

Inside the Classroom Context: Socio-Cultural Factors which Influence Teachers' Identity Formation in Iran

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Abstract

Culture and socio-cultural factors have been being always one of those discussible issues in terms of teaching a new language. EFL/ESL teachers face many challenges while teaching not only language and linguistic components but also socio-cultural points and their differences for the learners. To this, the present study offers an explanatory mixed-method research among 31 participants who are EFL adult teachers in Iran, educated in English language, with Persian culture background and answered a questionnaire and an interview regarding teacher identity which was coded and analyzed by the researchers and showed the results and findings in order to answer the research question. The results indicated that although there are many teachers who tend to use L1 more than L2 or vice-versa, most of the teachers prefer to use both languages and socio-cultural samples. The answers of the questionnaire and interview showed the variety of socio-cultural

variables that are effective in teachers' identity formation.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural Factors, Teachers' Identity Formation, EFL Teachers, Iran

1. Introduction

Investigating the teachers' behaviors and perception toward teaching can improve the quality of teaching and increase the outcomes in teacher education (Badia & Liesa, 2020; Soodmand Afshar & Donyayie, 2019). Moreover, the way that the teachers introduce themselves in classroom or in society can influence the quality of educational system especially learning and teaching which can be analyzed through the concept of identity in sociolinguistic studies (Labba, Moinszadeh, & Dabaghi, 2019). Because of the importance and influence of identity especially teachers' identity on language learning achievements, this subject has been a matter of interest among researchers and linguists. In other words, many studies in the field of English as Foreign Language (EFL) and also teacher education have focused on the teachers' identity to show its impacts on the learning and teaching (Badia & Liesa, 2020; Soodmand Afshar & Donyayie, 2019; Villegas-Torres & Mora-Pablo, 2018). For instance, recent studies revealed that teachers' identity is an important issue that has been investigated corresponding with other variables such as improving the education

quality (Labba et al., 2019), effective teaching and teachers' reflection (Rozati, 2017), and other psychological behaviors inside or outside the classroom (Villegas-Torres & Mora-Pablo, 2018; and Labba et al, 2019). Therefore, English language teachers' identity has an important role to provide an environment in which learners can adapt themselves with globalized, competitive, diversified and complex context of language learning (Ghanizadeh & Ostad, 2016; & Abedinia, 2012).

Besides, there are many social and cultural factors that can influence the identity in a specific group or context (Salinas, 2017; SoodmandAfshar & Donyaie, 2019). For instance, numerous studies have been conducted to refer to the socio-cultural factors that influence general identities like social identity in social groups. These factors can be mentioned as social classes, different cultural beliefs, or psychological factors like age and personality (Villegas-Torres & Mora-Pablo, 2018; and Labba et al, 2019; Salinas, 2017). In other words, throughout all studies in line with teacher and teaching effectiveness issues, few studies on teachers' identity have been conducted by utilizing various methodologies of investigation and different theoretical models in order to investigate socio-cultural factors that can have influence on teachers' identity. Put it differently, these studies found hardly any reliable consistency between a teacher's identity, and their professional development achievement because of the lack of knowledge in identifying the socio-cultural challenges (Badia & Liesa, 2020; Soodmand Afshar & Donyayie, 2019). This area needs further investigation and data in order to validate the impacts of socio-cultural variables in teacher's identity. In other words, this can give them more awareness of how to cope with educational

changes, how to cooperate with their colleagues and how to inject innovations in their own teaching practice.

To explain it clear, this study aims to investigate the effect of socio-cultural variables on teachers' identity of Iranian EFL teachers. As the literature suggests, the majority of the studies on the characteristics of EFL teachers' identity have addressed the issue from learners' perspective. However, to get a clearer picture, it seems essential to address it from different angles and viewpoints from teachers' side. This study is thus significant in that it aims at describing the challenges of EFL teachers and their identity from their own perspectives. Furthermore, although literature abounds with research on socio-cultural variables, few researches conducted on the main socio-cultural factors that can change the EFL teachers' identity, especially in the context of the present study (i.e. Iran). Hence, it is deemed necessary to probe into the characteristics of English teachers' identity and related socio-cultural factors in foreign language contexts like Iran with the purpose of providing suggestions and implications for both pre-service and practicing EFL teachers as well as teacher trainers and curriculum designers. In order to achieve this goal, the following research question raised by the researchers: What are the socio-cultural factors affecting Iranian EFL Teachers' Identity?

