Locked Between Policy and Practice: The Identity Journey of Novice Iranian Public School EFL Female Teachers via an Ecological View

Mohammad Amin Mozaheb [1]* iD , Narges Sardabi [2] iD , Mercede Omidnezhad [2]
[1] Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran
[2] Ershad Institute of Higher Education, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

This study explores the key factors shaping how novice EFL female teachers develop their professional identities within Iranian public schools. Through thematic analysis of interviews and focus group discussions with eight teachers, some key themes emerged guided by sociocultural theories of teacher identity and an ecological view of teacher agency. Findings revealed how novice teachers' professional identity interacts with ecological dimensions of teacher agency. They create tensions between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and institutional realities and shape their evolving professional identities. The role of gender and the segregated schooling system in Iran was also found to be facilitative. The study highlights the need for systemic reforms, including improved mentoring programs, reduced class sizes, and greater curricular flexibility to support novice teachers' identity development. By addressing these challenges, teachers can show more resilience and become professionally fulfilled EFL teachers in Iranian public schools. To achieve this goal, policymakers and educational authorities need to provide institutional support and acknowledge ecologically-based teacher agency dimensions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of teacher identity has received increasing attention in the field of second/foreign language teaching (Alsup, 2019; Fairley, 2020; Gao & Cui, 2023; Ghiasvand & Seyri, 2025; Nguyen & Ngo, 2023; Pillen et al., 2013; Stewart & Jansky, 2022; Uştuk & Yazan, 2023; Zhang & Darvin, 2025). Language teacher is understood as a dynamic and multifaceted construct which is shaped through teachers' contextual demands and professional interactions (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Uştuk, 2022; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). Teacher identity is not a static or pre-determined concept as it is constructed and reconstructed over time, particularly in the early stages of teachers' careers. During this transition, novice teachers often face emotional and cognitive challenges as they attempt to navigate the expectations of their institutional settings while making sense of their emerging professional selves (Fairley, 2020; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Xu & Tao, 2023). These

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* **Corresponding Author:** Mohammad Amin Mozaheb, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Language Center, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran, **Email**: dr.mozaheb@isu.ac.ir

formative years can significantly impact their long-term engagement with the profession and the development of their pedagogical values.

Research into language teacher identity (LTI) has emphasized that language teaching is both personal and context sensitive (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teachers bring their own histories as language learners as well as their beliefs and values into their classrooms (Norton, 2013; Varghese et al., 2005). For novice teachers, this interaction results in uncertainty and negotiation, especially when their personal beliefs about teaching conflict with institutional expectations (Yazan & Peercy, 2018). These tensions can influence teachers' confidence, emotional well-being, and overall job satisfaction (Eslamdoost et al., 2020).

While there has been growing interest in how language teachers construct their identities, a large body of literature has focused on experienced teachers (Pennington & Richards, 2016). In other words, fewer studies have explored how novice teachers construct their identities in public school systems (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). This gap is particularly observed in the Iranian context, because EFL teachers in public schools are confronted with overcrowded classrooms, outdated resources, and prescriptive methodologies (Mirzaee & Aliakbari, 2018). Further, the few studies that have examined professional development conflicts in the Iranian context were also conducted with a very small number of students (Eslamdoost et al., 2020). Thus, a more recent qualitative study with a larger number of participants is warranted. Moreover, focusing on female teachers can shed more light on the professional identity of those female educators teaching in a segregated single-sex schooling system in Iran. Where in previous studies, little attention was made to gender, it should be noted that gender is an important dimension of professional identity that could function differently for women teaching in Iran's gender segregated schools. The present study responds to these gaps by exploring the identity construction of novice EFL teachers in Iranian public schools. By focusing on their personal accounts, the study aims to understand how early-career teachers undergo the complexities of their new professional roles. This study can provide empirical evidence on how policy and practice could entangle novice teachers who may not be able to resist dominant discourses dictated by policymakers through the curriculum and official educational directives. In doing so, the study shifts the focus from externally imposed challenges to the construction of agency and identity from a bottom-up perspective to empower novice teachers in public schools in Iran. This study contributes to the wealth of knowledge in teacher identity research by exploring factors influencing the professional development of Iranian EFL teachers in public schools while considering these factors at the intersection of institutional norms and high-level educational policies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language teacher identity has been conceptualized as a fluid, dynamic, and contextually situated construct that emerges through interaction with various personal, social, and institutional factors (Henderson, 2022; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Li, 2022; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Pham & Phan, 2023; Teng, 2017; Yazan, 2025). Varghese et al. (2005) argue that identity is not merely an individual trait but is constructed and negotiated through practice and discourse within particular sociocultural settings. Norton (2013) highlights the significance of teachers' histories as language learners and the social positioning they experience in shaping their evolving identities. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) similarly emphasize the developmental nature of teacher identity, proposing that it involves ongoing reflection, tension, and (re)construction. Yazan and Lindahl (2020) define LTI as a multi-layered construct shaped by teachers' professional trajectories, personal beliefs, and interactions with their communities. This conceptualization converges on a critical insight that identity construction show that identity construction is an ongoing process influenced by both

