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## KAZAKH EFL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

This study examines the professional identity of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan. A qualitative research design, including semi-structured interviews, was employed to explore the multifaceted aspects of identity formation in the context of language teaching. MAXQDA 24 software was used for data analysis. The data collected during the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis. The study highlights the complexities involved in the development of teacher identity, emphasizing the importance of personal experience and teaching methods. The findings provide deeper insight into how English teachers carry out their professional roles. The authors offer valuable implications for improving teacher education and supporting initiatives aimed at fostering a strong sense of professional identity among language teachers. The research addresses the following questions: What key factors and experiences shape the professional identity of English as Foreign Language teachers? How do these factors influence their teaching practices and interactions with students? The study offers an understanding of potential ways to support English teachers on their path to a more resilient and sustainable professional identity, ultimately enhancing teaching practices and student learning outcomes in English language education.

**Keywords:** professional identity, in-service teachers, EFL (English as a Foreign language), qualification, professional development.

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### Қазақстандық ағылшын тілі мұғалімдерінің кәсіби білімі

Бұл зерттеу Қазақстанның Түркістан облысындағы ағылшын тілі мұғалімдерінің кәсіби ерекшеліктерін зерттейді. Тілдік оқыту контекстінде жеке тұлғаны қалыптастырудың көп қырлы өлшемдерін зерттеу үшін сапалы зерттеу дизайны, оның ішінде жартылай құрылымдық сұхбат қолданылды. Деректерді талдау үшін MAXQDA 24 бағдарламасы пайдаланылды. Сұхбаттан жиналған мәліметтер тақырыптық талдау көмегімен талданды. Зерттеу мұғалімнің жеке басын дамытудағы қиындықтарға баса назар аударады, жеке тәжірибе мен оқыту әдістерінің маңыздылығын көрсетеді. Зерттеу нәтижелері ағылшын тілі мұғалімдерінің кәсіби міндеттерін қалай жүзеге асыратынын тереңірек түсінуге мүмкіндік береді. Авторлар педагогикалық білім беруді жетілдіруге және тіл мұғалімдерінде кәсіби сәйкестіктің берік сезімін қалыптастыруға бағытталған бастамаларды қолдауға құнды тұжырымдар ұсынады. Зерттеу ағылшын тілі шетел тілі ретінде пәнінің мұғалімдерінің кәсіби сәйкестігін қалыптастыратын негізгі факторлар мен тәжірибелер қандай; бұл факторлар олардың педагогикалық тәжірибесіне және студенттермен өзара әрекеттесуіне қалай әсер етеді деген сұрақтарды қарастырады. Ағылшын тілі мұғалімдерінің өмірлік тәжірибесі мен қабылдауын ескере отырып, бұл зерттеу мамандыққа тән қиындықтар мен мүмкіндіктерді терең түсінуге ықпал етеді. Ағылшын тілі мұғалімдерін неғұрлым сенімді және тұрақты кәсіби сәйкестікке жету жолында қолдаудың әлеуетті жолдары туралы түсінік беріп, ағылшын тілі контекстінде оқыту тәжірибесі мен студенттердің оқу нәтижелерін жақсартады.

**Түйін сөздер:** кәсіби білім, мұғалімдер, EFL (ағылшын тілі шет тілі ретінде), біліктілік, біліктілік арттыру.

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### **Профессиональная идентичность казахстанских учителей английского языка (EFL)**

В данном исследовании рассматривается профессиональная идентичность учителей английского языка как иностранного (EFL) в Туркестанской области Казахстана. Качественный дизайн исследования, включая полуструктурное интервью, использовался для изучения многогранных аспектов формирования идентичности в контексте языкового обучения. Для анализа данных использовалась программа MAXQDA 24. Данные, собранные в ходе интервью, были проанализированы с помощью тематического анализа. Исследование подчеркивает сложности, связанные с развитием личности учителя, подчеркивая важность личного опыта и методов обучения. Полученные результаты исследования помогают более глубокому пониманию того, как преподаватели английского языка выполняют свои профессиональные роли. Авторы предлагают ценные выводы для улучшения педагогического образования и поддержки инициатив, направленных на формирование сильного чувства профессиональной идентичности среди преподавателей языка. Исследование отвечает на вопросы: какие ключевые факторы и опыт формируют профессиональную идентичность преподавателей английского языка как иностранного; как эти факторы влияют на их педагогическую практику и взаимодействие со студентами? Исследование предлагает понимание потенциальных возможностей поддержки преподавателей английского языка на их пути к более надежной и устойчивой профессиональной идентичности, что в конечном итоге улучшает практику преподавания и результаты обучения студентов английскому языку.

