

Iranian EAP Teachers' Professional Identity Construction in Online Teaching: Supporting and Hindering Factors

¹Nahid Fallah*

²Mahmood Reza Atai

³Mohammadreza Hashemi

Research Paper

IJEAP- 2302-1947 DOR: [20.1001.1.24763187.2023.12.1.5.3](https://doi.org/10.1001.1.24763187.2023.12.1.5.3)

Received: 2023-01-01

Accepted: 2023-03-12

Published: 2023-03-28

Abstract: While research on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has extensively grown, little is known about EAP teachers' professional work. The literature on EAP teachers is more under-developed in terms of their identity construction. The present study aims to fill this research gap and contribute to the EAP teacher education literature by discovering the factors that support or hinder EAP teachers' professional identity in an online environment. To fulfill this purpose, 20 Iranian EAP teachers were interviewed and thematic analysis was conducted to extract the main codes and themes. The results showed the role of various personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors in EAP teacher professional identity construction in online contexts including global, societal, institutional, classroom and individual factors. While the status of English as the language of science dissemination is considered by teachers as a facilitating factor for EAP teachers' identity construction, the status of EAP is not established in academia which hinders EAP teachers' identity. The limitations of online tools and teaching platforms is a major source of hindering EAP teachers' effective identity construction, which could be reduced with technology support provision by university managers. The findings may promise implications for EAP teacher educators in online contexts and offer suggestions for future research.

Keywords: EAP Teacher, Online Teaching, Professional Identity Development, Professional Identity Support, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

While English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in general and knowledge base of EAP in particular have been extensively investigated in the literature, few investigations can be found regarding EAP practitioners (Ding & Bruce, 2017). Despite having multiple roles and responsibilities, EAP teachers and their professional identity have been of little focus of attention. Only recently, a number of studies have focused on practitioners themselves, especially their transition from mainstream ESL education to EAP without taking into consideration the identity transformation of these practitioners (Alexander, 2007; Blaj-Ward, 2014; Campion, 2016; Elsted, 2012; Krzanowski, 2001; Martin, 2014). Although teacher professional identity is a key element in teacher success (Chong & Low, 2008), self-efficacy, job satisfaction, commitment (Canrinus, et al, 2012) and well-being (Day & Kington, 2008), this subject has not received

¹PhD candidate of Applied Linguistics (Corresponding Author), nfallah12@gmail.com; Department of Foreign Languages, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran.

²Professor of Applied Linguistics, atai@khu.ac.ir; Department of Foreign Languages, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran.

³Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, mrhashemi@khu.ac.ir; Department of Foreign Languages, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran.

the attention it deserves in the EAP literature. Nonetheless, EAP practitioners' identity has been undertaken by a few researchers (Atai et al., 2021, Atai et al., 2018; Bell, 2016; Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hadley, 2015, Tao & Gao, 2018). These studies describe and explain teacher professional identity development. However, there are many unanswered questions, especially with regard to the factors influencing EAP teachers' professional identity development.

Furthermore, research on teacher professional identity has been conducted in ELT contexts in the mainstream ELT context; therefore, it is less known how a novel teaching environment and teachers' associated experiences would affect their professional identity. Online teaching is a completely different instructional approach with its own distinct challenges and opportunities. For instance, the lack of human connection in online classroom environment may hinder identity construction in teachers (Gacs, et al. 2021). Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by exploring factors influencing the process of changes of EAP teacher professional identity in online teaching. By knowing these factors, higher education policy makers and the people in charge of EAP teacher recruitment and education will be able to provide a better condition for EAP teachers' professional growth and development. Furthermore, there is little training for teachers who are about to become EAP teachers (Fitzpatrick, 2022). This is especially true in the Iranian higher education context (Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). There is very little support for EAP teachers and the new role that they may need to take on in an online EAP context. Therefore, this study was carried out with the aim of highlighting factors that may foster or hinder EAP professional identity development in EAP online teaching, by answering the following research question:

Research Question: What are the factors supporting or hindering EAP teachers' professional identity in online teaching?

Literature Review

EAP Teacher Identity

In recent years, more attention has been paid to the different dimensions of EAP teachers' professionalism. In this regard, an emerging line of research is the process of identity construction of EAP teachers. For example, Hadley (2015) used interviews and investigated professional identity of EAP practitioners and students. The study was triangulated in that Hadley interviewed different stakeholders including EAP students and practitioners, former EAP teachers, and administrators. Borrowing Whitchurch's (2008) concept of "blended professionals", he examined EAP practitioners' identity working in third spaces. He surveyed the development of the field of EAP in general and EAP practitioners' function in particular. Although he contributed to the EAP literature and EAP practitioner identity, his participants were mainly prominent figures in EAP and not grass-root practitioners. Investigating at three different universities in UK, US, and Japan, Hadley was interested in studying the role of neoliberalism in changing universities and EAP from EAP practitioners' perspectives. Moreover, Bell (2015) interviewed 15 well-known figures in EAP who had contributed to the development of EAP. His study provided invaluable information regarding the status, research streams, development, and challenges facing EAP.

In a different study, Chang (2017), using narrative inquiry, examined the identity development of a teacher in the process of becoming an ESP practitioner. Different data collection instruments were utilized. By means of categorical analysis, some linguistic features were tested. Data analysis revealed that the ESP teacher should obtain as much knowledge as possible, collaborate with various academic disciplines, obviate the problems, and play different roles in teaching content. Chang also found that in transition from EAP to ESP teaching, the practitioner experienced stable adaptations with regard to classroom activities, teaching methods, and lesson pace. Chang concluded that novice ESP practitioners should be prepared to resolve identity struggles they may face in the process of professional development.

