

## Exploring Iranian Primary-Level EFL Teachers' Perceptions toward Social Identity

## Abstract

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Social identity plays a significant role in the professional life of teachers; however, the social identity of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers is an under-investigated research area in general and in the context of Iran in particular. This study aimed to explore Iranian primary-level EFL teachers' perceptions toward social identity. To this end, phenomenological design was adopted. Participants included 15 teachers (7 males and 8 females) from private language schools of Tehran and Tabriz who were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Based on the results of the thematic analysis, five main themes were identified: social communication skills, professional development experiences, using collaboration, group activities, and negotiation strategies to understand students' social identity, effect of social identity on teaching profession, and effect of social identity on teacher interactions. This study has some implications for primary-level EFL teacher educators and primary-level EFL teachers. Primary-level EFL teacher educators should use the findings to train pre-service teachers on the construction and reconstruction of their social identity. Besides, primary-level EFL teacher teachers should be attentive to the reconstruction of their social identity based on the insights taken from this study.

**Key Words:** Primary-level EFL Teaching, Professional Identity, Social Identity, Teacher Identity

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on the construction of teacher identity. Their efforts have aimed to illuminate both the visible and invisible dimensions of the teaching profession. The visible dimension involves observable activities such as student evaluation and material preparation, while the invisible dimension comprises individualized traits like motivation, perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions (Haslam et al., 2023). An examination of teachers' identities proves valuable when exploring both these aspects (Haslam et al., 2023).

In general, identity is recognized as a dynamic construct that evolves through individual experiences and social interactions (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Theoretical frameworks emphasize their multifaceted nature, characterized by (1) multiplicity and fluidity, often presenting conflicts (Brewer, 2012); (2) their grounding in social, cultural, and political contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979); and (3) their formation through discourse and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Identity comprises various categories, including Personal Identity (PI), Relational Identity (RI), Social Identity (SI), Collective Identity (CI), Ego Identity (EI), and Imposed Identity (II) (Kim et al., 2022).

PI is conceptualized as the stream of consciousness reflecting an individual's unique values, beliefs, and experiences (Kinsella et al., 2022). RI focuses on how individuals perceive themselves through the lens of their relationships (Burford et al., 2020). SI, which is the primary concern of the present study, is grounded in affiliations with various social groups, providing a sense of belonging and context within the sociocultural framework. Affiliations related to ethnicity, gender, and social roles contribute to an individual's self-concept and position within the societal structure (Kim et al., 2022). These group memberships not only affirm identity but also enhance well-being, as individuals derive meaning and support from their collective affiliations (Haslam et al., 2023). The interrelation between group identity and individual well-being indicates that social identities serve as critical resources during life transitions, offering a foundation for resilience (Mawson et al., 2016). CI embodies a shared sense of belonging that transcends individual identities, fostering unity among group members based on common values and goals (Kim et al., 2022). EI, distinct from the identities mentioned above, encapsulates how individuals perceive their worth and place in the world. EI is shaped by personal experiences, particularly successes and failures, which inform the self-concept (Burford et al., 2020). II refers to identities assigned by external societal expectations, often through stereotypes and cultural norms. This phenomenon can lead to internal conflicts as individuals grapple with identities that are not freely chosen but ascribed by societal forces (Kinsella et al., 2022). Moreover, teachers' PI plays a significant role in their pragmatic awareness in the EFL context (Samani et al., 2024).

In sum, identity, as investigated through these various lenses, reflects a complex interplay of personal experiences and social interactions. Each aspect interacts to form a cohesive understanding of self that dynamically evolves through time and context (Samani et al., 2024). Therefore, the concept of identity is not merely a reflection of a personal narrative but is deeply embedded within the relational and social frameworks that shape human experience and well-being.