internal dispositions and external demands. This, however, reveals a theoretical tension through which the interaction of teacher agency and teacher professional identity with policies remains undertheorized.

Research on language teacher identity has predominantly focused on experience, focusing on either seasoned or beginner educators. A number of studies have examined the identity development of language teachers (Fairley, 2020; Gao & Cui, 2023; Ghiasvand & Seyri, 2025; Golombek & Klager, 2015; Lan, 2024; Lindahl & Yazan, 2019; Song, 2016; Yazan, 2023). Studies focusing on experience as a potential factor in developing professional identity revealed that long-term engagement in the teaching profession can lead to progressive identity refinement. For instance, Pennington and Richards (2016) investigated how long-term engagement in teaching contributes to the refinement of professional identity. Their findings suggest that identity becomes more stable as teachers gain experience and confidence in their pedagogical decision-making. Drawing on a longitudinal case study, Barkhuizen (2016), adopting a narrative inquiry approach, highlighted how experienced teachers continuously reconstruct their identities in light of evolving institutional roles and policy changes. These studies show how teachers who have achieved a certain degree of professional stability deal with different stages of their professional role. However, this body of knowledge fails to depict how such adaptive identity components initially develop during the early-career phase.

With regard to novice teachers, several studies have explored the identity construction of these teachers (Fairley, 2020; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Nazari et al., 2023; Song, 2025; Uştuk & Yazan, 2023). Across various contexts, novice language teachers encounter common challenges that influence their identity development. These include feelings of isolation, limited autonomy, misalignment with institutional norms, and difficulty enacting desired teaching practices (Pillen et al., 2013). Trent (2016) found that novice teachers often struggle to reconcile their training with the demands of test-oriented school cultures. Due to their lack of or limited experience, novices often find themselves in transitional and uncertain professional stages. Kayi-Aydar (2019) examined how early-career teachers negotiated their identities amid institutional constraints and found that tensions often arose from conflicts between personal beliefs and professional expectations. Fairley (2020) focused on emotional struggles and identity formation among beginning teachers in the UK, emphasizing that novice teachers often experience significant dissonance between their imagined teaching selves and the realities of classroom life. Similarly, Uştuk and Yazan (2023) investigated the identity construction of Turkish EFL teachers during their first years of teaching. They found that institutional support significantly shaped how these teachers positioned themselves professionally. Yet the literature presents some contradictory findings regarding the nature and severity of these challenges that could be related to the educational contexts in various countries. Recent scholarship has increasingly employed narrative methods to examine how novice teachers construct and make sense of their professional identities. Gao and Cui (2023) used narrative inquiry to explore how Chinese EFL teachers negotiated their identities during their induction period, noting the role of personal reflection and external mentoring in shaping teacher agency. Stewart and Jansky (2022) highlighted how identity development is interwoven with emotional labor regarding novice teachers in the U.S. In a different setting, Song and Tian (2024) showed that novice teachers in China constructed their professional identities through emotional reflection on everyday classroom experiences. Similarly, Gong and Gao (2024) emphasized the role of social positioning, language ideologies, and institutional expectations in the identity construction of early-career language teachers.

The Iranian EFL context presents peculiar challenges for novice teacher identity construction. In Iran, Eslamdoost et al. (2020) documented how novice teachers experienced

identity conflicts when their pedagogical ideals clashed with institutional practices, leading to diminished confidence and professional dissatisfaction. Such tensions result in emotional exhaustion and reinforce the need to understand the lived experiences of novice teachers. Several Iranian studies have also explored the contextual and personal factors that shape novice teacher identity. Moradkhani and Ebadijalal (2024) identified workplace conditions, collegial support, and access to professional development as key elements influencing identity trajectories in Iranian EFL contexts. These findings affirm that identity formation is shaped not only by individual goals but also by the broader sociocultural and institutional contexts in which teachers are embedded. Despite existing literature on language teacher identity, fewer studies have focused on how novice EFL teachers develop their professional identities within the contexts of public school systems, particularly in Iran. Therefore, there is a need to understand how these factors influence early-career teachers' identities in such educational environments. This study addresses the identified gaps by investigating the factors influencing novice EFL teachers' professional identity construction, specifically within Iranian public schools, with a focus on female teachers, as gender is an important dimension of identity that can be functionalized differently through professional identity for female teachers teaching in segregated schools in Iran. This could shed more light on identity construction in a specific teaching context in Iran, where factors influencing professional identity could be different in comparison with other educational settings in Iran such as private language academies as well as other language classes in different countries. Additionally, the factors involved in constructing and negotiating professional identity with reference to practice and institutional norms were far from being thoroughly explored.