**Ключевые слова:** профессиональная идентичность, преподаватели, EFL (английский язык как иностранный), квалификация, профессиональное развитие.

## **Introduction**

Professional identity formation among EFL teachers is a topic of considerable interest worldwide, reflecting the global nature of English language teaching and the diverse contexts in which it takes place. Identity development can be seen as an important component of ‘the learning process of becoming a teacher’ and as something that can improve the way teacher education programs are designed (Friezen & Besley, 2013).

In particular, teacher identity shapes our knowledge of the teaching profession and helps teacher educators to develop teacher education programs. To better understand the idea of teacher identity, scholars have made several attempts to define it in the past. For example, a Chinese study used narrative analysis techniques to examine how Chinese EFL teachers’ views of their professional responsibilities and identities are influenced by Confucian educational principles (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Similarly, a study conducted in Japan examined how the idea of “Kizuna” or “deep emotional connections” influences teachers’ professional identities (Kobashi, 2023, p.500). The study highlighted the importance of relational elements in identity construction in a Japanese EFL setting.

Schotgues (2022) examines the status of public primary school teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa, covering topics such as professional development, absenteeism, pre-service training, and teaching and learning materials (TLMs). The study reveals serious deficiencies in the amount and quality of available teaching and learning resources, pre-and in-service training, teacher topic understanding, and attendance. However, the paper also documents instances of perseverance and effectiveness, supported by qualitative data that is also used to discuss decentralization and bottom-up strategies for addressing educational challenges in resource-limited contexts.

To address the conflict between linguistic and professional identities, a mixed-methods study was conducted in Spain to investigate how Spanish EFL teachers manage their professional identities in response to the country’s increasing demand for English skills (Martínez et al., 2022).

The study conducted in Latin America has highlighted the influence of educational policies and socioeconomic conditions on the professional identities of EFL teachers. Silva and Souza conducted a study in Brazil using case studies to explore this issue (Silva & Souza, 2022). The study found that Brazilian EFL teachers’ professional identities are significantly shaped by socioeconomic and educa-

tional inequalities in the country, with a strong emphasis on social justice.

Research on the development of professional identities among EFL teachers in different parts of the world highlights the complex interplay between educational, political, social, and cultural issues. The study reveals common themes that emerge throughout.

This study examines the professional identity of EFL school teachers in the Kazakh context. The research questions for the study are as follows:

1. What are the key factors and experiences that shape the professional identity of EFL teachers?
2. How do these factors influence their teaching practices and interactions with students?

### **Literature review**

Since 2010, researchers in applied linguistics have increasingly focused on language teacher identity due to the growing body of research on this topic over the past two decades. Furthermore, post-structural views on identity have had an impact on language teacher identity. According to these perspectives, Language Teacher Identity (LTI) is characterized as “multiple, complex, and shifting” due to its reliance on a range of factors within the classroom setting (Varghese, 2005, p.30; Kayi-Aydar, 2019, p.290). Scholars now view LTI as a challenging endeavor due to its intricate and multifaceted structure (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Defining language teachers' identities in light of all the literature's facets has proven to be a challenging task. Barkhuizen attempted to provide a comprehensive definition of language teacher identity (LTI) by examining the content of each chapter authored by 41 researchers in the fields of applied linguistics and TESOL. However, it is important to note that theorizing LTI is a complex process, as acknowledged by Barkhuizen (2017) in *Reflections on Language Teacher Identity*. Another important study in the literature about identity formation for university lecturers is the study by Baxter and Haycock (2014), where they highlighted the need for different pedagogies and strategies to be able to work in a fully online environment and emphasized the importance of teachers adopting a new online teacher identity in terms of student retention, progression, and success. Richardson and Alsop (2015) was one of the key studies in teacher identity research prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Essentially, the study was conducted in response to a call for research on on-

line teacher identity at the university level, as the increase in the number of online students and courses required a better understanding of teacher identity in the online environment.