Social identity is a kind of identity that has been shown to be important in the professional life of teachers. As far as social identity is concerned, it reflects the social view of the teacher and is formed through becoming a member of society (Wenger, 1999). There is a deep and significant link between social identity and practice (Wenger, 1999). We determine “who we are” by connecting with other group members and being involved in society. Social identity is different from self-identity since social identity refers to feelings towards a group membership, while self-identity refers to the individual themselves (Ko & Kim, 2021). However, the common trend is that social membership is taken as part of one's social identity. The fact is that social identity conceptualization is different across cultures because of differences in context and experiences (Ko & Kim, 2021). With a view to this, some scholars such as Betancourt and López (1993) and Brewer (2012) have recommended the incorporation of culture into mainstream psychology theories to expand its theoretical domain. Our practices and experiences within society are significantly the answer to “who we are?” and how we feel and think as a person. Instead of being a simple process, this is part of a trajectory and involves various membership shapes in the society (Ko & Kim, 2021).

Understanding the role social identity plays in shaping teachers' experiences is paramount due to the challenging conditions of teacher employment and retention. High proportions of teachers' work leaving have been reported among teachers within the first years of their job (Griffin et al., 2024). By uncovering how teachers develop their social identity, teacher educators can better support and train pre-service teachers by addressing the work-leaving challenge more systematically. For instance, as documented in recent research, developing teachers' social identity through encouraging them to participate in joint research projects with their students is an effective strategy to prevent them from leaving their job (Haslam et al., 2023). This view, coupled with the other challenges with which teachers encounter, calls for further research on teachers' social identity development.

Among different factors influencing teachers' identity construction, learners' characteristics, including their English proficiency level, can be mentioned. Closely related to this,

teaching English at the primary level to young learners demands knowledgeable teachers who can deal with children. According to Roberts (1998), primary teachers should have psychological knowledge, considering the specific learning styles of young learners who may need different cognitive adjustments in teaching methods. The primary stage is undoubtedly important because it functions as a foundation for more advanced grades. Therefore, authorities and school principals search for critically minded, creative, and responsible primary English language teachers (Roberts, 1998). In the same vein, Mortazavi Nezhad et al. (2024) found that among Iranian EFL instructors, positive emotionality, such as responsiveness, pleasure, emotional support, and flexibility, significantly predicts informative identity, while it negatively predicted diffuse-avoidant identity. Negative emotionality, such as anxiety and exhaustion, significantly and negatively predicts a person's informational and normative identities. Additionally, instructors who report feeling positively about themselves tend to have a weak diffuse-avoidant identity characteristic, according to the research. Ultimately, the close link between EFL instructors' emotionality and identity is evident. To help shape their personality in a positive and genuine way, EFL teachers should strive to feel more joyful emotions than negative ones (Mortazavi Nezhad et al., 2024).

Even though a great deal of research has been carried out in the field of EFL teachers' identity (He & Lin, 2013; Hera et al., 2020; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Lebrouj & Solhi, 2024), little attention has been given to primary-level EFL teachers' social identity. More specifically, although Avraamidou (2014a) showed that social identity is extensively relevant to education, it has been under-investigated in the field of education (Lee et al., 2013). While relevant to education, by combining group identity and self-categorization theory (Haslam et al., 2011), social identity accounts for the role of social context in determining an individual's sense of self and identity. In this way, investigating the social identity of teachers can lessen the problems of teachers as a key part of the education process. Thus, the researchers of the current study were motivated to explore Iranian primary-level EFL teachers' social identity, and thus, formulated the following research question:

**RQ.** How do primary-level Iranian EFL teachers perceive their social identity?

## **2. Review of the Related Literature**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as the theoretical framework of this study, suggests that individuals shape their identities based on social groups to safeguard self-identity. This process involves aligning with an “in-group” concerning an “out-group” and showing a predisposition towards viewing one’s own group positively compared to others. The outcome is an association with a collective, depersonalized identity rooted in group membership and characterized by positive attributes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social Identity Theory was introduced as a social-psychological theory to explain group processes and behaviors. The theory arose from the critique of previous approaches to understanding and interpreting social behaviors, such as psychology, sociology, biology, and social psychology (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory was developed to counter the individualistic approach of social psychology to inter-group interactions and group processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A fundamental premise of Social Identity Theory is that groups are the primary vehicle for social reform and conflicts, not individuals. Tajfel's view recognizes the existence of human self-interest. He argued that focusing entirely on individual identity would not displace the knowledge base from what is already known. Furthermore, it would remove the impact of social identity on behavior within a given social context. The theory describes the limited dimensions of selves relevant to certain limited forms of social activity at a given point in time (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that social and personal identity are hypothetical cognitive structures that form most of the concept of self. Each structure is constructed of more narrow cognitive elements such as particular social categorizations of gender, race, political affiliation, religion, and personal features, for example, bodily attributes and personal preferences. In other words, a person’s self-concept is extracted from two primary sources: personal and social identity. Personal identity contains a person’s individual attributes, accomplishments, and qualities. Social identity involves collective affiliations that are accepted as part of a person’s identity. Therefore, individuals’ total characteristics that define a social group are used to identify themselves and produce their social identity.

### **2.2. Teacher Social Identity**

Social identity refers to the manner in which we define ourselves based on shared terms and categories with others. Unlike personal identity, which can be unique to individuals, social

identity includes commonalities among groups of people (Deaux, 2001). This process of social identity formation promotes the development of shared values and a sense of belonging among individuals within these groups (Deaux, 2001).

It is argued that other people's role in forming social identity is vital. An individual's social identity evolves and develops through engagement in social life and membership in particular groups (Griffin et al., 2024). When an individual is identified because of membership in a group and creates a sense of membership within themselves, it leads to the conceptualization of social identity (Griffin et al., 2024; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, we might depend on several groups simultaneously; therefore, this relationship is dynamic instead of being static and unchangeable. We may also encounter different levels of dependability and correlation of the groups we belong to. Therefore, our roles and characters may adjust to various interactions and settings (Deaux, 2001). Our dependence on broader structures and social cultures could be part of this. As a result of these processes, it can be said that social identity is constructed, shaped, and converted (Deaux, 2001; Haslam et al., 2023).

In summary, the notion of social identity necessarily entails the meanings related to the person and also their experience as a member of the society. Talking about identity includes personal, cognitive, psychological, and emotional notions. On the other side, social identity involves sociological aspects like gender, race, age, and nationality, and it also involves social, cultural, and historical factors. Although these two views have been raised separately by sociologists and psychologists, precisely identifying where the personal aspect of identity ends and the social aspect of identity begins is a challenging task. Therefore, the analysis concentration should be on the process of their reciprocal creation (Hera et al., 2020; Wenger, 1999). Small discoveries that have been achieved about the notion of identity so far may not contain the minimum features for providing the exact definition of this notion. In explaining this subject, the notion of identity has been interpreted based on individual and social aspects. However, both processes attempt to answer "Who am I?" or "Who are you?". This answer can be expressed extensively in two complicated realms: one sees the person as an individual, and the other sees them as a social community member (Hera et al., 2020).

Reviewing the literature, it was found that few studies have been conducted on the significance of social identity in shaping teachers' professional roles and authority in the classroom. In a study, Chesler and Young (2007) explored the relationship between social identity and classroom authority of faculty members. According to the results of document analysis, social identity contributes to higher classroom authority among faculty members. Wells (2015)

addressed social identity in teacher education. He examined some teacher education courses and concluded that student teachers need to be informed about their social identity. It is through recognition of social identity that their selves are constructed.