Given that teacher identity is relational and negotiated (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), sociocultural teacher identity theories could be integrated by ecological agency. Through the integration of ecological agency and socio-cultural teacher identity, one can examine how novice EFL teachers simultaneously construct professional identities and enact agency within the highly centralized Iranian education system. In contexts marked by institutional rigidity and policy constraints, the Agency-Identity nexus becomes complex and needs to be studied. While Priestley et al. (2015) ecological model notes agency could be attained through acts and decisions, teachers in such intense contexts may develop forms of "covert agency" or "strategic compliance." In other words, identity negotiation based on socio-cultural identity could be affected by institutional constraints. An ecological approach to teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) brings a fresh perspective on the power of teacher agency in terms of culture and schooling structures. According to an Ecological Approach to Teacher Agency, competence and conditions are interrelated. Teacher agency is constituted through three interrelated temporal dimensions: the international, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions. This study synthesizes sociocultural identity theory with Priestley et al. (2015) ecological model of teacher agency to examine how novice EFL teachers in Iran's centralized education system construct professional identities and negotiate agency within severe institutional constraints.

For the purposes of this study, the present study seeks to explore the following research question:

How do novice EFL teachers in Iranian public schools negotiate tensions between their pedagogical beliefs and institutional constraints in constructing their professional identities and agency?

3. METHOD

Context and Participants

This study was carried out in the context of English language education in Iranian public schools, where English is taught as a compulsory subject starting in middle school. The Ministry of Education sets policy for the curriculum and textbooks used across the country. Although pre-service teacher education programs offer training in English language, pedagogy, and practical teaching, research has shown that these programs do not fully prepare novice teachers for the realities of public school classrooms. The study involved eight novice EFL teachers from two public schools in Tehran. They were selected through purposive sampling, meaning they were chosen because they could provide detailed insights into the research topic. The participants gave their written informed consent after being informed of the study's objectives. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details from all transcripts and reports. Recognizing the power dynamics between researchers and novice teachers, the authors built rapport before any formal data collection. They were told that their participation would not impact their teaching career as well. In terms of researcher positionality, two of the authors who analyzed the interviews had experience in English language teaching in Iranian universities. One of the authors, holding an MA and teaching at Iranian public and private schools, conducted most interview sessions, receiving feedback from the other two authors. They emphasized their roles not as evaluators, but as fellow teachers interested in the participants' narratives. To manage emotional impact, data collection was carried out in a flexible interviewing style with participants leading the conversation with no pressure, and no signs of discomfort were monitored. In the case of the latter, the interviewers offered a pause or moved to different topics.

All participants were females, between the ages of 23 and 29, and had one to three years of teaching experience. The reason for excluding the male gender was to increase the internal validity and to gain depth and richness in the data, with a more homogeneous sample. Moreover, owing to the single-sex education system in Iran, where boys and girls attend separate schools, interviewing only female teachers can shed more light on the reality of female school teachers' professional identity. Nevertheless, the homogeneity that granted this study's analytical depth, limits its generalizability.

The selected participants' academic backgrounds included degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English Literature, and Translation. This diversity helped the researchers explore how different educational experiences shaped the teachers' identity development. To protect their privacy, the teachers were given codes (T1 to T8) instead of using their real names. Table 1 indicates the demographic information of the participants. As demonstrated in Table 1, all the participants were female, with the years of teaching English experience ranging from a minimum of one year to a maximum of three years.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Novice Language Teachers

Participants	Years of Teaching Experience	Major	Degree	Gender	Age
T1	1	English Literature	BA	Female	23
T2	3	Translation	BA	Female	27
T3	3	Translation	BA	Female	29
T4	1	Translation	BA	Female	25
T5	2	TEFL	BA	Female	28
T6	2	TEFL	BA	Female	24
T7	1	TEFL	BA	Female	23
T8	2	TEFL	BA	Female	26