2. Literature Review

Culture and socio-cultural scripts have been being one the most important principles in anthropology and human sciences, especially in language studies and more particularly in teachers' identity investigations. This is a considerable issue for many linguists and sociolinguist during decades. Regarding the issue, in order to investigate the effective socio-cultural factors on teachers' identity and to have

an overall view on the language and identity, this study was concerned about the following matters regarding teaching: cross-linguistic and cross-culture scripts, and language, identity and education.

2.1 Role of Cross-linguistic and Cross-Culture Scripts in Teachers' Identity

Another important issue in cross-linguistics and cross-culture scripts is using appropriate words in adequate context and situation, otherwise the speech would be considered as impoliteness and straight speech that is not welcome in many cultures (Wierzbicka, 2010 cited in Trosborg, 2010), which is highlighted in language teaching. As O'Neil, Bennet and Vanier (2010) assert, such situation leads to a negative impact in cross-linguistic study, and such bad influence would occur not only in words but also other parts of language structure like grammar, writing, etc. These are the components that a teacher has to consider in his/her teaching process.

As mentioned earlier, it is vital to teach the learners to not only learn a new language but also new culture in order to make a good relationship with the target language speakers. To this, cross-linguistic areas should be taught. In many multilingual or bilingual classes a phenomenon called '*interference*' may happen that makes the learners confused, in transferring the message (Torrijos, 2009). This is because of knowing more than 2 languages and each has its own roots, history, and culture.

2.2 Language, Identity and Education

Scholars like Creese and Blackledge (2015), engage the language with identity and education. According to them, translanguaging is considered as pedagogy and practice, while sociolinguistics studies multilingualism and talks about the boundaries and separation of

languages, identity cannot be separated from the language; because human is social and is a part of society. So language, identity and culture cannot be apart from each other and they are clench together.

In another study, Geng (2018) talks about the legal aspects of a society in which people live and interact and they have to know legal terms to not to face problems. Geng also studies the function of translation in frame of culture which is not an easy task and challenges the translators with unusual words, expressions, and structures which can be very difficult to translate and states that: "To increase the efficiency of translation, more detailed, organized and compact referent cultural information is needed to be taken into consideration" (Geng, 2018, p. 114). Because a specific word with a bad or inadequate translation may lead to misunderstanding and rejection while every single word may have different meanings and need to be used in suitable context. e.g. those false translations in personal documents of people in bureaus. So the area of law and legal terms are vital to be considered by the habitants of a country, especially migrants that may be unfamiliar with. The translation is stated here because many bilingual learners compare words between two languages and use them similarly. So this is the duty of teacher to give them corrective feedback and remove the mistake.

All the mentioned issues and examples above are good and considerable matters to the area of sociolinguistics that can show brightly the role of culture, identity and language not only in a country but also among different nations because people are naturally multidimensional being and need to be interconnected with the others. In general, we can conclude that language learners (international students) should learn not only the language but also the target culture to behave appropriately in

different contexts and to avoid misunderstanding and rudeness.

2.3 Gap in the Literature

As stated earlier, several factors indicate the identity and have influence on the process of agent, language and education. The current study focused on the socio-cultural factors that are effective on teachers' identity formation among Iranian EFL teachers which is less paid attention to, from both sides, qualitatively and quantitatively.

3. Methodology

This section consists of the following parts. After describing the demographic information of participants, description of research population and sample are described. Next data collection and data analysis are explained. Finally, the chapter ends with a brief summary of its whole content.