Kayi-Aydar's (2019) research timeline is a comprehensive study of 42 papers on language teacher identity. The study provides valuable insights into LTI research (Vygotsky, 2012). The articles are grouped into four categories: theoretical framework, participant profile, kinds of language teacher identities, and contextual clues. The studies included in this timeline cover the years 1994-2018 and primarily focus on the linguistic identities of teachers, sociocultural identities, and the multiple and complex nature of teacher identity. This study presents the five primary theoretical frameworks in LTI research from those years: communities of practice, critical theory, positioning theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and the Bakhtinian framework. Six distinct groups of individuals participated in LTI research from 1994 to 2008: non-native speakers, native speakers, M.A. TESOL student-teachers, new/novice teachers/experienced teachers, and pre-service instructors. The study used five categories to group the investigations: narrated identities, identities-in-practice, gendered identities, future selves, and socio-cultural identities. Additionally, three contextual concerns were identified: identities and institutional needs, identities and ideologies, and identities in the context of change. Therefore, scholars researching teacher identity could benefit from this comprehensive study of history (Olsen, 2008).

This study examines EFL school teachers' professional identities in the Kazakh environment using a semi-structured interview.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Research design***

This study employs qualitative research, which is defined as ‘a systematic approach to understanding human behavior, experiences, and perspectives through the collection and analysis of non-numerical data, such as interviews, observations, and textual analysis’ (Creswell, Poth, 2016, p.100), to delve into the multifaceted nature of EFL teachers' professional identity.

#### ***Setting and Participants***

The random sampling method was adopted in selecting the participants of the study. The partici-

pants of this study were 18 English teachers teaching at 10 different schools in Turkistan.

### **Data collection instrument**

Data collected through a semi-structured interview provided nuanced insights to complement and contextualize the qualitative findings. In-depth an interview, a commonly used technique for generating qualitative data was used to capture rich and detailed information regarding the professional identity of EFL teachers

### **Data analysis**

For analyzing qualitative data MAXQDA 24 program was used. The data collected from the interview were analyzed using thematic analysis. The interview data were carefully reviewed to identify the main themes, concepts, and ideas relevant to the research questions. These themes and concepts were organized into categories reflecting the framework of the interview questions. The codes were created based on data obtained from the responses of EFL teachers.

### **Results. Findings**

The qualitative data collected from semi-structured interview questions were analyzed according to these components, which are classified under three main categories: *teaching skills and knowledge, professional development, interpersonal skills, and behavior*. The study's qualitative findings explored and evaluated the content of these three categories totally including ten components. The following figure (Fig.1.) presents the content of EFL teachers' responses on teaching skills and knowledge within various codes. As a result, the analysis of teaching skills and knowledge revealed in 25 codes gathered under the components of tendency to impart knowledge and experience, ability to develop/select EFL materials, familiarity with target language and culture, error correction skills, and creating an effective teaching environment. The components, codes, frequencies (f), and numbers (n) for the category of teaching skills and knowledge are indicated in Table 1.