Instruments

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were adopted for data collection in this study. The semi-structured nature of the interviews provides a framework for guiding the conversation and allowing participants the freedom to narrate their unique experiences. The interviews were guided by key themes emerging from the literature on language teacher identity (De Costa et al., 2022; Fairley, 2020; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020), particularly in relation to novice teachers' early professional experiences. Drawing on this body of research, the interviews aimed to elicit insights into participants' self-perceptions as teachers, the emotional dimensions of their work, identity tensions, and their perceived agency within institutional settings. The topics covered in the interviews included: Teachers' self-image and beliefs about language teaching and learning, emotional experiences and challenges in the early years of teaching, identity tensions and dilemmas between personal beliefs and school expectations, perceptions of support from colleagues and administrators, changes in their professional identity over time, the influence of prior academic and language learning experiences on their teaching. Each interview began with broad, open-ended questions designed to invite narrative accounts, followed by more focused prompts that encouraged participants to share their experiences. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent, and each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes (see Appendix).

Focus Group Discussions

This study used focus group discussions to explore identity tensions experienced by novice EFL teachers in Iranian public schools. Two online focus groups were conducted, each with four participants. The small group size created a supportive and manageable setting. It helped participants feel comfortable and encouraged them to share their experiences. The focus groups allowed for meaningful interaction among participants. These discussions helped reveal how social and institutional contexts shape teacher identity. Open-ended questions guided the focus group discussions. Participants were asked to reflect on their teaching values, personal beliefs, and experiences. They also discussed challenges they faced in the classroom and the support they received. Each session lasted about 90 minutes and was audio recorded with the participants' consent. The data collected offered valuable insights into the identity development of novice teachers. It helped identify their specific needs and provided informed suggestions for better support in Iran's public school system. The authors chose both semi-structured interviews and

focus groups to triangulate the data and gain more depth regarding teacher professional identity. Furthermore, the interviews provided participants with the privacy to express their sensitive experiences. The focus group discussions allow the researchers to explore how the novice teachers collectively negotiated and built shared meanings together. In other words, this combination was deliberate; it allowed triangulation of our data by comparing the personal narratives from the interviews with the collaborative discussions in the groups.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight novice teachers chosen from two public schools in Tehran, Iran. The participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted in a private setting, ensuring a comfortable and quiet environment that fosters open and honest sharing of experiences.

The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent, and each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview questions were designed to explore the participants' experiences, challenges, and tensions in constructing their professional identity as novice L2 teachers in Iranian public schools. The questions were open-ended, allowing participants to share their stories and reflections in detail. The interviewer took notes during the interview and ensured that all questions were covered, while also allowing for flexibility to explore emerging themes and topics.

After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher engaged in iterative coding and theme identification, using the participants' narratives to identify patterns, tensions, and insights related to their professional identity construction. The data analysis process was ongoing and iterative, with the researcher refining the codes and themes throughout the analysis process. The final themes and findings were presented in a narrative format, highlighting the participants' tensions and challenges as novice L2 teachers in Iranian public schools.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). It allowed for patterns and recurring meanings to be identified across participants' narratives. To manage the data obtained from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, an inductive, iterative approach was followed, drawing on within- and across-case comparisons (Merriam, 2009). Each teacher's dataset, including interview and focus group responses, was viewed as an individual case. Based on Braun and Clarke (2006) six-stage model, the analysis began with a familiarization phase. During this phase, all audio recordings were transcribed and read multiple times. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments of the data. For each teacher, codes were developed separately and then compared across participants. These comparisons allowed codes to be refined and clustered into broader thematic categories.

For instance, codes related to past language learning experiences, emotional reactions to classroom realities, and adaptation to school policies were grouped under the theme *Identity Formation Through Personal Histories*. After the initial coding, a continuous process of code comparison and theme refinement was carried out across all teachers and data sources. Through this process, both commonalities and unique experiences in identity construction were traced. As themes such as *Transitioning from Student to Teacher*, *Reconciling Beliefs with Institutional Expectations*, and *Enacting Agency* emerged, the raw data were revisited to ensure that the themes

were well represented. To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, collaborative peer discussions were held throughout the process. After the first cycle of coding was completed, the emerging themes were reviewed and refined by the research team. Interpretive decisions were discussed to maintain consistency and ensure alignment with the study's objective. Once the analysis was finalized, the findings were organized around three overarching thematic domains: (1) Identity Formation Through Personal Histories, (2) Institutional Constraints and Identity Negotiation, and (3) Gendered Realities of Teaching. The selection of themes was guided and discussed through an ecological view of teacher identity based on Priestley et al. (2015) teacher agency model. Below is a table showing coding progression from initial codes to themes:

Table 2: Coding Progression from Initial Codes to Final Themes

Theme	Reflective codes	Initial coding
Identity Formation Through Personal Histories	Biographical influence on teaching beliefs; Transition from learner to teacher; Negotiating uncertainty; Reflective identity growth	motivation; prior knowledge, stress, comprising expectations, listening to mentors, listening to school authorities, university knowledge not applied; Focused on surviving the day
Institutional constraints and identity negotiation	Curriculum constraints; Policy pressure; Assessment dominance; Student expectations; Emotional Labor and Coping; Adaptation and resilience	Tension, learner-centered ideals, institutional norms, teacher compromise, exam-oriented curriculum, resistance, adaptation, Sociocultural hierarchies, obedience, limited materials, sense of agency, resilience under pressure, well-being
Gendered Realities of Teaching	Gender as professional identity lens	Segregation, female authority, empowerment

These themes are presented in the following section, supported by direct quotations to illustrate the complex and evolving nature of identity construction among novice EFL teachers.

4. FINDINGS

Data analyses revealed that four factors were mainly influential in L2 novice teachers' identity construction. The themes are Identity Formation Through Personal Histories, Institutional Constraints and Identity Negotiation, and Gendered Realities of Teaching.

Identity Formation Through Personal Histories

Novice teachers' professional identities are closely shaped by their personal language learning histories, academic backgrounds, and the shift from learner to teacher. These narratives reflect the storied nature of identity construction, as teachers draw from past experiences to inform their beliefs, teaching styles, and classroom practices. Such biographical experiences provide the foundation upon which teachers begin to interpret and define themselves within new professional roles.

Personal experiences, including family background, upbringing, and personal challenges, impact a teacher's worldview and approach to education. For example, L2 teachers who experienced supportive and engaging learning environments as students might be more inclined to replicate those positive experiences in their own classrooms. All of the novice teachers in this study described how their views of teaching were impacted by the learning experiences they had at school and when attending English classes at private language schools. For instance, T4 stated:

When I was studying English at the institute, I had a teacher who always engaged us in discussions and encouraged us to speak up. She would never criticize students in the class. She really inspired me to want to be that kind of teacher for my own students one day.

As the quotation indicates, T4 was positively influenced by a teacher who fostered an interactive, student-centered classroom, which she now wishes to imitate.

T1 and T3 also described their positive past learning experiences as a source of motivation to carry on in populated classes of public schools. Conversely, those novice teachers who faced negative or challenging learning experiences may attempt to create a different classroom environment for their students, actively seeking to avoid replicating past traumas or shortcomings. T5 narrated her negative experience:

When I think back to the grammar-focused lessons and rote memorization in my English classes. I know I never want my students to experience that kind of passive learning environment.

T2 referred to the "intimidating classroom environment" she experienced, and T8 mentioned how a teacher frustrated them with "long and boring teacher-talk time".

Furthermore, the transition from student to teacher was an important shift in their identity. The participating teachers in this study argued that entering the professional world of teaching created a sense of uncertainty that shadowed their overall performance. T2, for instance, mentioned how the feeling of uncertainty dominated the initial years of her practice: "When I first stepped into my own classroom, I felt like I knew nothing. All those years as a student made me feel so unprepared to be the one in charge". In the same vein, T3 explained the transition to a teacher role as a change in her perspective:

The most difficult part of my job so far has been the first months. I was so focused on just surviving each day that I barely had time to think about my own teaching beliefs. Managing the class and the expectations of different students, as well as covering the syllabus, was really challenging.

This process of role transformation can be particularly challenging, as the participating teachers experience the tensions between their personal teaching philosophies and the institutional expectations placed upon them. Suddenly, they find themselves responsible for making decisions, managing a classroom, and guiding student learning - tasks that were once the domain of their own teachers. This shift in perspective can lead to a sense of uncertainty and a need to establish a new professional identity that integrates their personal values and beliefs with the demands of the teaching profession.

The process of reconciling personal beliefs, values, and teaching philosophies with the institutional expectations and constraints of the public school system was a crucial aspect of teachers' professional identity development. As novice teachers, they entered the teaching profession with a set of personal ideals about effective language instruction, shaped by their own educational experiences and beliefs. However, these individual perspectives often clashed with the realities of the centralized curriculum within the public school context.