Stenberg et al. (2014) studied teachers' identity through the lens of didactical position. They believed that teachers should orchestrate and encourage student learning. Regarding 'orchestrating position', teachers should learn how to organize their teaching activities to support students' learning. The teacher is a facilitator and should be aware of different ways that he can use to create an environment that leads to productive interaction among learners. In a study conducted by Nguyen (2016) in Vietnam, the ways English teachers attempted to enhance their practice and shape their identity in a local setting were scrutinized. According to the results of the data analysis, at first, these participants believed that self-education as well as learning from their colleagues in primary schools was inadequate for professional growth. Consequently, they sought other ways to enhance their professional identity by forsaking pedagogical and epistemological restrictions to find new practices and identities.

Jetten et al. (2017) explored the effect of social identity on health and well-being of educators and learners. According to the results, health and well-being are jointly influenced by social identity significantly. Zahid and Ghani's (2018) study on social identity and language anxiety of learners showed that these relationships are deeply embedded within specific social contexts and are influenced by interacting personal factors such as age, gender, and proficiency level. Henry (2019) explored the social identity development of an English teacher in a case study. To this end, he employed semi-structured interviews. According to the results, three I-positions were recognized for the teacher: The student-apprentice I-position, the emerging practitioner, and the challenged practitioner.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Design**

The present study adopted a phenomenological design to investigate the lived experiences through which Iranian primary-level EFL teachers perceive and construct their social identity.

#### **3.2. Participants**

The target population of the study included primary-level male and female English

teachers teaching at private language schools in Tehran and Tabriz because Tabriz was the hometown and Tehran was the living place of the first researcher. 15 teachers (7 males and 8 females) from the private language schools in Tehran and Tabriz voluntarily took part in the study by participating in semi-structured interviews. They were selected through purposive sampling because the main criterion for their inclusion in the study was teaching at English at the primary-level. Sample size was justified based on data saturation point. The age range of the participants was 25-50. Research ethics were observed in the sampling procedure by informing the participants of the aims of the present study. Moreover, they were assured about the anonymity and confidentiality of their personal information.

### **3.3. Instruments**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore primary-level Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of social identity. It consisted of five open-ended questions, which the researchers developed through consulting the existing literature on exploration of teachers' perceptions in general (rather than the literature on social identity of primary-level teachers) and the experts in the field. The questions addressed teachers' definition of their social identity, professional development experiences which have led to enhancement of teacher social identity, strategies used by teachers to understand their students' social identity, the effect of teachers' social identity on their profession, and the role of teachers' social identity in their interactions with their students and colleagues (See Appendix). The interviews were conducted face-to-face. Each participant was interviewed individually. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of further data analysis. The interviews were conducted in Persian. To check the dependability of interview data, member checking was used. That is, the researchers showed some parts of the analyzed interviews to the interviewees to see whether their perceptions were the same as the extracted themes. The credibility of interview data was confirmed by using low-inference descriptors. That is, some direct quotations from the interviewees were provided in presenting the results of thematic analysis.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

The collected audio-recorded data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim to be further analyzed. Data analysis was conducted through the qualitative manual thematic analysis through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding entailed highlighting specific phrases and sentences and assigning corresponding codes to encapsulate the content of the emphasized portions. Axial coding included relating codes together to reveal categories. Selective coding involved categorizing all the themes under a main category, namely, primary-



level Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of social identity.

#### 4. Results

To answer the research question 'How do primary-level Iranian EFL teachers perceive their social identity?', through thematic analysis of the data, the following themes and sub-themes were identified about primary-level Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of social identity:

##### Theme 1: Social Communication Skills

According to this theme, social identity is the acquisition of social communication skills. This theme was supported by two main codes of 'the skill of collaboration, teamwork and cooperation', and 'group leadership skills'. The following excerpts illustrate this theme:

Participant 8:

*Social identity means social life skills. Social life skills are one of the teacher's skills. The social identity of the teacher means the art of teaching social skills to students and preparing them for large gatherings. Social identity means the skill of collaboration. Collaboration can lead to beneficial results in education. The teacher should have the skill of using collaboration in a good way.*

Participant 5:

*Social identity means social communication skills. The class is a collective community that requires collective communication to advance it. Therefore, the English teacher should have mass communication skills. Social identity means teamwork skills. One of the most important teaching skills is teamwork. Teaching is a group category, and without the use of group skills, it is not possible to achieve its specific goals.*

Participant 3:

*Social identity means cooperation skills. If the language teacher can create cooperation between the students as well as between himself and the students, he is much more successful in teaching. Part of the learning takes place inside the classroom, and another part outside the classroom. What this means is that extracurricular relationships should not be ignored. The teacher should create and maintain extracurricular relationships.*

Participant 12:

*Social identity means group leadership skills. Group activities related to the group, including group and social activities, are essential parts of the teaching job. This means*

*that the language teacher should be able to manage the group and group activities well.*

As reflected in the above quotes, the participants noted *that it is social communication skills that could shape their social identity*. They perceived that the main skills of collaboration, cooperation with others, and mastery of group work build their social identity. They also perceived group leadership skills play a key role in the formation of their social identity. This finding is compatible with Social Identity Theory's proposition that individuals shape their identities based on social groups and activities to safeguard self-identity.

## **Theme 2: Professional Development Experiences**

According to this theme, some professional development experiences lead to the enhancement of the social identity of teachers. This theme was supported by two main codes of 'cooperation skills' and 'problem-solving skills'.

Participant 1:

*Cooperation skills, coordination skills, and community life skills are essential. Cooperation skills involve working effectively with colleagues and students. Coordination skills refer to the ability to organize and align different activities, as well as manage interpersonal coordination. Community life skills include all skills related to social interaction and participation in social life.*

Participant 7:

*Participation and cooperation skills, along with resilience skills developed in difficult situations with the support of the group, encourage active classroom participation. These skills increase students' endurance and tolerance and ultimately contribute to strengthening their social identity. Cooperation skills include mutual aid and friendship, relationship-building abilities, recognizing boundaries in relationships, and managing interpersonal relationships. Through cooperation, altruism, and relationship building, the social personalities of both teachers and students are strengthened.*

Participant 4:

*Group problem-solving and group activity skills help foster stronger social relationships in the classroom. These relationships contribute to strengthening the social identity of both teachers and students, which in turn supports more effective problem management. When the teacher manages knowledge, classroom issues, and the class as a whole effectively, the social factors that shape social identity are also well managed.*

Participant 11:

*The skill of group problem-solving and seeking solutions from others empowers both students and teachers. Finding solutions collaboratively helps students become socially confident and enables teachers to work more effectively. It also helps all participants recognize and understand the potential of the group.*

According to the above quotes, participants believed that some professional development experiences, including cooperation skills and problem-solving skills help them enhance their own social identity. This finding is congruent with the emphasis on collective priorities and cooperative attitudes in Social Identity Theory.

### **Theme 3: Using Collaboration, Group Activities, and Negotiation Strategies to Understand Students' Social Identity**

This theme aims to help teachers understand their students' social identity. This theme was supported by three main codes of 'collaboration strategy', 'group activities', and 'negotiation strategy'.

Participant 3:

*Collaboration strategies and relationship management are essential for strengthening social identity. By involving students and guiding their interpersonal relationships, I can explore and support the development of their social identity. Collaboration with students plays a key role in this process: first, it helps them rebuild, change, and improve their social identity; second, it allows their social identity to be expressed and recognized.*

Participant 2:

*Group activity and group formation strategies help reveal students' social intelligence and their ability to participate. Grouping and group work in the classroom effectively highlight students' social identities. Through these activities, the teacher can gain deeper insight into students' social identities. By placing students in different group situations and observing their behavior, the teacher can more accurately assess and understand each student's social identity.*

Participant 15:

*Negotiation strategies emphasize interaction and dialogue as effective ways to identify students' social identities. Conversation is a powerful tool for achieving multiple goals, including understanding social identity. Through meaningful dialogue and interaction,*