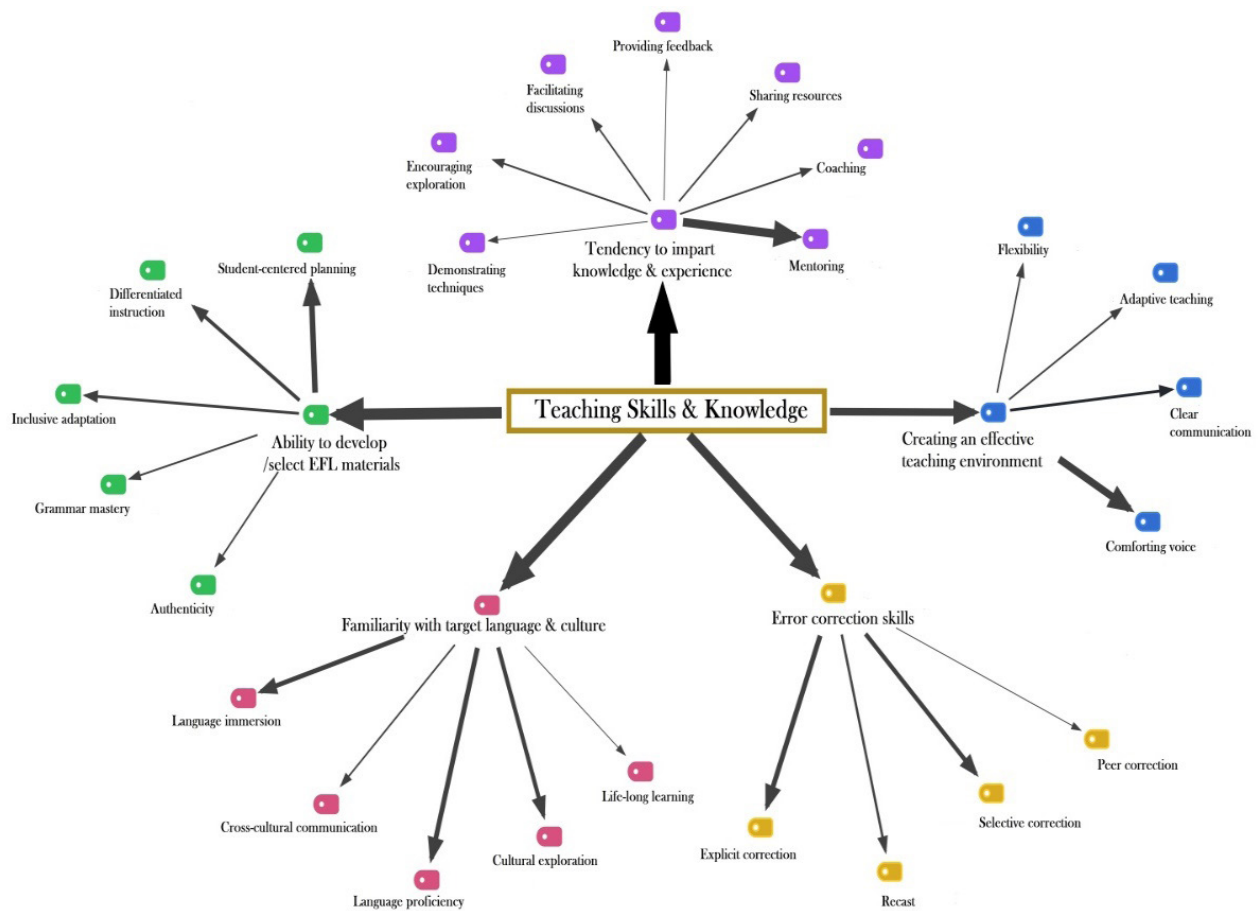
According to Table 1, the first component, the tendency to impart knowledge and experience, included seven codes, and the most frequently responded by EFL teachers was mentoring, pursued by coaching, sharing resources, providing feedback, facilitating discussions, encouraging exploration,

and demonstrating techniques. Here some expressions of EFL teachers are presented: *I try to guide and mentor my students rather than control or rule... (P5), I encourage my students to explore the topics which are interesting to them and in that case they can feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, taking risks, asking questions and confronting challenges in their learning... (P1), I share the appropriate resources with my students and show them how to search the information they need (P7), I employ facilitating discussions where my students love making debates and they help to improve their speaking skills (P15).*

The component of the ability to develop/select EFL materials involved five codes, and student-centered planning was the most frequented code, followed proportionally by differentiated instruction, inclusive adaptation, grammar mastery, and authenticity. For example, EFL teachers' comments on the ability to develop/select EFL materials given hereby: *When I plan each lesson, I pay attention to the content of the assignments given to my students in accordance with the needs of my students...(P2), It actually helps to easy consume the new information, because of the individual needs were taken into consideration and new info was remembered (P9), I have one example where I adapted my teaching materials to address my students' specific needs, I conducted a thorough needs assessment...(P11), ... in order not to lose the student's interest, I always prepare additional materials (P16), Adapting teaching materials to address diverse learning needs resulted in a more inclusive and effective learning environment... (P13).*