Three participants (T5, T6, and T7) explained the way they adapted their teaching ideas to the realities of the classroom and the school regulations. T5, for example, stated:

I believe in collaborative learning, and I have classes at private institutes where I encourage group work and teamwork, but the classroom structure in our school often necessitates individual work. I have tried to find creative ways to incorporate collaboration despite the limitations. So far, I think I have changed my teaching style.

The above comment shows how a teacher adapts their preferred collaborative teaching style to fit a more traditional classroom structure, demonstrating a negotiation between personal preference and practical reality.

T7 also had a similar comment and highlights the disconnect between the teacher's training in creative lesson design and the institutional expectation to adhere to a prescribed curriculum, hampering their ability to express their teaching identity: "My university professors taught us to be creative and innovative in our lesson planning. But the reality is, I have to follow this predetermined curriculum that leaves little room for my own teaching style."

This tension between personal and institutional priorities forced the participating teachers to engage in an ongoing negotiation of their professional identities. They had to carefully balance their intrinsic motivations and pedagogical preferences with the practical demands and limitations imposed by the education system. This balancing act required the teachers to critically reflect on their core values, adapt their teaching practices, and at times, compromise or redefine their personal philosophies to align with institutional requirements. The ability to deal with these reconciliations was a key component in the participating teachers' journey towards establishing a stable and coherent professional identity.

Institutional Constraints, Teaching Ideals, and Identity Negotiation

The second theme captures the tensions novice teachers experience as they attempt to reconcile their pedagogical values with institutional expectations. These tensions often arise from conflicts between learner-centered teaching ideals and rigid, exam-oriented curricula or hierarchical school norms. Identity development here is shown to be a negotiated process, marked by compromise, adaptation, and at times, resistance within constrained institutional structures. Using ecological perspectives (Priestley et al., 2015), one can recognize that constraints are not isolated factors with particular forms of professional identity and agency involved.

Novice teachers noted pedagogical autonomy and curriculum rigidity, expressing tension between their pedagogical values and the realities of their workplaces. This tension forced ongoing negotiation of professional identity. One teacher, T4, expressed how the curriculum undermined her goal to promote active student engagement: "I had learned about the advantages of student engagement, but it is very difficult to implement such classes because of the books. Because the books do not require active involvement of the learners, and they emphasize memorization, I had to switch to a focus on rote memorization."

Teachers reported that the curriculum's heavy emphasis on test preparation and rote learning often clashed with their belief in fostering communicative and critical thinking skills. T7 commented on the difficulty of integrating creativity into her teaching under such constraints: "The textbook has some advantages, but it also has a big problem. We can't focus on speaking and listening in class because the activities are mainly designed for teaching grammar, reading, and vocabulary."

Similarly, T5 described the textbooks as emphasizing "more on the written skills rather than spoken skills," and T6 believed teachers "could not change the syllabus". An exam-oriented assessment system in public schools also influenced novice EFL teachers' identity construction. Such a centralized assessment system prioritizes standardized tests and rote memorization and constrains teachers' ability to implement communicative and student-centered teaching approaches.

Novice teachers believed that the dominance of high-stakes testing in their schools affected their performance in the class to a great extent. That is, their performance in different class activities was influenced by the content that was being assessed for the exams, and as they did not have control over the exam content, they had to design their teaching syllabus accordingly. Teacher T3 reflected: "I wanted to focus on speaking and interactive activities; some students even asked

me to do so. But the school's principal always puts emphasis on exams, and what they see is the exam scores. Therefore, it leaves little time for anything beyond grammar and vocabulary drills."

This illustrates how institutional pressures can stifle creativity and pedagogical ideas and innovation, forcing teachers to adapt their practices to meet exam requirements. The centralized curriculum and emphasis on final exams often lead to a teaching-to-the-test approach. Teacher T6 shared, "I feel like I'm not teaching language but preparing students to answer multiple-choice questions. It's not the language teaching I envisioned during my training." This shows the tension between teachers' personal beliefs about effective language instruction and the constraints imposed by the system.

The sociocultural norms and expectations significantly shape the professional experiences of novice L2 teachers. These norms are deeply rooted in broader societal values, local educational traditions, and institutional expectations. While they provide a framework within which teachers operate, they can also create tensions that affect their professional identity construction. One prominent feature of Iranian public schools is the expectation that teachers conform to hierarchical structures and display a high level of respect to senior colleagues and administrators. For novice L2 teachers, this can be a challenging adjustment.

Public schools often emphasize uniformity and discourage overt expressions of individuality, which can stifle the personal identities of novice teachers. The emphasis on following prescribed curricula and adhering to established norms can clash with teachers' aspirations to develop unique teaching styles. For example, T7 explained: "I try to have fun classes because I think students get motivated and they learn better, but the principal once called me to her office and told me to be more serious in my classes. She said that the students do not look at you as a teacher but as a friend."