*teachers can explore, recognize, and better understand the social identities of their students.*

Participant 7:

*Here is a fluent and polished version:*

*Through discussion, participation, and negotiation, the teacher creates opportunities for students to reveal their social identities. Students express their social identities by responding to the issues raised during discussions and negotiations.*

Participants pointed out that to reveal their students' social identity, they resort to different strategies, including collaboration strategies, group activities, and negotiation strategies, which means that teachers involve students in interpersonal relationships and collaborate with them, arrange group activities within the classroom, and through discussion, participation, and negotiation, put students in a position to reveal their social identity. As mentioned above, in Social Identity Theory, intergroup communication and depersonalized group membership are highly emphasized.

#### **Theme 4: Effect of Social Identity on Teaching Profession**

According to this theme, teachers' social identity influences their teaching as a profession. This theme was supported by three principal codes of 'teacher motivation', 'using new teaching methods', and 'professional development'.

Participant 1:

*Social identity strengthens cooperation and enhances motivation. It makes both the teacher and the classroom more effective and productive. A strong social identity also increases the teacher's motivation and energy, contributing to professional development and career growth.*

Participant 10:

*Social identity encourages the teacher to learn new teaching methods and facilitates the resolution of classroom challenges. It also enhances the effectiveness of the teaching and assessment methods used by the teacher, while fostering greater motivation for teaching.*

Participant 15:

*Social identity enhances the teacher's professional knowledge and creates satisfaction for both teachers and students. It supports the teacher's professional growth and acts as a catalyst for development. Additionally, social identity fosters closer relationships between teachers and students, promoting friendship and mutual understanding.*

Participants believed that social identity makes them more motivated and involved. They also noted that it encourages them to learn and try new teaching methods. Finally, social identity leads to professional development among them by increasing their professional knowledge. This confirms a closed tie between social and professional identity, as supported in Identity Theory.

### **Theme 5: Effect of Social Identity on Teacher Interactions**

According to this theme, there is a causal relationship between teachers' social identity and their relations with students and colleagues. This theme was supported by three main codes of 'positive relationships', 'life construction', and 'controlling children's emotions'.

Participant 13:

*Social identity enables the teacher to build positive relationships with others by leveraging their potential. The teacher's social interactions with students and colleagues are generally more productive than working alone, as these relationships allow the teacher to utilize the diverse talents and abilities of different individuals.*

Participant 7:

*A teacher with a strong social identity tends to have better relationships with others. Higher social identity leads to stronger social connections, and teachers can enhance their relationships by cultivating their social identity. Building both small and large relationships in the classroom is a key responsibility of a language teacher, and this skill should be prioritized in their work. Without it, the teacher's social relationships may weaken.*

Participant 6:

*Social identity provides an opportunity to build and shape life. Through social identity, individuals can develop meaningful interpersonal relationships. Without it, students and colleagues may naturally distance themselves from the teacher. Living a full and successful life requires social identity. If a teacher has not learned the principles of social identity, how can they effectively teach others or maintain positive relationships?*

Participant 12:

*Children's emotions can sometimes hinder their learning or, conversely, enhance it. Teachers can use social identity to help manage and guide students' emotions and behavior. Conflicts of interest between students and teachers are inevitable at times, and this is where the teacher's role in peacemaking and reconciliation becomes important. Social identity provides a foundation for establishing and maintaining peace in the classroom.*

Participants perceived that social identity helps the teacher create positive relationships with students and colleagues. They also considered social identity as a tool which could serve to control learners' emotions and behavior and help them reconstruct their behaviors and thoughts. This finding is in line with Social Identity Theory's motto that one's "self" is constructed and reconstructed through social relations with others. In Social Identity Theory, 'other' acts as a mirror for the self. Hence, individuals cannot identify themselves without being connected and related to others.