The component familiarity with target language and culture comprised five codes. The most frequented response of EFL teachers was language proficiency, added relatively by language immersion, cultural exploration, cross-cultural communication and life-long learning. For instance, EFL teachers explained that: *I always seek for new experiments in teaching and read research articles in my field... (P3), I try to build digital environment in target language, for instance watch movies, listen audiobooks... (P6), ... English culture was always interesting to me and I like to discover about its culture... (P8), I try to develop my students' communication skills across cultural boundaries, such as being open-minded, empathetic, and adaptable to different cultural contexts (P14), lifelong learning promotes a growth mindset and success...(P15)*





Note: The thicker lines specify the higher frequency of components and codes

**Figure 1** – Content of Teaching Skills and Knowledge

**Table 1** – Content of Teaching Skills and Knowledge Category

Components	Codes (f)	N
Tendency to impart knowledge and experience	mentoring (9), coaching (2), sharing resources (2), providing feedback (2), facilitating discussions (2), encouraging exploration (1), demonstrating techniques (1)	7
Ability to develop/select EFL materials	student-centered planning (7), differentiated instructions (4), inclusive adaptation (3), grammar mastery (2), authenticity (2)	5
Familiarity with target language and culture	language proficiency (6), language immersion (6), cultural exploration (5), cross-cultural communication (2), life-long learning (1)	5
Error correction skills	collaboration (6), extending knowledge (5), strengthening relationship (3), reciprocity (2), following footsteps(1)	4
Creating an effective teaching environment	comforting voice (8), clear communication (3), adaptive teaching (2), flexibility (2)	4

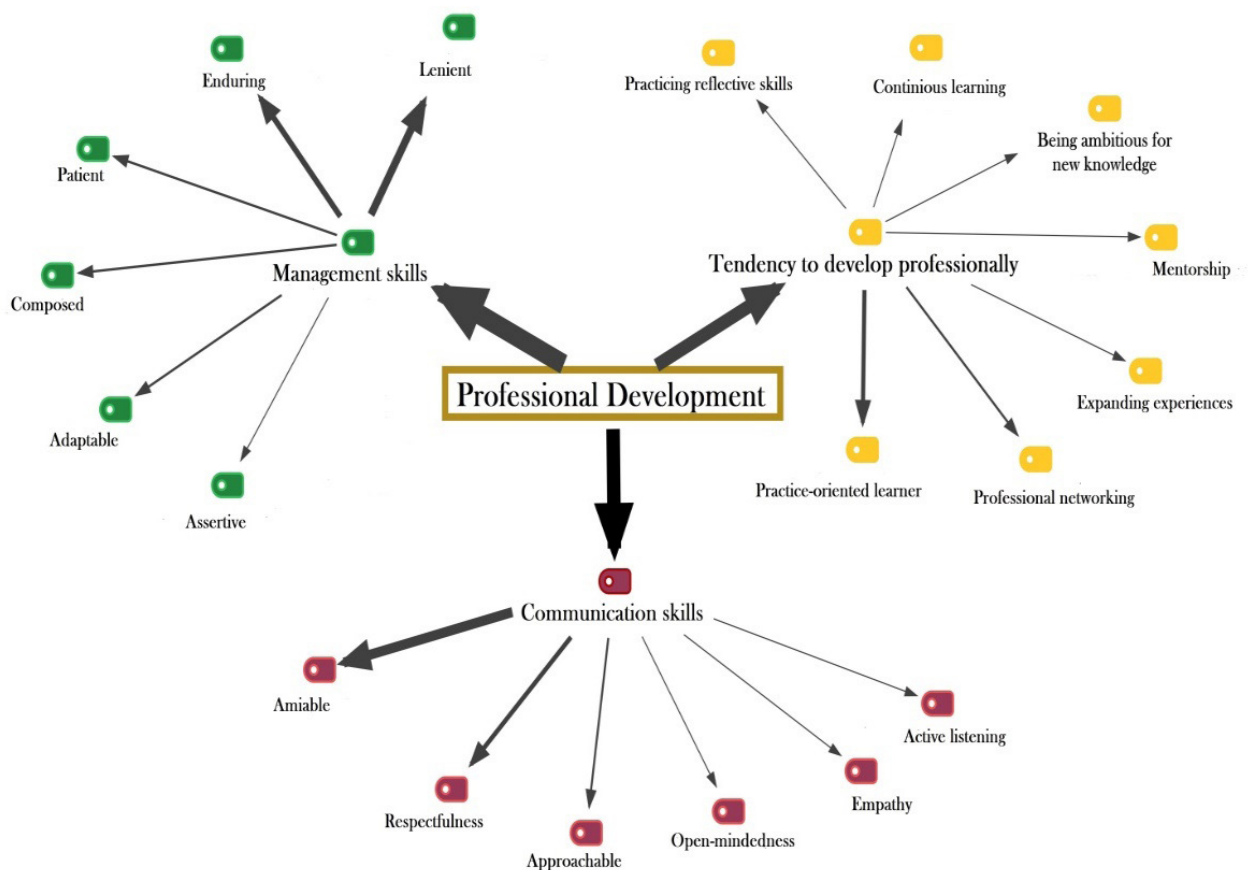
The error correction skills component covered four codes and explicit correction was the most mentioned code, tailored relatively by selective correction, recast, and peer correction. According to EFL teachers' attitudes correction, students' errors depend on: *...I clearly indicate the errors of my students and providing the correct form in order to make them aware...*(P13), *...I mostly focus only on errors that interrupt communication or are relevant to the learning objectives...* (P1), *...I rephrase my students' incorrect utterances into correct form without explicitly pointing out the error* (P11), *I sometimes encourage my students to correct each other's errors ...*(P3).