Finally, Tao and Gao (2018) conducted life history interviews with eight ESP teachers to explore their identity construction at a Chinese university. They utilized an adapted model of TESOL teacher identity (Pennington, 2014) to examine the multi-faceted nature of identity. The results showed that the marginalized status of ESP as introduced by the university largely attenuated ESP practitioners' professional identity construction. Furthermore, ESP instructors gained a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment as their teaching contributed to the development of ESP students' skills.

Ding (2019) briefly discusses EAP practitioner identity and how the fragile status of EAP as an academic discipline has negatively affected EAP teachers' identity. In a more recent study, Atai et al. (2022) explored a novice Iranian EAP teacher's identity construction through collecting reflective journals, conducting semi structured interviews, and observing classroom. Their findings showed that an EAP teacher's professional identity construction is "largely defined in light of contextual particularities of EAP teaching" (p. 9). They extracted three main themes related to their novice EAP teacher's identity construction "(1) tensions between claimed and constructed EAP identities, (2) content-related emotional conflicts, and (3) EAP teacher as an undervalued professional" (p. 1). Tao and Gao (2018) also concluded that ESP teachers' identity construction is highly complex due to marginalized status of EAP in Chinese universities and the positive impacts of ESP teaching on the socioeconomic of the region.

EAP Teacher Identity in Online Education

Shifting the mode of education from traditional face-to-face to online teaching has given rise to transformations in teachers' identity construction as they adopt new roles. In other words, new instructional settings along with technology-rich contexts require different and novel conceptualization of teachers' identity in general and EAP practitioners' identity in particular. When multiple communities exist, teachers' identities can be constructed and developed in any evolving context based on their engagement (Lave & Wenger 1991). Hence, teachers engage in communities of practice and, accordingly, novel identities are adopted and shaped, paving the ground for their socialization process. Online community is an example of a new community of practice that has affected instructors' professional practice. Lantz-Andersson, et al (2018) reviewed the relation of formal and informal online communities that teachers engage in to their professional learning and revealed that these communities "can be a valuable means of developing supportive and collegial professional practices" (303). They also maintained that online education affects professional identities of teachers.

A few endeavors have been done to investigate teachers' online identities (Carpenter et al., 2019; Lu & Curwood, 2015; Robson, 2018). In most accounts, teachers' identity has been articulated in terms of their membership. However, Robson (2018) criticized this conceptualization of online teacher identity as related to the advantages of membership. To consolidate the online membership of teachers, he introduced a conceptual framework in which such components as context, agency, social complexity, and structure were also included. Furthermore, Lu and Curwood (2015) explored a number of teacher candidates' posts shared in an online social network (Facebook). Utilizing semi-structured interviews, eight teachers were also interviewed. The results of interviews and content analyses of posts revealed six categories of identities, including supportive, sociable, reliant, open, helpful, and hidden. The researchers found that in the online group, open and hidden identities were analogous with membership and identification with peers in the teachers' group.

When teachers' identity shifts from face-to-face to online teaching, they adopt new roles. Shift in teacher identity can be either the consequence of changes in teachers' belonging, as it usually occurs among beginning teachers (e.g., Flores & Day, 2006; McNaughton & Billot, 2016) or it may be the result of professional growth of teachers, which in this case needs detailed inspection of their evolving identities. Teachers' identity thus can vary across contexts. Zimmerman (1998) refers to these identities as "identities that are usually visible, that is, assignable or claimable on the basis of physical or culturally based insignia

which furnish the intersubjective basis for categorization” (91). Consequently, identity shift makes a distinction between personal and online practitioners as each group assumes its own identity.

As discussed before, little research has been done in the area of online teacher identity. This point calls for more investigations, as Lantz-Andersson et al. (2018) propose that “another area that merits further exploration is the role of online professional learning communities in teachers’ development of self-identity” (312). As far as the Iranian context is concerned, new attempts are required to examine teachers’ online identities in general and EAP practitioners’ online identities in particular. The literature reveals few studies on Iranian teachers’ online identity construction (Nazari & Seyri, 2021), no studies were found to date concerning EAP practitioners’ identity transition from personal to online contexts.

Recently, Nazari and Seyri (2021) explored six Iranian teachers’ identity shift from traditional face-to-face classes to online teaching. Using a triangulated approach, they found six elements determining factors in the process of identity transition. The components “were subject-related instructional variation; tensions such as low agency, greater responsibility, and low professional preparation; emotional labor; conceptual change in becoming technophile teachers; (in)congruities in identity extension; and enhanced reflectivity” (p.6).

Motivated by the scarcity of research on this topic, El-Soussi (2022) examined the impact of online context on teachers’ professional identity by conducting semi-structured interviews with four faculty members from different UAE universities. He found that these faculty members experienced identity tensions as they had to change their roles, practices, beliefs due to the sudden shift to the online teaching mode. He suggested that to facilitate successful transition to online teaching, teachers should get emotional support to deal with the stresses of their new professional identity. Moreover, Bahari (2022) reviewed 44 studies on the challenges and affordances of technology-assisted education for teacher identity. Some of the challenges mentioned in the articles include online environment structure and content, timing, higher workload, and online feedback. These challenges require teachers to change themselves to adapt to the new environment. He also found some of the affordances of digital environment for identity development, which are professional learning networks, sharing teachers’ values with technology, online collaboration, reflective practices in the online mode. Although the literature of EAP teacher identity construction and exploring language teachers’ identity in online communities has grown, it is yet to know about the effects of online teaching on EAP teachers’ identity construction. This is the purpose of the current study.