3.1 Participants

As the goal of the study which was focused on the teacher identity among Iranian EFL teachers through investigating the socio-cultural variables, the researchers asked 31 Iranian teachers, working in an institute in Tehran, Iran, to fill the related questionnaire and answer the interview that are mentioned in the 'Instrument section'. The participants who were participated in this study were all from the same nationality (Iranian), in Tehran, between 24 to 31 year-old, from both male and female gender (22 were female and 9 male), and all of them were graduated from Islamic Azad University, whose MA and PhD degrees were English language at Islamic Azad University. The mentioned

participants had about 8 years of teaching experience in schools and language institutes. The sampling method used in this research was "convenience sampling" or "availability sampling" based on the easiness to access and availability of the researchers who found access to the participants as colleagues.

3.2 Instruments

To achieve the purpose of this study, following instruments were applied to achieve the goals of the study.

3.2.1 Identity Questionnaire

Teachers' professional identity Questionnaire (based on Labbaf et al, 2019) was used to evaluate the identity of the EFL teachers in this study (See the Appendix A). The questionnaire comprises of 28 questions with a reaction scale running from 0 (No Opinion) to 5 (totally Agree). In other words, researchers selected a language institute in Tehran, Iran and asked the teachers to answer the online questionnaire that was sent to them which focused on teaching quality and professional identity, through couple of weeks. The related questionnaire is based on teacher identity which leads to answer the research question and include the backgrounds of the teachers, their areas, age and experiences that helped the researcher to get more information according to their socio-cultural bases. Validity and reliability of the questionnaire were checked. Therefore, the validity was examined through the said procedure and reliability of this study was checked by performing Cronbach Alpha test (0.76).

Table 1. Reliability of the Identity Questionnaire through Cronbach Alfa.

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.76	.850	28

3.2.2 Structured Interview

The researchers also used an open-ended interview including 5 questions and received the participants' answers via WhatsApp application regarding pandemic Covid-19 period and avoiding any face-to-face interview. The researchers asked the questions one by one and the participants sent their answers through voice messages. Such process was fruitful for the researchers to get a holistic view about the participants' perspectives. This interview contained following questions:

1. How does your ethnic and cultural background shape your view of yourself as an EFL teacher?
2. How do your ethnic and cultural identities influence your instructional practices?
3. How do you use your cultural and ethnic identity to mediate understanding EFL students' needs, interests, and concerns?
4. How do you use your background to understand your students' social-cultural identities?
5. Comment on issues, if any, relating to your ethnic and cultural background that is of interest to you regarding EFL teaching and learning that may not have been covered in this part.

This part contains information about teachers' reflection toward the sentences. They should briefly comment on how such influence their pedagogical decisions regarding the following important curricula issues. The findings and

results of both phases are discussed in 'Finding and Results' section.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

The process of data collection started in October 2020 and ended in January 2021 and it contained several phases:

Phase 1. The first step of data collection was identifying the research gap and research objectives through analyzing the related literature. After identifying the research gap, the researchers selected a language institute in Tehran, Iran in order to investigate the socio-cultural factors that influence teachers' identity. Following this, they found a questionnaire about teachers' identity and prepared an interview to gather the data from the selected participants.

Phase 2. As this study is a kind of mixed-methods study, the researchers distributed the questionnaire first in order to gather the quantitative data. Considering that the participants were 31 EFL teachers in Iran, the participants were asked to respond the questions as naturally as possible. Accordingly, they returned the answers to the researcher within two weeks. It should be mentioned that, the researchers were ready to answer any questions to remove any ambiguity about the questionnaire. Researchers' availability was necessary because their presence and explanations could solve many problems and misunderstandings with which teachers would be encountered.

Phase 3. In third phase, the oral interview was conducted among EFL teachers. In other words a structured interview (5 open-ended questions) was conducted in the WhatsApp application, which has recorded through voice messages or written messages. It should be mentioned that voice-based responses transcribed in written form.

Phase 4. After that, each items of the questionnaire was coded in order to find an answer for the mentioned research questions. This phase contained data analysis and reporting the related data.