The last component of teaching skills and knowledge category, creating an effective teaching environment included four codes. Among these codes the most repeated was comforting voice, following by clear communication, adaptive teaching, flexibility. For example, EFL teachers' comments on creating an effective teaching environment giv-

en hereby: *A comforting voice contributes to a positive and inclusive atmosphere, fostering a sense of belonging and well-being among students...*(P13), *Students are more likely to feel at ease and open to expressing themselves when teachers are able to make clear communication...* (P12), *When a teacher explains a new topic there should be coherence within the previous topics...* (P16), and *I try to be more flexible in creating teaching environment in order to make my students feel reliable and comfortable* (P18).

The following figure (Fig. 2) presents EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development in a variety of components and codes:

The analysis of the professional development category is assorted into 19 codes compiled under the components of management skills, communication skills, and tendency to develop professionally. The components, codes, frequencies (f), and numbers (n) for the category of professional development are presented in Table 2.



Note: The thicker lines specify the higher frequency of components and codes

**Figure 2** – Content of Professional Development Category

**Table 2** – Content of Professional Development Category

Components	Codes (f)	N
Management skills	lenient (7), enduring (5), patient (2), composed (2), adaptable (2), assertive (1)	6
Communication skills	amiable (8), respectfulness (4), approachable(2), open-mindedness (1), empathy (1), active listening(1)	6
Tendency to develop professionally	practice-oriented learner (4), professional networking (2), expanding experiences (1), mentorship (1), being ambitious for new knowledge (1), continuous learning (1), practicing reflective skills (1)	7

As indicated in Table 2, the first component, management skills, included six codes and according to EFL teachers' perceptions of management skills, the most frequented code was lenient, followed closely by enduring, patient, composed, adaptable, and assertive. For instance, some EFL teachers' comments are presented as follows: *I usually allow my students to enter the classroom when they are late or I try to understand their problems. ...* (P 6), *...When my students are not listening to me I clearly see that they are tired or have problems with attention* (P 7), *...I can say that I am patient person because my nervous are more important than other things...* (P18), *...I stop speaking when there is noise in the classroom...*(P16), *...I start to stare my students when they do not listen to me* (P3).

The communication skills component comprised six codes, and amiable was the most repeated code which was revealed on the consequences of analysis, followed relatively by respectfulness, approachable, open-mindedness, empathy, and active listening. EFL teachers expressed their feelings on communication skills as follows: *Include giving co-workers at every level your attention, listening to their opinions and conversing with kindness* (P5), *...examples of respect in the workplace include giving coworkers at every level your attention, listening to their opinions and conversing with kindness* (P1), *Actually, I can listen to every person's opinion and can take some points if it is workable* (P18), *Honestly, I often receive their suggestions and try to use them in everyday routine, that's how I demonstrate my respect* (P7), *...active listening, open communication, and consideration contributes to a positive work environment by enhancing collaboration, boosting morale, fostering innovation, promoting effective communication, aiding conflict resolution,*

*supporting employee retention, and strengthening overall team dynamics* (P13).