A review of extant literature indicates that, thus far, teachers’ identity construction in the context of English teaching for general purposes has been explored in relation to technology-assisted language learning (Bahari, 2022), self-efficacy, job satisfaction, motivation, and commitment (Canrinus et al., 2012), well-being and effectiveness within emotional contexts (Day & Kington, 2008), teachers’ emotions via an ecological lens (Nazari et al., 2023), performance, structure, and teachers’ engagement in online social spaces (Robson, 2018), and teachers’ negotiations (Torres-Rocha, 2023). Moreover, identity construction of EAP and ESP teachers has been examined in relation to the formation of novice EAP teachers’ identity (Atai et al., 2022), teachers’ identity transition (Chang, 2017; Martin, 2014), EAP practitioner identity formation (Ding, 2019), and ESP university teachers’ identity construction (Tao & Gao, 2018). However, there is paucity of research delving into EAP teachers’ professional identity construction in online teaching focusing on the supporting and hindering factors. Furthermore, a review of the theoretical frameworks adopted by previous studies reveals that Chang (2017) and Tao and Gao (2018) have employed Pennington’s (2014) model of teacher identity construction, however; they have not used the model for identity formation in online teaching contexts. Thus, the current study, in an attempt to fill the gap in the literature aimed at probing into Iranian EAP teachers’ professional identity construction via adopting Pennington’s (2014) model in online teaching while focusing on the supporting and hindering factors in the course of teachers’ identity development.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in the current study is based on Pennington's (2014) model of teachers' identity construction. This model presents a holistic image of teacher identity within the settings of their professional activities, which consists of practice-centered and contextual frames. The practice-centered frame constitutes the instructional, disciplinary, professional, vocational, and economic elements while the contextual frame encompasses the global, local, and sociocultural elements. The current study utilized the expanded model for teacher identification based on Pennington's (2014) model presented by Tao and Gao (2018). Such model incorporates the contextual elements impacting teacher identity formation. According to Tao and Gao (2018), local elements seem to be insufficient and accordingly weaken the effect of various contextual elements on ESP instructors' identity formation.

It should be noted that EAP teachers' identity construction still requires to take into account different factors conducive to their identity development (Chang, 2017). Put it another way, there should be a link between the teaching of specific fields with specialized information of linguistics and ESL/EFL education to show the way teachers identity is constructed in an EAP context (Campion, 2016). In other words, the factors contributing to the identity formation of EAP teachers in the way they translate the teaching of specific fields via adopting specific disciplines' methods of teaching should be considered as important contextual elements while investigating EAP teachers' identity development (Ding, 2019; Martin, 2014). Thus, in the current study, the model of Pennington's (2014) expanded by Tao and Gao (2018) was adopted only as an organizational tool to provide the opportunity for the identification of factors conducive to teachers' identity development and make it possible for determining the contextual elements impacting EAP teachers' identity construction while considering the particularities of the EAP teaching context.

Context of the Study

Students in Iran start learning English as an obligatory subject when they enter the junior secondary school which lasts seven years. During this period, English proficiency of the majority of the students is usually at a low level and they cannot use the language successfully (Gholaminejad & Raeisi-Vanani, 2021). Under the tertiary education curriculum, students of all academic fields must pass English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). They complete a three-credit general English course in their first year of university and they have to take some credit EAP courses (two to four credits) in their following years of study. The EAP courses are taught either by English Language Teaching (ELT) instructors or subject-specialist instructors. These courses too often times are not effective in improving English proficiency of students due to their focus mainly on learning lists of vocabulary and reading comprehension (Soodmand Afshar & Movassagh, 2016; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018).

In the general English course, which is held for three hours during a week, the focus is mostly on reading comprehension, sometimes vocabulary and grammar are explained, and translation activities are conducted, and all the other competencies are mostly left out (Gholaminejad & Raeisi-Vanani, 2021). It is presumed that if English language abilities like reading and translation skills are enhanced through in the course, and then the subject-specific vocabularies are mastered, college students could be adequately ready to address academic textbooks in their later specialized courses (Atai & Fatahi-Majd, 2014; Atai & Tahririan, 2004; Hayati, 2008; Soodmand Afshar & Movassagh, 2016).

Instructors are faced with another barrier in selecting what to teach in the classroom. The problem with the available textbooks is that their contents do not usually match the needs of Iranian students, and the articles are based on topics not the genre or discourse of a specific field of study (Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). Iranian EAP teachers are mainly subject-matter instructors whose knowledge of English is not sufficient or they are adequately trained to teach the language. Besides, EAP teachers majoring in ELT

often lack enough knowledge of the subject-matter they teach, and team-/co-teaching is also very rare in Iran (Atai, & Fatahi-Majd, 2014).

The study took place after a year of EAP online teaching since the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic. EAP teachers were mostly using their universities' learning management systems (LMS). These platforms usually provide external environments for online classroom such as Adobe Connect or Big Blue Button or other teaching tools. They offer tools for creating tests, quizzes and discussion forums and provide online spaces for uploading assignments among other capabilities.