The narrative of this exceptional case among the participants shows that even within institutional pressure for conformity, small acts of resistance could be possible. This suggests compliance and agency coexist in educational settings.

A common issue cited by novice L2 teachers is the difficulty of managing large classes while providing individual attention to students. Language learning often requires personalized feedback and opportunities for interaction, which are challenging to deliver in classrooms with 30 to 40 students or more. T1 described this problem: "I want to give each student the chance to speak at least a few sentences during the lesson or even check the exercises, but with 38 students in the class, it's impossible. I end up focusing on the stronger ones because there's just not enough time for everyone."

The challenges posed by large class sizes affect not only instructional practices but also novice teachers' sense of professional identity. They may feel torn between their idealized visions of teaching and the compromises they must make to adapt to their work environment. These tensions can lead to frustration, self-doubt, and even attrition from the profession. These accounts allude to the high level of emotional labor required to teach in Iranian public schools as female teachers.

While all participants mentioned various challenges in public schools, some of them noted that they have more job security in public schools, and this makes them less prone to teacher precarity commonly experienced in private institutions. One of them also mentioned that larger classes is a blessing for her as it means she has a stable job in the Iranian education system.

The various dimensions of the second theme included pedagogical control, material limitations, and sociocultural norms. This ecology of constraints shaped how novice teachers negotiated their professional identities, and that they forced them to adapt, compromise, or covertly

resist to reduce tensions with educational authorities. As Priestley et al. (2015) suggest, agency in rigid contexts is attainable by navigation of constraints through various strategies.

Gendered Realities of Teaching

Only one of the participants mentioned issues they faced in all-girl schools in Iran with segregation, which can be a desirable working condition for most of the interviewed participants. They mentioned that they are more eager to talk with their colleagues and share their teaching issues in their classes. This helped them to a great extent at the beginning of their teaching journey. She noted that segregated classes and schools were an "empowering experience" for her as a novice teacher, as it gave her and other co-workers a sense of female-authority in bringing change. The rest did not mention anything regarding the importance of gender in empowering female students and teachers in all-girls schools in Iran.

5. DISCUSSION

This study investigated how novice EFL teachers in Iranian public schools construct their professional identities in response to personal, institutional, and contextual factors. Our findings highlighted that identity development is a complex and evolving process shaped by personal learning histories and the transition from student to teacher, the negotiation of conflicting values within rigid institutional structures, and the material and social ecologies of the school environment. These dimensions show the multifaceted nature of teacher identity as situated, relational, and shaped by emotional, structural, and pedagogical tensions.

Our findings showed that novice teachers rely on their past experiences as language learners in forming their professional beliefs and classroom practices. Teachers' memories of supportive or restrictive learning environments influenced their current approaches to teaching. This finding aligns with Norton (2013) view that teacher identity is historically and socially situated, and resonates with Barkhuizen (2016) work on the role of narrative in identity development. Similar to the observations of Stewart and Jansky (2022), we found that novice teachers reflect on their own educational backgrounds as they make sense of their emerging professional roles. However, our data further suggest that these reflections are not merely formative but deeply emotional, often serving as sources of both inspiration and resistance in the identity-making process.

Findings also indicated the tensions novice teachers experience when their pedagogical values conflict with centralized curricula, exam-focused instruction, and hierarchical school systems. Participants felt restricted by prescriptive materials and top-down policies, which limited their capacity to implement communicative and learner-centered approaches. This confirms previous findings by Kayi-Aydar (2019) and Fairley (2020), who emphasized how institutional constraints challenge novice teachers' autonomy and professional expression. Our findings also echo Eslamdoost et al. (2020), who found that such constraints in the Iranian context can lead to reduced confidence and professional dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, based on our study, these constraints struggle to achieve agency, a process that could be emotionally and professionally demanding for novice teachers.