The latest component of the professional development category, EFL teachers' perceptions on the tendency to develop professionally involved seven codes. The most indicated code among the other codes was practice-oriented learner, followed relatively by professional networking, expanding experiences, mentorship, being ambitious for new knowledge, continuous learning, and practicing reflective skills. For example, teachers' comments on a tendency to develop professionally as follow: *...I am a practice-oriented learner, always try to discover actual topics in the articles which are published in scientific journals* (P14), *...I am interested in participating at the conferences, seminars, workshops, and other events ...* (P2), *...a connection between lessons and their personal interests, as well as real-life applications, to ignite our intrinsic motivation for enduring enthusiasm in learning...*(P3), *I always engage myself in self-reflection to assess strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement, and using this insight to guide my professional development efforts* (P 6), *...I am ambitious and starve for new knowledge, cuz any moment things which you learned at any time in the past can become the key of getting your job of dream or anything which you desire to have* (P 8).

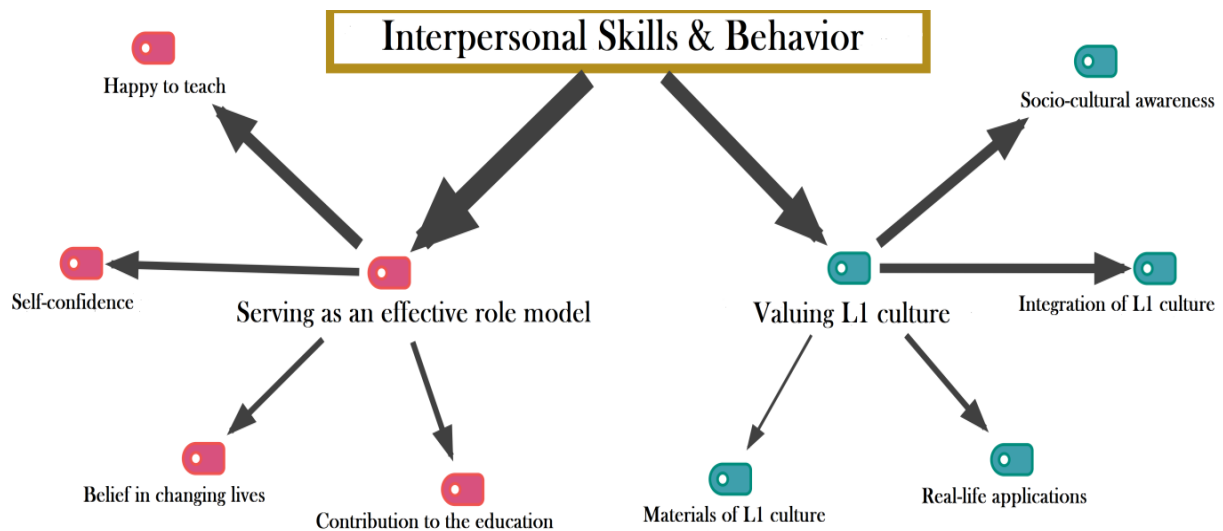
The ultimate category, interpersonal skills and behavior within the variety of codes, which are revealed from the content of EFL teachers' perception, is provided in the following, figure (Fig. 3):

As a result of analysis, the category interpersonal skills and behavior involved 8 codes unified under the components of serving as an effective role model and valuing L1 culture. The components, codes, frequencies (f), and numbers (n) for the category of

interpersonal skills and behavior are demonstrated in Table 3.