## 5. Discussion

Based on the results of the thematic analysis, five main themes were identified as Iranian primary-level EFL teachers' perceptions toward social identity: social communication skills, professional development experiences, using collaboration, group activities, and negotiation strategies to understand students' social identity, effect of social identity on teaching profession, and effect of social identity on teacher interactions. More specifically, according to the perceptions of Iranian primary-level EFL teachers, social identity means social communication skills, collaboration, teamwork, cooperation, and group leadership skills. Additionally, Iranian primary-level EFL teachers perceived that cooperation and problem-solving skills can enhance social identity. Besides, they used a collaboration strategy, group activities, and a negotiation strategy to understand their students' social identity. Regarding the effect of social identity on the teaching profession, their perception was that social identity increases teacher motivation, helps teachers use new teaching methods, and leads to professional development. Concerning the effect of social identity on teacher interactions, according to them, social identity helps primary-level EFL to create positive relationships, is helpful for life construction, and helps teachers in controlling children's emotions.

The findings of the present study are consistent with previous research highlighting the

close relationship between social identity and key educational variables. For instance, Karimi and Mofidi (2019) reported a reciprocal relationship between social identity and professional development, suggesting that each reinforces the other. Similarly, Jetten et al. (2017) demonstrated a strong link between social identity and motivation, emphasizing the motivational function of social belonging. In line with these results, Ko and Kim (2021) found that group activities both influence and are influenced by social identity, underscoring the dynamic role of social interaction in shaping identity within educational contexts.

The alignment between social identity and social communication skills appears justified, as social identity is largely constructed through primary-level EFL teachers' social interactions. Social ties and interpersonal relationships serve as the foundation upon which social identity is formed. As primary-level EFL teachers engage in ongoing communication with others, their social identity gradually develops and is reshaped (Griffin et al., 2024; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Furthermore, the conceptualization of social identity in terms of collaboration, teamwork, and cooperation can be explained by the influence of collective work on teachers' social dimensions. Collaborative practices not only affect teachers' social images but also contribute to the reconstruction and strengthening of their social identity, supporting earlier findings that highlight the reciprocal relationship between collaboration and identity formation (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Similarly, group leadership skills enable primary-level EFL teachers to engage more actively in group and social activities, which in turn reshape their social relationships and networks and contribute to the ongoing construction and reconstruction of their social identity. In addition, cooperation and problem-solving skills provide teachers with alternative modes of social interaction, encouraging new forms of social living. These experiences prompt teachers to reflect on and revise their social attitudes and ideologies, ultimately strengthening their social identity (Jetten et al., 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Moreover, understanding students' social identities requires the use of diverse social strategies (Burford et al., 2020). Accordingly, primary-level EFL teachers in the present study benefited from cooperation strategies, group activities, and negotiation practices to better explore and interpret their students' social identities. Finally, regarding the impact of social identity on teacher motivation, prior research suggests that a strong social identity increases teachers' social engagement and interaction (Hera et al., 2020). Greater participation in social activities fosters a more socially oriented professional stance, which enhances motivation. Increased motivation, in turn, encourages teachers to experiment with new instructional approaches, thereby contributing to ongoing professional development. As such,

engagement with novelty and innovation appears to be a key mechanism linking social identity to professional growth.

Overall, the findings suggest that social identity among primary-level EFL teachers is a multidimensional construct composed of several interrelated layers. Consistent with Social Identity Theory, various forms of social behavior contribute to the formation and development of social identity (Griffin et al., 2024). Specifically, social communication skills, collaboration, teamwork, cooperation, and group leadership emerge as key social behaviors that shape teachers' social identity. Importantly, social identity should not be viewed as a fixed or inherent trait; rather, it is dynamic and continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interaction. Accordingly, the use of strategies such as cooperation and problem-solving enables primary-level EFL teachers to revise and redefine their social attitudes and ideologies, thereby enhancing their social identity.