While studies such as Uştuk and Yazan (2023) documented more supportive environments in other national contexts, we observed that Iranian novice teachers often had to suppress or adapt their pedagogical values in order to meet institutional demands. The crucial insight from our data extends dominant theories of professional identity in education, highlighting the role of negotiation and agency to respond to these constraints. To substantiate this, we can explicitly engage with theoretical models of teacher agency. Drawing on Priestley et al. (2015) ecological model, agency

could be attained through acts and decisions. The results of our study suggest that practice is limited by top-down curricula and summative exam pressure. Nevertheless, novice teachers' agency is practiced in a covert way through strategic adaptation on a limited basis. This finding challenges universalist models of teacher agency. It suggests a need for a framework that accounts for negotiation and adaptation in harsh teaching conditions. This study's analysis reveals identity construction as a complex negotiation with temporal dimensions, material realities, and discursive constraints playing pivotal roles. In other words, a novice teacher's professional identity is an ecological construct that emerges at the intersection of personal history, instructional structures and constraints, and sociocultural norms. For instance, our findings emphasized the role of physical and emotional working conditions in shaping identity. Teachers reported that large class sizes, lack of instructional materials, and minimal access to technology influenced their sense of agency and professional fulfillment. These findings are consistent with Trent (2016), who highlighted the impact of environmental and institutional constraints on the identity development of early-career teachers.

Nevertheless, with regard to the projective dimension of their professional identity, several teachers reported that their visions of becoming better teachers were negotiated in highly constrained contexts. This finding suggests that, although Priestley et al.'s ecological framework conceptualizes the projective dimension as shaping the practical-evaluative dimension of teacher agency, in highly constrained educational settings, the relationship may operate in the opposite direction, with the practical-evaluative dimension significantly shaping and, in some cases, limiting the projective dimension. This could undermine teacher agency to the detriment of students, as they shall be deprived of the innovative practices and aspirations of novice and early-career teachers that they bring to educational contexts.

Our findings support the understanding of teacher identity as an ecological, socioculturally situated construct (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). We add to this literature by showing how novice teachers in a centralized education system confront identity tensions as they attempt to establish themselves professionally. While earlier research has highlighted the role of reflection and institutional support, our findings suggest that without systemic reforms, novice teachers may be forced to compromise or abandon important aspects of their professional identity. The country's centralized education system, which promotes uniformity, presents a distinct set of pressures. For novice teachers, the resulting conflicts are as much ideological as they are pedagogical. They must navigate the difficult terrain between their own developing professional self and the government-approved model of teaching. In other words, findings revealed how novice teachers' professional identity interacts with ecological dimensions of teacher agency.

With regards to "Gendered Realities of Teaching", it can be observed that the segregated schooling system in Iran could be beneficial for female teachers and students as it reduces feelings of threat or inhibition when interacting with same-gender colleagues and learners. Such a structure may foster a supportive and confidence-building context, particularly for early-career female teachers.

6. CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to explore how novice EFL teachers in Iranian public schools construct their professional identities in response to personal, institutional, and contextual demands. Our analysis revealed key factors shaping identity development: (1) Identity Formation Through Personal Histories, (2) Institutional Constraints and Identity Negotiation, and (3) Gendered Realities of Teaching. These findings demonstrate that novice teachers' identities are formed through a process of negotiation, reflection, and adaptation. The teachers' past language

learning experiences, their struggles with centralized curricula and exam-focused teaching, and the pressures of overcrowded classrooms and limited resources all contributed to their identity tension and uncertainty. These experiences highlight the fragile and evolving nature of novice teachers' professional identity in public school contexts. Especially in the case of novice teachers, whose innovative teaching thoughts could be suppressed by senior colleagues, as indicated by one of the participants. This clearly shows how a social-cultural work environment enforces conformity to policies and prevents agentic practice. It also highlights the role of relational agency in reducing or increasing institutional pressure. Peer groups can provide a buffer for novice teachers' innovative ideas, playing an important role in shaping their willingness to go beyond policy constraints. As noted in the Gender as identity lens, a female teacher also endorses the help she received from other female teachers in her all-girls school.

The implications of this study are twofold. First, novice teachers need opportunities for emotional and pedagogical support in the early stages of their careers. This includes mentoring and reflective opportunities to allow them to make sense of their personal values within institutional constraints. Second, policymakers and school administrators should work toward reducing identity-related tensions by improving working conditions and offering professional development that is context-sensitive. Addressing the complex interplay of personal, institutional, and ecological factors is essential for fostering more resilient, agentive, and professionally fulfilled novice EFL teachers within Iran's public education system.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview questions

- What factors have influenced the development of your professional identity as a novice EFL teacher in the public school context?
- How do you think your teaching philosophy and values align with or contradict the expectations of the education system and school culture?
- What challenges have you faced in reconciling your own language learning experiences with your new role as a language teacher?
- What tensions or contradictions have you experienced as a teacher?
- How have you attempted to resolve any conflicts between your personal beliefs/experiences and the expectations/demands of the school environment?
- What support systems or resources have been helpful (or lacking) in your identity construction journey?
- How do you envision your future professional identity and development as an EFL teacher in the Iranian public school system?