As presented in Table 3, the first component, serving as an effective role model, contained four codes where the most frequently mentioned by EFL teachers was the code happy to teach, followed proportionally by self-confidence, belief in changing lives, and contribution to education. Teachers' expressions on serving as an effective role model, for instance, are: *...I am proud to be a teacher and happy to participate in my students'*

*language process... (P1), ...I'm confident in my role as an educator and the positive impact I can make on students' learning journeys (P12), I'm eager to inspire and motivate my students in their learning journey (P5), Enjoying the opportunity to make a positive impact on students' lives.... (P14), ...thrilled to be part of student's educational development ... (P18), ...I believe in the value of continuous improvement and professional development to enhance teaching effectiveness (P2).*



Note: The thicker lines specify the higher frequency of components and codes

**Figure 3** – Content of Interpersonal Skills and Behavior Category

**Table 3** – Content of Interpersonal Skills and Behavior Category

Components	Codes (f)	N
Serving as an effective role model	happy to teach (8), self-confidence (5), belief in changing lives (4), contribution to the education (4)	4
Valuing L1 culture	socio-cultural awareness(7), integration of L1 culture (6), real-life applications (4), materials of L1 culture (2)	4

The component of valuing L1 culture comprised four codes, and the most repeated code was socio-cultural awareness, followed closely by the integration of L1 culture, real-life applications, and materials of L1 culture. EFL teachers expressed their attitudes on valuing L1 culture in the teach-

ing process by following comments: *I think it necessary to know what is going on in the society in which we live and we don't have to forget about our culture... (P5), ...It is important to integrate L1 culture with second language culture, this can help students to express their thoughts freely... (P1), Ac-*



*tually, I try to use real life situational activities for my students where L1 culture is included...(P18), I continuously refresh my understanding of the native culture... (P14), Honestly, I try not to use materials of L1 culture as there are enough materials in L1 culture in our school...(P7).*

## Discussion

Understanding the professional identity of English teachers is important for a number of reasons. First, it provides insights into the complex interplay between personal beliefs, professional practices, and societal expectations. As the findings of this study show, English teachers often navigate a multifaceted landscape shaped by factors such as educational policies, cultural norms, and individual experiences. By exploring these dynamics, educators, and policymakers can better support teachers in their professional development journeys.

The data findings are mutually supportive and can support the idea that teacher identity is “an ongoing and dynamic process, it differs “, which is also consistent with previous studies in this area. Furthermore, the changing or consistent beliefs of English language teachers over time showed us both the subjective and dynamic nature of identity formation, as teachers’ personal and professional beliefs and experiences shape their teacher identity (Friesen & Besley, 2013; Richardson & Alsup, 2015). The final point of discussion that emerged from the data was the idea that the teaching environment required a different pedagogy of teaching (Baxter & Haycock, 2014). Similarly, some of the participants in the study focused on the idea that they needed to improve their skills in order to be able to teach English effectively, as they believed that their way of teaching did not work very well in a classroom environment.

The analysis of the category of professional development is sorted into 19 codes that are grouped under the components of management skills, communication skills and tendency to develop professionally. The components, codes, frequencies (f) and numbers (n) for the category of professional development are presented in Table 2. Thus, the findings of the study are the same as the study of Barkhuizen (2017). It is found that the level of pro-

fessional identity of EFL teachers differs according to their qualification category.

Thus, the present study also revealed that the identity of English language teachers requires the adoption of a different teaching philosophy. This could also lead us to the conclusion in the relevant literature that teacher identity has unique characteristics (Varghese, 2005; Vygotsky, 2012). The component of the professional development category, EFL teachers’ perceptions of their tendency towards professional development, included seven codes. Among the other codes, the most mentioned code was practice-oriented learner, followed relatively by professional networking, broadening experiences, mentorship, aspiring for new knowledge, continuous learning, and practicing reflective skills. The second point of discussion about changes in teacher identity is changes in workload.

## Conclusion

Examining English language teachers’ professional identities reveals the intricate network of elements that influence teachers’ sense of self in the classroom. It is evident from a synthesis of various studies that professional identity is a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon that is impacted by institutional circumstances, societal expectations, personal views, and continuous experiences rather than being a static construct.

The significance of acknowledging educators as active participants in the development of their professional identities is among the study’s main conclusions. Teachers exhibit resilience, agency, and dedication to their students and their profession in spite of the numerous obstacles and limitations they encounter. Building a robust and resilient agency in their pedagogical practice, speak up for their students, and do reflective inquiry.

It is obvious that further research and discussion are required as we move forward in order to fully comprehend the professional identity of English teachers. By continuing to explore the dynamic interplay between individual agency, institutional structures, and societal dynamics, we can inform policies and practices that support the development and well-being of teachers in diverse educational contexts.

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