Methodology

Design and Participants

Inspired by Tao and Gao's (2018) investigation, this study adopted a qualitative, exploratory research design informed by the extant conceptual framework established by Pennington (2014). A qualitative, exploratory design possesses the capacity to facilitate exploring novel aspects of participants' lives (Ary et al., 2014). The main justification for the adoption of this design was that it let the researchers place their exploration in a rigorous conceptual framework and concomitantly find any newly-emerged themes relevant to EAP teachers' identity construction in online settings as teachers' identity construction is subject to contextual factors (Nazari & Xodabande, 2023; Nazari et al., 2023; Torres-Rocha, 2023). This design could help the researchers understand the EAP teachers' identity in online contexts effectively.

The participants of the current study were 20 Iranian EAP teachers, teaching English at various fields of study such as engineering, chemistry, and computer selected from 10 different state universities in Iran. The participants were selected because of their availability to the researcher (convenience sampling) from various contexts, different universities located in different parts of Iran to include the voices of EAP teachers from different parts of Iran to put forward a more comprehensive account of how professional identity was presented in their talks and reflections. These universities provided online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the teachers were totally familiar with online teaching in such courses. The selected teachers were also involved in teaching general English courses in language institutes. Thus, the participants were cognizant of both general and academic English courses. To be qualified to teach EAP, all teachers were required to obtain an MA or PhD in TEFL or applied linguistics. The participants were Persian native speakers, with an age range of 31 to 47 years old and more than two years of teaching experience. Once they were informed of the procedure of the study and had adequate preparation, the researcher initiated the process of data collection.

Instrument

Semi-structured interview was used to obtain in-depth information about the teachers' opinions and their perspectives. Regarding the use of interviews, Seidman (1991) states: "if you are going to find out the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience, interview is a good item and would be one of the best instruments" (p. 3). Since obtaining deeper insights and clear understanding of how teacher participants see their role and position in higher education will be of great significance in this study, the technique used was an in-depth interview pertaining to their experiences of being an EAP teacher and the factors that support or hinder their identity. Questions designed in the interview actualize the aim of this study, provide sufficient coverage, and draw out participants to express their current ideas easily with regard to the supporting and hindering factors. It consisted of 10 open-ended questions based on the research question of the study and frequent themes in literature.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the interview questions and make sure that they lent themselves to the collection of the required data in alignment with the objectives of the study, an initial list of interview questions was developed drawing on Pennington's (2014) model of teacher identity construction. Following that, three experts in the fields of applied linguistics and educational science reviewed the questions. Three EAP teachers also reviewed the interview questions and commented on the wording and content of the questions. Finally, based on experts' and EAP practitioners' comments, the interview questions were modified to increase the clarity of the questions. The structure of some questions was also modified following the experts and EFL teachers' advice and suggestions to mitigate any ambiguities.

Data Collection and Analysis

To obtain the data for the present study, 20 Iranian EAP teachers were interviewed. The interviews, arranged at a time convenient to participants, were conducted either face to face in the participants' office or through phone calls. First, the researcher introduced the topic and tried to create a comfortable space to build a close and respectful rapport by asking them to describe their background, experience in EAP/ELT, qualifications, current job title and type of contract as well as their current position in academia. Then, the participants were informed of the main purpose of the study, data collection procedure and given pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the study. If there were any vague responses to the questions, the researcher asked for more clarification. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes and in the end the researcher thanked the participants for their time. After obtaining participants' consent, the interviews were audio recorded to avoid data loss and then, they were transcribed verbatim.

The analysis of data was conducted through a dualistic deductive/inductive approach in line with Bingham and Witkowsky (2022). The deductive stage which is a top-down procedure, concerns the application of the adopted conceptual framework to data. Therefore, the initial themes available in the adopted framework proposed by Pennington (2014) were used as strictly organizational tools to analyze the data. Following that, during the bottom-up or inductive analysis stage, the data were explored several times and any newly-emerging themes concerning EAP teacher identity construction were identified. During the whole analysis process, the six stages of thematic analysis put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006) were applied. These stages include "1) getting familiar with the data 2) generating initial codes 3) searching for the themes 4) reviews themes 5) defining and naming the themes and finally the 6) writing up the report" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). To address the reliability of the analysis process, an assistant provided help with the thematic analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In so doing, initially the interview contents were extensively read several times to gain adequate familiarization with the data. In the meantime, early impressions of the data and some notes were also taken and recorded. Following that, the data were coded, categorized, and reduced in meaningful ways. Next, the co-researcher separately analyzed the data in a similar manner. Finally, any discrepancies between the researcher's results and those of the assistant were discussed and resolved. Moreover, rater agreement was also calculated based on Holsti's (1969) coefficient of reliability. The value equaled 0.86, which indicated a satisfactory level of consistency between the two raters. To add to the credibility of the analysis, member checking was also conducted (Nassaji, 2020) via discussing the results with six of the participants to ensure that the interpretations have been done appropriately.

Findings

The results of deductive analysis indicated three overarching themes in alignment with Pennington (2014). The three common themes were nested in the global, societal, and institutional layers contributing to EAP teachers' identity construction. The results of inductive analysis revealed two newly emerging themes situated in the classroom and individual layers conducive to EAP teachers' identity construction. Figure 1 presents these layers. The first level is the global level that shows how interconnected our world has

become. The Internet has provided opportunities for EAP practitioners to find each other on virtual world and even form professional associations such as BALEAP. At the level of society, the influence of social attitudes and governmental decisions on EAP has been explained. At the institutional level, the impact of decisions and policies made by higher education ministry and universities on the professional identity development of EAP teachers are mentioned and discussed. The next level represents the influence of classroom environment, which is drastically different in online education. The individual layer encompasses EAP teachers' personal attributes such as their willingness to learn, personal desire, and previous experience as salient factors shaping teachers' identity construction. These factors, extracted as sub-themes, can either support or hinder teachers' professional identity construction. In what follows these factors are presented in a series of tables and are elaborated in detail below each table.

