems (Kanika, 2016). On the other hand, some other themes proved to be religion-centered, such as emphasizing religious values in teaching, suggesting religious topics for free discussions in class, having minimum eye contact and keeping the conventional distance with the learners of the opposite gender, and being grateful to others' favors. One of the religion-oriented teacher behaviors is the use of religious topics for free discussions in the classroom. As the majority of language learners in Iran are of the same religion, it is their right to benefit from the localization of instruction principles. This finding has also been reported by Babaci-Wilhtte and Geo-JaJa (2014), who posited that instruction must be centripetally arranged and dependent on the standards of respect for human rights and social identity. Instruction must take the local factors into consideration and direct its scholarly endeavors and educational plan towards creating opportunities and freedoms.

The fifth part of the interview dealt with the ideological features. It was found that religious teachers are expected to replace or remove religion-inconsistent materials and paying attention to learners' observation of religious values. This materials adaptation of religious teachers resonates with the observation that teachers' religious beliefs influence their decisions, classroom practices, and teacher-learner interactions (Amiryousefi, 2015). This finding is also in accord with Wicking's (2012) that teaching and communications in the learning context are considerably influenced by the teacher's moral and religious perspectives. Religious teachers' replacement of materials that are against the religious values can be attributed to educational theories such as critical pedagogy (McArthur, 2010) and transformative teacher pedagogy (Cummings, 2000). This suggests that teachers should not use any materials and syllabus that are against the identity of a particular group of learners. This verifies teachers' autonomy and freedom. As Xu (2007) asserts, teachers should be free from control in the teaching process. This implies that teachers should be autonomous enough to have self-directed professional actions in adapting pre-fabricated materials.

The last section of the interview examined the social roles and group membership of religious teachers. It was revealed that religious teachers are expected to be members of

beneficial and useful groups and institutions such as Basij, Red Crescent, and charity organizations. Expectations about religious teachers' membership in such groups seem to be compatible with the Islamic doctrine commanding Muslims to participate in the events and companies which are of public utility. This issue is emphasized by the Quran, stating that "Content yourself with those who pray to their Lord morning and evening, seeking His approval, and do not let your eyes turn away from them out of the desire for the attractions of this worldly life, and do not yield to those whose hearts We have made heedless of Our remembrance, those who follow their own low desires, those whose ways are unbridled." (Quran, 18: 28). Thus, on the one hand, it sounds quite natural for religious teachers to attend places and companies that are allowed by Islamic rules. On the other, they are expected not to attend ceremonies and events such as music gangs, which are in contrast with the Islamic teachings.

Conclusion

The current study investigated the Iranian religious EFL teachers' perceptions of their identity. From the findings, it can be concluded that religious EFL teachers' professional identity in the Iranian context cannot be isolated from their religious identity. It means that they are highly bound to Islamic principles even in clothing. Attributed emphasized by religious teachers are consistent with previous works findings on effective teachers' qualities. However, some attributes appeared to be specific to Iranian religious teachers. For instance, despite the significance of teacher eye contact in engaging all learners in the learning process, as posited by Pennycook (1985), religious teachers have the minimum eye contact with the learners and colleagues of the opposite gender due to the Islamic order of "Haya" (shyness). Moreover, religious teachers' appeal to the Quranic verses and the Prophet saying can be considered to have resonance with the Islamic recommendations for teachers to be not only a source of knowledge but also a role model who molds the others' personality. Finally, religious EFL teachers' tendency to ignore or at least replace Islam-inconsistent materials indicates that they pursue religion-oriented teaching practice with a strong commitment to ideological ideas and, in turn, ideological imposition.

Based on our findings, Iranian religious EFL teachers are highly influenced by and adhered to the Islamic values even in their behavior with their learners. Thus, in-service teacher trainers should pave the way for novice religious in-service teachers to the construction of a kind of identity that enables them to preserve their own beliefs and ideas on the one hand and

respect institutional parameters and ideological discrepancies while being critical toward identities determined by the educational system on the other hand. Another implication, stemming from the fact that Iranian religious EFL teachers observe Islamic laws and regulations in their relationships with others, is that it is expected that supervisors, colleagues, and institute administrators become more cognizant of religious EFL teachers' attributes to promote better collaboration in the workplace to best promote the desired aims of the institutes. Religious teachers can also become aware of their own attributes and need to know that their colleagues, learners, and administrators might not always agree with their beliefs and practices. Therefore, they need to respect the discrepancies between their beliefs and practices and those of learners and colleagues.

The study had a few limitations. The first limitation was that as religion in Iran is not limited to Islam, other religions like Christianity and Zoroastrianism could be also included. Thus, it is suggested to include teachers from other religions in distinct studies to see their religious backgrounds' effects on their classroom performance as well as their interactions with colleagues. The second limitation was that the present study explored the religious teachers' perception of religious identity while other teachers' viewpoints can also be researched to see the differences. The third limitation of this investigation was that it was limited to EFL teachers. Other researchers can work on other agents of language instruction such as material developers, policymakers, supervisors, and institute administrators to see if their religious background has any effect on foreign language teaching. Finally, the current study was not aimed at exploring religious teachers' identity in practice. Thus, other researchers can explore their religious identity in practice through classroom observation to see the effects of religious beliefs and backgrounds on their performance.

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Appendix

Teacher Religious Identity Interview

Interview questions designed adopting Simon (2004) model which builds on and incorporates the distinction between collective identity and individual identity.

Age: sex: Place of living: Mother tongue:

Teaching experience: Degree: University:

Personality Features
1. What personality traits distinguish Iranian religious teachers from others?
2. What personality traits are not expected from religious teachers in Iran?

Special abilities
3. Do religious teachers benefit from special abilities?
4. If yes, what abilities do religious teachers have?

Physical Features
5. Do Iranian religious teachers have special physical features (clothing and appearance)?
6. What physical features (clothing and appearance) are not expected from Iranian religious teachers?
7. What are the physical features (clothing and appearance) of male religious teachers in Iran?
8. What are the physical features (clothing and appearance) of female religious teachers in Iran?
9. Should Iranian religious teachers have special clothing and appearance?

Behavioral Features
10. How do Iranian religious teachers behave with their colleagues in workplace?
11. How do Iranian religious teachers behave with their students in class?
12. How do Iranian religious teachers behave with their students out of class?
13. What behaviors are not expected from Iranian religious teachers?

Ideological Features
14. What ideologies does a religious teacher in Iran follow?
15. What are the effects of this ideology in his/her work and behavior?

Social Roles and Group Membership
16. What are the social roles of Iranian religious teachers?
17. What social roles are not expected from religious teachers?

18. Should an Iranian religious teacher be a member of a special group/community?

And as the last question:

19. Is there anything left to be added by you regarding the characteristics of an Iranian religious teacher?