Given that social identity is fundamentally a social construct, its understanding necessarily involves social action (Kim et al., 2022). This perspective explains teachers' reliance on cooperation strategies, group activities, and negotiation practices to explore and interpret their students' social identities. Social Identity Theory further provides a framework for understanding patterns of intergroup interaction and conformity, emphasizing groups—rather than individuals—as central agents of social change and conflict. In line with this view, a strong social identity fosters greater social involvement and interaction among teachers, characterized by increased participation in social activities and events. Such engagement contributes to higher levels of motivation, which may mediate the relationship between social identity and the adoption of innovative teaching methods. In this sense, social identity empowers teachers to experiment with new pedagogical approaches, thereby supporting their professional development, which is partly shaped by the instructional strategies they employ.

Finally, social identity encourages primary-level EFL teachers to engage more willingly in communication with others (Griffin et al., 2024). This increased communicative orientation facilitates stronger relationships with both students and colleagues and promotes a more positive professional self-image. When teachers' social needs and relational aspects of life are adequately fulfilled, they are better positioned to manage classroom dynamics, including the regulation of students' emotions. Collectively, these findings underscore the central role of social identity in shaping teachers' professional practices, interpersonal relationships, and classroom effectiveness.



## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that social communication skills, collaboration, teamwork, cooperation, and group leadership skills play a significant role in facilitating the development of social identity among primary-level EFL teachers. To establish and strengthen their social identity, teachers need to pay particular attention to cooperation and problem-solving skills, which appear to be central to effective primary-level EFL teaching and pedagogical innovation. Moreover, the results suggest that without the use of cooperation and negotiation strategies, it becomes challenging for primary-level teachers to fully understand their students' social identities.

In addition, the findings highlight the positive impact of social identity on teachers' motivation, as it encourages them to experiment with new teaching methods and contributes to their ongoing professional development. Finally, a well-developed social identity enables primary-level EFL teachers to build stronger interpersonal relationships, improve their overall quality of life, and more effectively manage students' emotions in the classroom. Collectively, these results underscore the importance of social identity as a key factor in enhancing both professional practice and classroom interaction in primary-level EFL contexts.

By fostering an educational environment that values social identity, primary-level educators can enhance their teaching practices while also creating a more inclusive classroom atmosphere. Such an environment allows students to feel recognized and respected, which may lead to improved academic outcomes as well as personal growth. When schools prioritize social identity within their curricula, they promote a sense of belonging among students. This supportive context encourages collaboration and empathy—skills that are essential for success in both academic and social domains. Through the cultivation of these competencies, educators equip students to navigate diverse environments with confidence and understanding. Ultimately, this holistic approach to education benefits not only individual learners but also contributes to the strength and cohesion of the wider school community.

The findings of this study also carry important implications for primary-level EFL teacher educators and practicing teachers. Teacher educators can use these results to prepare pre-service teachers to construct and reconstruct their social identity as part of their professional development. That is, they can use perceptions identified in this study to give useful insights to student teachers to be used for (re)construction of their social identity. Similarly, in-service primary-level EFL teachers are encouraged to reflect on and actively develop their social identity by drawing on the insights provided by this study. For instance, they can use the strategies

pinpointed by the participants of this study to develop their social identity.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The sample consisted of only 15 primary-level EFL teachers, selected based on availability and feasibility. Future studies may address this limitation by employing larger and more diverse samples. In addition, data were collected solely through semi-structured interviews; therefore, future research could incorporate other qualitative data collection methods, such as narratives, reflective diaries, and classroom observations, to further validate and extend the findings. Finally, as the present study focused exclusively on primary-level EFL teachers, future research may examine teachers' social identity at other educational levels to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this construct.

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## Appendix

### Semi-Structure Interview Prompts

1. How do you define social identity?
2. What professional development experiences have helped you strengthen social identity in the classroom?
3. As an English teacher, what strategies do you use to understand your students' social identities?
4. To what extent does your social identity influence your profession as a teacher?
5. What role does your social identity play in your relationships and interactions with students and colleagues?