Figure 1

Levels of Influence on Teacher Professional Identity



Five tables below show concepts extracted from the interviews divided on two sections of supporting and hindering factors. The concepts of each table are explained one by one in order. As can be seen, institutional factors are the most referred to concept, followed by classroom-related factors and factors pertaining to individual teachers.

Table 1*The Role of Global Factors in EAP Teachers' Online Identity Construction*

Support	Hinder
The status of English as the language of science	Inactivity of EAP members in academia
International Online EAP community (BALEAP)	Not giving priority to education by governments
Active participation of EAP practitioners on international academic communities	

Table 1 elaborates on the important global factors supporting or hindering EAP teachers' professional identity in online teaching. EAP teachers pointed out the important role of English in science as a major promoter of EAP status and identity as it is the most widely used language in the academic world for publication purposes and knowledge construction. For a scientist to get recognition in the international sphere, acquiring academic English is a necessary condition. This demands establishing an EAP department or center in universities which in turn play a role in EAP professional identity. A few teachers also mentioned that the existence of international online EAP communities such as BALEAP serve as an identity booster and a forum to discuss EAP, share ideas and materials. The presence of such an international organization adds to the credibility of EAP as an established discipline and supports expanding the knowledge base of practitioners.

On the factors that hinder professional identity, teachers mentioned the inactivity of EAP practitioners in EAP-related international forums and communities. Although EAP teachers form a considerable portion of academia in higher education, they do not actively form international communities and they mostly work individually. Another issue relates to the lack of enough support by counties to education in general and governments' failure in recognizing the importance of English in education and academic English in universities. Not enough budget is allocated to education in governments.

Table 2*The Role of Societal Factors in EAP Teachers' Online Identity Construction*

Support	Hinder
The perceived usefulness of EAP to students and society at large	Negative judgement of society on the usefulness of electronic devices for educational purposes
The recruitment of EAP practitioner at private institutes with high salary	Negative judgment of society on the effectiveness of academic education
Rewarding active participation in the world academic community	Undesirable economic situation
The society's strong economy	Lack of proper internet infrastructure, low speed and high cost of internet services
Friendly relationship with English speaking countries	
A society that values technology	

Societal factors form the second level of influence in the professional identity development of teachers. One of the major issues faced online teachers is negative judgment of society on the usefulness of using technology for educational purposes. This negative judgement, to a large extent, as asserted by teachers, goes back to the weak internet infrastructures in Iran. Low speed, frequent disconnection, high cost of internet services is among many other issues that have a direct negative impact on the quality of an online classroom. Mina gave an example of her difficulties in having an online classroom discussion:

When I give a topic to students to have a discussion about that, only a handful of students participate. Sometimes in the middle of their talk, they get disconnected. In adobe connect, the voice of students echoes. I get really frustrated.

Another important issue is the employment and recruitment. Possessing EAP teaching skills is considered valuable even outside universities and many demand to learn academic English either for IELTS preparation or international publication. As the value the society puts on English proficiency grows, the employability prospects of EAP practitioners also raise and it would in turn speed up the professional identity development process. EAP teachers who are already employed in ELT or other departments have a stronger professional identity and feel respected and rewarded. On the other hand, those who do not have stable position often feel undervalued and disappointed. Sina commented on the popularity on IELTS courses:

I decided to work on my academic English proficiency and become an IELTS teacher because of its high demand in Iran.

Table 3

The Role of Institutional Factors in EAP Teachers' Online Identity Construction

	Support	hinder
Policy level	Recognizing the important position and role of EAP in universities Developing clear guidelines with regard to online teaching Reforming and reevaluating EAP programs in universities Providing incentive for the extra burden of acquiring subject area knowledge and workplace discourse Providing high quality equipment and technology Embracing educational technology as a new, effective supplementary approach	Not considering EAP as an established discipline The existence of a centralized and one-sided educational system in educational and curriculum planning Lack of digital infrastructure and services Ineffective policies such as publish or perish policy

University level	<p>Having a physical space as EAP department (sense of belonging to the academic community)</p> <p>Establish a CoP for teachers' collaborative reflective practice</p> <p>Positive feedback from students/ teachers / managers</p> <p>Faculty support in the form of mentoring and providing professional development opportunities</p> <p>Collaborative relationships among colleagues</p> <p>Strong and open communication among members</p> <p>Clarity of professional roles and responsibilities</p> <p>Realistic expectations of teachers and learners in online mode</p> <p>Assessing EAP teachers' performance and providing constructive feedback</p> <p>Positive atmosphere in the university</p> <p>Recognition for teachers' hard work and achievement</p> <p>Involving teachers in decision making</p> <p>Respecting the autonomy of teachers</p>	<p>The questionable status of ESP as a discipline at higher education</p> <p>Lack of EAP professional communities</p> <p>Absence of constructive feedback from students / teachers / manager</p> <p>Heavy workload and competing professional roles</p> <p>Absence of mentors or role models</p> <p>Absence of professional development programs for online EAP teaching</p> <p>Ignoring EAP practitioners' views in important decisions on EAP</p> <p>Lack of clear rules and regulations for students' online conduct</p> <p>Negative evaluation by students</p>
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At policy level, one of the major sources that hinders EAP teachers' professional identity is the inadequate attention devoted to EAP's status in higher education. This unclear or non-established status of EAP causes feelings of frustration among teachers. The lack of a separate EAP department in most universities in Iran greatly influences EAP professional identity as it means there is no physical space corresponding to an EAP community. Even, some of the professionals see it as a lack of respect toward EAP practitioners. Maryam's comments are an example of it.