3.4 Research Design and Data Analysis

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used in this study to investigate the effect of socio-cultural variables on teachers' identity of Iranian EFL teachers. Due to this, the study has two main phases:

Quantitative Phase

In this phase of the study, the researchers gathered the data through **a questionnaire**.

Qualitative Phase

Content analysis of analyzing the answers of the EFL teachers from structured interview was used in this phase to report the comprehensible data. In other words, after distributing the questionnaires among the EFL teachers and collecting the required data from the interview, major socio-cultural challenges types were attained by employing the coded-based information.

4. Findings and Results

The findings and results are presented in two phases based on quantitative part and qualitative part as following:

4.1 Results of Quantitative Phase (Questionnaire)

Out of total 31 participant (N=31), 7 of the male teachers (22.5% of the participants) who are between 26 to 30 year-old, with MA degree from Azad University and with about 4 years of teaching experience whose native language are Farsi and teach English as foreign language were exposed to L2 (English) rather L1 that would influence their identity formation while teaching and experiencing. The findings and results found of this group of participants are based on the frequency of their answers regarding: up-to-date teaching, awareness of English culture and additional general knowledge. So according to their answers the researcher found that they tended to L2 rather L1. 19 female teachers (61% of participants) who are between 24 to 29 year-old, with MA and PhD degrees from Azad University and with about 5 years of teaching experience whose native language is Farsi and teach English as foreign language were exposed to L1 (Farsi) as well as L2 (English). These teachers prefer to help students to make more comparisons between L1 culture and L2 culture so that they may be able to distinguish and to differ the eastern and western not only linguistic points but also socio-cultural points. The findings found from this group of participants is based on their answers regarding 50% tending to transferability and English knowledge and 50% being accessible and teaching ability.

And finally, 5 of male and female teachers (16% of participants) who are between 24 to 31 year-old, with MA and PhD degree from Azad University and with about 8 years of teaching experience whose native language is Farsi and teach English as foreign language tended to expose to L1 rather L2 and make western examples in classrooms to clarify the matters for the learners rather eastern ones, that may differ

the effect of teaching on learning and affect their identity formation which leads to Persian culture or traditional culture while teaching in classrooms. I.e. such teachers prefer to use L1 examples and L1 culture (Eastern/ traditional/ home culture) in their classes to make the matter clearer for the students because they think that in this way the issue would be more clarified and tangible for them (based on many taboos and

traditional values). The results of this group are based on the frequency of their answers regarding: transferability, high teaching ability, high level of self-confidence, being accessible, and sense of security in the classroom. Table 2 shows in brief the number and percentage of the participants exposed to whether L1 or L2 or both.

Table.2 Total participants and percentage of using languages in questionnaire

Total participants (N=31)	Number of Participants	Percentage	Languages and Cultures in Use
Group 1	7	22.5%	L2
Group 2	19	61%	L1 & L2
Group 3	5	16%	L1

By all the above findings, it can be said that whether being exposed to L1 or L2 definitely changes the teaching process for both teachers and learners in shaping perspectives and views which leads to changes in socio-cultural factors and perspectives. Such challenges are effective for teachers' identity formation especially through teaching process.

4.2 Results of Qualitative Phase (Interview)

To receive full understanding and gain deep insight about identity challenges, a structured interview was conducted via WhatsApp, which has recorded through voice messages or written messages. It should be mentioned that voice-based responses transcribed in written form. After describing the objectives of interview for the participants, 31 teachers took part and each teacher answered to the questions. It should be mentioned that, teachers answered to the

questions completely in online form by the means of WhatsApp application and full-filling the questionnaire lasted for 10-15 minutes for each individual teacher. The interview consisted of some questions in particular and considered as an important tool for teachers to include their views and opinions about identity and affecting variables during the teaching in EFL contexts. All of the mentioned questioned transcribed and analyzed after the data collection to gain the required information. In other words, In order to answer the research question, 31 EFL teachers were interviewed through online platform (WhatsApp Application) to remove any face-to-face influence. After analyzing the responses from these 31 teachers, the researchers categorized the same responses for each question and they particularized the differences in each question. Based on this, they started to classify the socio-

cultural factors that influence the teachers' identity. Some highlighted answers are mentioned here. Subsequently, according to the first question which was, 'how does your ethnic and cultural background shape your view of yourself as an ESL teacher', the teachers provided their answers in a same way like below:

"the perspectives of people and their own **cultural identity** develops from childhood and is shaped by the values, traits, and attitudes at home and the surrounding, regarding taboos and politeness, taking into consideration that the **cultural identity**, in its essence, relates to our need to belong. Everyone needs to feel accepted and "at home" with a certain group which is not only the family and relatives but also the social community."

And

"**Culture** is the most important part of people's lives. It influences their views, their values, their humor, their hopes, their loyalties, and their worries and fears. So when you are working with people and building relationships with them, it helps to have some perspective and understanding of their **cultures**, respecting the target culture with obeying our own culture."

In addition to this, some other teachers responded to the second question as below. It should be mentioned that second question was, 'how do your ethnic and cultural identities influence your instructional practices'.

"**Cultural backgrounds** determine many things from a contextual point of view. It may be the solidarity or the region from where an individual belongs to. It **means** that what are

the rituals, how people eat, talk, greet, dance, sing, stand, sit, behave and many other factors."

And

"**Identity** is about what you believe and what you think about yourself and your ambient. With outcome-based **habits**, the focus is on what you want to achieve. With **identity** based **habits**, the focus is on who you wish to become. The ultimate form of intrinsic motivation is when a **habit** becomes part of **your identity**. This habit can come from our culture or language that is also effective on our teaching"

Moreover, third question considered the role of cultural identity and EFL teachers' needs, interests, and concerns. The question was 'how do you use your cultural and ethnic identity to mediate understanding EFL teachers' needs, interests, and concerns'. The main responses of the teachers are brought as follow:

"**Cultural** tendencies **impact** the way children participate in education. To engage students effectively in the **learning** process, **teachers** must know their students and recognize their academic abilities individually, rather than relying on racial or ethnic stereotypes or prior experience with other students of similar backgrounds."

And

"**Teacher** professional **identity** can be influenced by the beliefs, values, and commitments an individual holds toward being a **teacher** (as distinct from another professional) and being a particular type of **teacher** (e.g. an urban **teacher**, a beginning **teacher**, a good **teacher**, an English **teacher**, etc.)."

In line with previous question, fourth question was asked from EFL teachers. In other words, the question 'how do you use your background

to understand your students' social-cultural identities', was asked from EFL teachers. Their responses were brought in the following section:

“**Culture** is a definite feature of a person's **identity**, contributing to how they see themselves and the groups with which they identify. An individual's understanding of their own and other's **identities** starts to shape from birth and is formed by the values and attitudes prevalent at home and in the surrounding community.”

And

“**Social identities** are components of **self** that are derived from our **involvement in social** groups and societal community to which we are interpersonally invested. These components are based on **socially** constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for our thoughts and behaviors.”

The last question was about the teachers' own perception about teacher's identity and socio-cultural variables that influence it. Therefore, the researchers asked this question to reflect teachers' idea about the questionnaire. They asked like this, Comment on issues, if any, relating to your ethnic and cultural background that is of interest to you regarding ESL teaching and learning that may not have been covered in this part. In this regard, some of them said:

“**Sociocultural variables** are **factors** including customs, behaviors, and beliefs that a certain population adheres to or follows. The set of customs that a group of people has affects the way they relate to others but they also involve the characteristics that make a society different from others.”

And

“There are several **factors** that affect the **teaching** among **teachers**.

Personal **factors** such as age, gender, and development of language influence **teaching**. Confidence and development of language influence the **teaching** abilities too.”