When there is not a specific department in the university for EAP, it is as if I do not belong to the university community. When I am not employed and not given equal status as other faculty members, I feel disrespected. I think it is better to leave.

Moreover, universities in Iran are divided on the employment prospects. Only a handful of major well known universities recruit EAP teachers in a permanent contract. Other universities either use content professors or ELT professionals that are already employed in their respective departments. This has a huge negative impact on EAP teachers' professional identity development which is exemplified in the previous quote by Maryam. Another issue that teachers emphasized on was the necessity of teacher education programs to prepare teachers to teach online EAP courses. According to teachers, the absence of such professional development opportunities hinders their identity development as they cannot find a place to discuss and find solutions for their classroom problems. Lack of professional development programs for online EAP teaching may leave the teachers with a sense of helplessness and incompetency which in turn may lead them to questioning their professional identity. Fatemeh referred to this issue:

Online teaching is a novel teaching method and is completely different from face-to-face teaching. Teacher training in this area is therefore crucial and can greatly enhance teachers' performance and self-confidence.

Teachers emphasized the need to recognize the importance of EAP courses in universities by developing a framework for reforming and evaluating EAP programs in universities. This might help to make these courses and programs more enriched for teachers and university students, give them a sense of being valuable and boost their professional identity. Furthermore, rather than limiting EAP courses to one single

skill (i.e., reading), technologies and equipment can be included and used in the EAP classes, which will be helpful in giving variety to these classes and promoting motivation in the learners, resulting in a stronger professional identity development. This will provide the ground for embracing educational technology as an effective supplementary approach. In contrast, failure to recognize EAP as an established discipline, lack of interaction between the developers of EAP programs and the targets of these programs, limited resources and facilities will cause a harm to the teachers' professional identity.

At the university level, receiving positive feedback from the students and teachers and even the university managers particularly by arranging assessment programs to provide constructive feedback to the teachers, creating a sense of belonging to the academic community, and receiving support from the faculty in the framework of mentoring and providing professional development opportunities to the teachers will help to create a sense of worthiness in the teachers, improving their professional identity as EAP teachers. More importantly, a dynamic interaction between the teachers and communication with the colleagues can be helpful in creating a sense of belonging. Lack of positive and constructive feedback from the students, teachers, and managers, and worse than that, the heavy workload and too many teaching hours as well as competing professional roles hinder teachers' professional development for online EAP teaching. Sara referred to the important role of students' feedback in her professional identity:

Students' positive comments on my teaching boost my energy. They are the real reason I choose to stay in this profession.

Teachers, as the major and final decision makers in the class, need to be made involved in the decisions to be made about what to teach and how to teach besides recognizing and respecting their autonomy in the class. In addition, not recognizing the important role of teachers in the important decisions made on EAP courses might act as a demotivating factor in the amount of contribution they can make in the extent to which these programs can be successful. Mohsen believes that:

Not much can be taught in a two-credit EAP course that I teach. We are not consulted when such decisions are made about the amount of time needed.

Table 4

The Role of Classroom Factors in EAP Teachers' Online Identity Construction

Support	Hinder
Encouraging teachers' innovation in instructional methods in online environments	Challenges to assume appropriate professional identity (most online educational platforms reinforce teaching roles such as a classroom manager rather than a facilitator)
Encouraging to overcome tech constraints	Constraints of the online teaching platforms to include students' participation, collaboration and communicative activities
Improving the digital skills of teachers	More time-consuming than face to face teaching
Novelty of the situation	Students' not taking online education seriously
Students online learning community	Students' unreasonable expectations of online teaching
Increasing the affordances of online platforms	Difficulty in assessing academic progress and provision of accurate feedback to students
	Lack of clear evaluation methods
	Lack of emotional connection between teachers and students since building rapport with students is done only through language
	Students' taking advantage of online teaching
	Difficulty to verify the presence of students
	Students' lack of autonomous learning
	Students' lack of self-regulation skills
	Online classroom management

The limitations of online tools and teaching platforms is a major source of hindering appropriate professional roles for teachers. For instance, according to the current educational theories, teachers should play the role of a facilitator of learning process rather than a mere transmitter of knowledge. However, in online context, due to the constrained of digital tools, teachers are forced to assume the role of a lecturer and student collaboration and discussions are limited. This also increases the emotional labor of teachers in online platforms. Mohammad explains this situation:

I do most of the talking in the class and students are listeners most of the time. I feel guilty that my class becomes boring and less useful as students can't discuss topics easily with each other like a normal face to face classroom.

As shown in the quotation above, feeling guilty is a sign of conflict between a teachers' true beliefs and the constraints of context that leads to a negative emotion which in turn will have a negative impact on professional identity construction. Sahar's comments also illuminate the effects of digital tools' limitations.

I don't feel like a teacher when I teach online. It feels like I'm talking to a wall. When I can't see students' faces and their reaction, I think I don't have any roles in their learning.

This is a common statement by teachers who teach in online classrooms where it is not possible for teachers and students to use all the affordances of a digital classroom like cameras, microphones, discussion rooms for different reasons. Such classes tend to become boring and teachers believe that many students do not take online courses seriously due to the constraints of online education. Teaching tends to become one-sided in these classrooms and there is a small amount of student participation, discussion and collaboration. Maryam says:

There is little interaction in my classroom, only a few students use the chat box to answer my questions. When I ask them to be more active, they say they have bad internet connection, or their device is not compatible with the used software, or they can't afford to buy new devices.

Another issue is related to difficulty in assessing academic progress and provision of accurate feedback to students. Although, giving some types of tests such as multiple tests choice is easier in online format, conducting formative assessment and providing feedback to students is more difficult and time consuming compared to face-to-face teaching. Therefore, if we view classroom as a small community of practice, the lack of interaction between teachers and students weakens their sense of identity as teachers and students. Amir demonstrated this issue in the following quote:

In face-to-face classes, I usually check students' language use when they are working in groups on a task and provide feedback. In online classes, this is not possible.

Table 5

The Role of Individual Factors in EAP Teachers' Online Identity Construction

Support	Hinder
(Critical) ongoing reflection	Resistance to change
Previous experience in other fields of study/ workplace	Being uncomfortable with technology
Willingness to learn	Not believing of virtual education
Personal desire to online teaching	Negative attitude towards online education
Openness to new experience	Lack of confidence in teaching EAP
Confident in learning to use technology	Lack of confidence in technological skills
Self-regulation skills	Teachers' values and beliefs in conflict with that of the subject lesson
Teachers' imagined identity	Conflict between personal and professional identity
Compatible personality types (extroverted)	Negative experience with online teaching
Digital literacy and competency	Digital illiteracy

Teachers' personal identity is one of the major sources of their professional identity construction and performance (Beijaard et al, 2004). If a person is not comfortable with change and even resist change at some point, then it would be more difficult for them to enthusiastically welcome new technologies. A few teachers pointed out that they are not used to working with computers and cell phones, even in their everyday life they do not use technology so often and are not comfortable with it. Zeinab explains:

I already use technology for social networking and it is really difficult for me to use it for instruction as well. It would be too much of staring to a screen time and not being out of house.

On the other hand, those teachers who considered themselves more digitally competent in general had a more positive attitude toward the application of technology, could better align themselves with the online environment. They easily adapted themselves to online teaching and therefore could strongly identify themselves as online EAP teachers. Hosein is an example of a technology enthusiast teacher:

I love technology and try to learn about new digital tools and applications in my free time

Some EAP teachers said that they usually prefer not to teach certain subjects because they have no interest in or understanding of that major's books, theories, and practices. Susan' experience shows this:

I was once assigned to teach English to architecture students. It was not a good experience for me. I could not understand most of the concepts. I have never been interested in learning about architecture. I will not teach that course again.

Alternatively, previous experience in other fields of study or a background as a practitioner of that field may greatly facilitate EAP professional construction. Amin's quote corroborates this idea:

I have a degree in chemistry. So, I am quite familiar with concepts in that field and it is easy for me to teach English to students of this major.

Ongoing critical reflection was among the major factors that an individual teachers mentioned as supporting their identity construction. As online teaching is more challenging than traditional teaching, teachers need to continually reflect on their teaching to change it for the better as Sahar mentioned it:

I always look for improving my teaching and one way to that is to think about my performance in class and the feedback I get from the students. I try find new ways leading to students' effective learning.

Discussion

The study findings showed that various factors support or hinder EAP teachers' professional identity construction. At the global level, the teachers referred to the role of English as the language of international communication and as a factor that profoundly shapes their online identity construction. This finding is in line with the discussions surrounding EAP teachers' status and how their academic membership becomes vital in their sense of belonging (Ding, 2019; Harwood, 2022). Tao and Gao (2018) also refer to the significance of this dimension of EAP teachers' work in their professional membership and connectedness to educational settings. This finding shows that EAP teachers not only view the role of English as key in their personal classes, but they perceive such a role as significant in their own personal engagement with academic discussions. More importantly, it shows that how significant such use of English is in EAP teachers' online identities, which unpacks novel aspects of EAP teachers' professionalism.

At a societal level, the teachers referred to the supportive and debilitating perceptions of people toward technology, which came to define their professional practice as online EAP teachers and their associated professional identity construction. Regarding the supportive side of their identities, the teachers mentioned how online teaching could become effective in students' socio-educational growth and how this shows that the society is growing. This finding parallels with the arguments of Robson (2018) and Lu and

Curwood (2015) in that technology-based advancements change people's perceptions macro-structurally at the level of society and micro-structurally at the personal level. However, such perceptions about the usefulness of technology were also a hindrance. This finding shows the under-developed infrastructure of technology in the Iranian ESP context, which, according to Nazari and Seyri (2021), needs to be effectively developed to facilitate educational progress at various institutional and social levels.

At the institutional level, the teachers referred to a multitude of supporting and hindering factors in constructing their online identities. As to the supporting factors, the teachers referred to the effectiveness of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in their online professional identity construction. This alternative seems to be helpful for EAP teachers because they can form collective initiatives that guide their professional growth. More specifically, considering the challenges of online education (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018), this agenda could be specifically useful in online settings because teachers can tackle the problems by drawing on collegial ties so that they can construct their online EAP identities more effectively. Conversely, the teachers referred to various policy-invoked challenges hindering their identity construction. This finding complies with the earlier findings (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Soodmand Afshar & Movassagh, 2016; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018) regarding the abundance of institutional challenges complicating Iranian EAP teachers' work. In particular, such institutional challenges were key to hindering the EAP teachers' online identities in this study, which, parallel with Ding (2019), shows how such challenges not only exist in personal classes, but they serve as key factors even in online EAP classes.