5. Discussion on Findings

As the findings of the study revealed, teachers' identity can be under the influence of many socio-cultural factors. These socio-cultural factors can shape or even change the teachers' identity and can be underestimated from the background behavior and background knowledge of teachers. These socio-cultural factors such as age, gender, and development of language can have impacts on teachers' identity; hence it might be more beneficial to consider these factors in sociolinguistics. Moreover, factors like confidence and other personality factors can change the identity in teachers. The findings of the study can be in line with the results of the study of Granjo, Castro Sliva, and Peixoto (2020) who concluded that there is significant difference between teachers with different personality characteristics in terms of teachers' identity. In contrary way, findings of the study can be contradicted by findings of Hanna et al., (2020), that says socio-cultural factors such personality factors has not significant impact on teachers' identity. Moreover, the results of this study are in contrast with the results of the study of Skerritt (2019) because there was no significant difference between personality and teachers' identity. In addition to all above, Gray and Molton (2018) contends that effective teachers built their pedagogy on practices that help students to affirm their cultural identity and develop critical skills to challenge social and institutional inequalities in the school and

society. This can be in line with the results of this study too and it can manifest the learning. In general and in order to answer research question, there are several factors which affect teachers' identity in Iranian context expressed both quantitatively and qualitatively; but more stressed ones, revealed in group 2 (table.2) that was exposed to both L1 and L2, are as: transferability, English knowledge, being accessible and teaching ability.

6. Conclusion

As the purpose of the present study was to investigate the socio-cultural factors which influence teachers' identity formation in Iranian context, the researchers proposed an explanatory mixed-method research in order to draw attention to the most stressed factors that are effective in this regard through conveying both quantitative and qualitative phases, using questionnaire and interview to get teachers' backgrounds and points of view and also a statistical table to show the results. Finally, they reached to the findings that the majority of the participants (61%) tended to expose and use L1 (Farsi) as well as L2 (English) in their classrooms; whereas two other groups (table.2) exposed to L1 or L2.

This study can assist EFL teachers to understand the teachers' identity; thus, to reach educational goals and to give good instructions for English teaching, EFL teachers should consider socio-cultural factors. This study can assist EFL teachers to understand that their types of personality cannot be regarded as a determinative factor in their professional development; thus, to reach educational goals and to give good instructions for English teaching, EFL teachers should consider other factors regardless their personality traits. This study can also point out EFL teachers not to consider their gender to develop in their careers

professionally; to put it more simply, EFL teachers whether they are male or female and regardless what type of personality they have, can improve and achieve professional development. To put it more simply, EFL teachers whether they are male or female and regardless what identity they belong to, can improve and achieve professional development. Future studies need to be conducted with a larger sample to make a generalization of an overall population. Further research needs to be done with more comprehensive samples including different levels of EFL teachers including PhD to get total picture of the problem. Moreover, it is highly suggested to be performed in different language contexts, using other methods of study such as interview, observation, etc.

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Appendix A: Teachers' professional identity Questionnaire based on Labbaf et al, (2019)

Teachers' Professional Identity (Factors)

0 (No opinion) 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Agree), 4 (Strongly agree)

Items	Content	0	1	2	3	4
1	Interest in the teaching profession					
2	Academic proficiency					
3	The ability to transfer the content					
4	High teaching ability					
5	High level of self-confidence					
6	Courteous behavior					
7	Creating a sense of security in the classroom					
8	Friendly Relationships with students					
9	Respectful relationships with colleagues					
10	Neat and tidy appearance					
11	Being motivated and enthusiastic					
12	Applying the up-to-date teaching methods					
13	Knowledge of psychological learning theories and application					
14	Active participation in related research					
15	Knowledge and application of IT in teaching					
16	Expert knowledge of English for specific purposes					
17	Awareness of the English language culture					
18	Additional General knowledge					
19	Awareness of social issues					
20	Unbiased perspective about students' academic ability.					
21	Unbiased sexual perspective about students					
22	Class Discussion beyond course content					
23	Job commitment					
24	Periodic evaluation of students					
25	Valid evaluation of curriculum taught					
26	Reliable evaluation of the exam paper					
27	Punctuality					
28	Being accessible					