The teachers emphasized that online education has influenced them in-class performance and identity construction by, for example, propelling them toward innovating their teaching. Earlier observations of online education (e.g., Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018; Robson, 2018) have focused on this dimension of technology-based instruction in that it affords teachers ways of renewing their pedagogical approaches. In particular reference to teachers' professional identity construction, Nazari and Seyri (2021) detailed how online classes positively contribute to teachers' emotions and agency, which shows that these affordances are also the case with EAP teachers and its associated contributions for their identity construction. Nonetheless, the teachers referred to the hindrances of online education including lack of personal contact and lack of adequate acceptability of online education by students (see Nazari & Seyri, 2021). These findings show that EAP teachers, due to the existence of subject matter, may be more profoundly influenced by in-class issues in constructing their identities because they have more responsibilities, which is like to complicate their job more.

Finally, the teachers argued that due to its novelty, technology-based instruction is likely to positively contribute to their professional identity construction because it enhances their interpersonal skills, engages them in critical reflection, and provides novel ways of practicing. These findings align with the key role of the personal side of teachers' work in the restructuring of their professional identity, as highlighted in previous scholarship (Chang, 2017; Hadley, 2015; Tao & Gao, 2018), yet here in relation to EAP teachers' online identities and the affordances of online education in facilitating such a growth procedure. Moreover, the teachers argued that levels of resistance to and lack of comfort with technology may act as hindrances in their effective identity construction. This finding highlights that teachers may need training to become more embracing of technology because it has become the part and parcel of educational work in today's educational world and more so in EAP contexts because teachers have to handle versatile responsibilities (See Ding, 2019).

Conclusion and Implications

This study has explored the factors that influence EAP teachers' professional identity construction in online teaching in Iranian universities. It was found that teachers' identity construction can be hindered or supported by various factors at different levels including societal, institutional and classroom. Major factors that hinder identity construction were the poor internet infrastructure in Iranian universities, the fragile

status of EAP as a discipline and heavy workload of EAP teachers in online contexts among many others. With regard to supporting factors, the high prestige of academic English in national and international universities, the collaboration of EAP teachers to solve their teaching problems in a new environment and teachers' previous experience in using digital tools were the more noticeable themes.

The above findings may promise some implications for teacher educators in online contexts. In particular, although online education offers benefits to EAP teachers' effective identity construction, it poses certain challenges as well. In this regard, major initiatives should be made to reduce the challenges. As highlighted earlier, EAP teachers already grapple with the challenges of language and content in their classes, factors that profoundly shape their identity construction. Thus, there should be concerted attempts to deal with the challenges of their effective professional identity construction. And such challenges may become more intense when interacting with the online nature of their instruction. Thus, teacher education courses that integrate technology with identity awareness could effectively help teachers resolve the tensions and experience a more educationally productive environment. However, the limitations of this study including using a greater number of teachers and longitudinally exploring teachers' growth could be agendas that future research can explore so that a better understanding of EAP teachers' online identity construction could be available. Furthermore, future research can focus on studying the impacts of removing the aforementioned barriers on EAP teachers' professional identity construction and integrating supporting factors at different levels of context.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to all the participants of the study and our dear colleagues their expertise and assistance throughout all aspects of our study

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

We declare that we do not have any conflicts of interest.

Funding Details

This research did not receive any funding from any agency or organization.

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Appendix A – Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me about your family and academic background.
2. Can you describe your experience in online teaching and how it has impacted your professional identity construction as an EAP teacher?
3. In your opinion, what are the major differences between teaching EAP in a traditional classroom setting and teaching it online? How do these differences affect your identity as an EAP teacher?
4. What are some of the challenges you faced as an EAP teacher in online teaching, specifically hindering your professional identity construction?
5. In your experience, what are some of the most important factors that support EAP teachers' professional identity construction in online teaching?
6. Can you describe the factors that support your professional identity construction as an EAP teacher in online teaching at the individual level?
7. Can you share your experience of how your teaching philosophy and pedagogical approaches contribute to your professional identity development in online teaching at the personal level?
8. How does your personal teaching philosophy, beliefs, and values impact your professional identity construction as an EAP teacher in online teaching? Are there any conflicts or synergies between these two aspects?
9. In what ways do your course materials, teaching methods, and pedagogical approaches affect your professional identity as an EAP teacher in online teaching at classroom level?
10. Have you been able to establish a relationship with your students in online teaching? How does this relationship (or lack of it) affect your professional identity?
11. How do you perceive the impact of institutional policies and practices on your professional identity construction in online teaching at the organizational (institutional) level?
12. In what ways have institutional policies and practices hindered your ability to construct a professional identity in online teaching?
13. How do factors like lack of institutional support, limited resources, or inadequate training hinder your professional identity construction as an EAP teacher in online teaching?
14. What level of support have you received from your institution, department, and/or colleagues in developing your professional identity as an online EAP teacher?
15. In what ways do you think that institutions and universities can support EAP teachers in online teaching to construct and maintain their professional identity?
16. Do you feel that online teaching platforms adequately support the needs of EAP teachers? Why or why not? How does this impact your professional identity?
17. What are the challenges you face as an EAP teacher in building your professional identity in the context of the online teaching environment at the societal level?
18. In your opinion, what is the impact of social media, online communities and professional networks in the larger society on the professional identity construction of EAP teachers in the online environment?
19. Do you believe that the social, cultural, or political context in which you are teaching affects your professional identity construction? If so, how?
20. Can you discuss how your professional identity as an EAP teacher in online teaching is influenced by political, sociocultural and international factors at the global level?