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Emotional Identity Construction in EFL Teachers: An Integrative Approach

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Studies on teachers' emotions and identity have progressed from focusing on one-way relationships to exploring reciprocal process among a variety of constructs. Based on the available research, few studies have considered the dynamic relationship between emotions and identity from an integrative approach, particularly among EFL teachers within the context of teaching young learners. Expanding on these previous studies, the current study adopted a case study approach to explore the dynamic process involving urban primary school EFL teachers in Northern China based on the social psychological identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) and control-value theory (Pekrun, 2024; Pekrun et al., 2007). Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall interviews were conducted. The results highlighted the influence of emotions on identity verification through authority resources and the influence of teachers' cognitive ability and emotional competence on identity change. Such identity dynamics were found to affect teachers' emotional experience, emotion regulation, and emotional labor through their appraisal of value and control, as well as their commitment to emotional rules, forming a cyclical process. Practical implications for teachers, administrators, and policymakers were proposed.

Keywords: EFL teacher identity, control and value, emotions, emotion regulation, identity verification and change

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INTRODUCTION

Identity is “a set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role”, which influences one’s “behavior, thoughts, and feelings” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). Given its centrality in professional development, studies have explored language teachers’ identity from various angles (Nazari & Karimpour, 2023) and teachers’ identity can be examined through various lenses, including their self-perception, pedagogical practices, and emotional experiences. Emphasis has been laid on several dimensions, such as (1) identity in discourse through language and speech patterns (e.g., Zhang & Hwang, 2023; Park et al., 2024), (2) identity in practice through professional learning and pedagogical practices (e.g., Bao et al., 2024; Nazari et al., 2024), and (3) identity in tensions caused by cognitive dissonance (e.g., Zhu et al., 2022; Hayik, 2023), identity conflicts (e.g., Lu & Zhang, 2023; Zhao & Wang, 2024), relationship with stakeholders (e.g., Derakhshan & Nazari, 2023; Zang et al., 2024), and sociocultural contexts (e.g., Morris, 2023; Han et al., 2024). Such angles suggest the cognitive, interactive, contextual, and dynamic nature of language teachers’ identity. However, these prior studies on language teachers’ identity largely focused on the cognitive aspects of pedagogical decision-making and interactive aspects with contexts, with less attention given to the emotional dimensions that shape its construction.

With the “affective turn” in the linguistic domain (Pavlenko, 2013), increasing attention has been paid to language teachers’ emotions. This trend reflects the subject-related emotional challenges language teachers face due to their diverse roles in teaching (Namaziandost et al., 2023). These challenges are linked to four key outcomes, specifically monolingual ideologies (Hopkyns & Dovchin, 2024), marginalized legitimacy resulting from the native speakerism (Zhang & Kim, 2024), foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; Liu & Wang, 2023), and cultural differences (Hu, 2023). With that, language teachers’ emotions have been explored from two emotional sub-domains: (1) their emotional experiences and influencing factors, including anxiety, exhaustion, and positive psychology (see Fraschini & Park, 2021; Liu et al., 2023); (2) their emotional competence and coping strategies, encompassing emotion regulation, resilience, and emotional intelligence (see Gkonou & Miller, 2023; Peel et al., 2023; Zhi et al., 2024). However, these studies emphasized the antecedents and effects of language teachers’ emotions and overlooked their influence on identity. Song (2016) stressed the major role of emotions in language teachers’ identity “negotiation” and “self-transformation” through emotional rules within specific contexts (p. 651). This reflects the need to understand the dynamic process connecting language teachers’ emotions and identity for a better understanding of both domains.

It is worth noting that the dynamic process of the mutual influence between language teachers’ emotions and identity is still in its early stages. Teachers’ emotions are their emotional experiences resulting from current competence appraisals and the perceived value of teaching activities (Pekrun, 2024), as well as their emotional agency to “(trans)form individuals, social interactions, and power relations” (Shea et al., 2022, p. 278). In other words, emotions are constantly shaping and shaped by interactions with individual strategies (Su et al., 2024), stakeholders (Agbayani-Pineda, 2025) and contexts (Qin et al., 2024). The cognitive, interactive, contextual, dynamic, and

performative nature of emotions underscores the potential to explore the dynamic process of the mutual influence between emotions and identity.

Therefore, the influence of language teachers' identity on their emotional experiences (Shea et al., 2022; Zhao & Wang, 2024) and emotion regulation (Chen et al., 2022; Han et al., 2024) have gained growing research interest. The influence of emotions on language teachers' identity construction has been explored in various studies, including its catalyst role in identity development through cognition development (e.g., Zhang & Jiang, 2023; Nazari et al., 2024) and agency (e.g., Huang & Yip, 2021; Nguyen & Ngo, 2023), as well as the mediating role of emotional competence to deal with identity tensions (e.g., Morris, 2023; Lu, 2024). Prior studies highlighted the reciprocal relationship between language teachers' emotions and identity. However, there is a gap in understanding the dynamic and ongoing nature of this process, which requires more attention due to the interactive nature of emotions and identity (Chen et al., 2022; Zhang & Zhang, 2024).

To date, language teachers' emotions and identity have been investigated from the ecological perspective emphasizing the intrapersonal and interpersonal factors (e.g., Kamali & Nazari, 2023; Nazari et al., 2023), the sociocultural perspective emphasizing contextual influences (e.g., Nasrollahi Shahri, 2018; Derakhshan & Nazari, 2023), and the poststructuralist perspective focusing on the influence of sociopolitical contexts, power relations, and normative ideologies (Kocabas-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021). Prior studies mainly focused on fixed emotions and identity, emphasizing specific aspects of the personal, interpersonal and contextual factors. There have been limited studies on this relationship from an integrated approach, where emotions are temporary states and influenced by the control-value appraisals (Pekrun et al., 2007). Therefore, it is essential to highlight the dynamic influence of emotions on identity development (Chen et al., 2022), particularly through an integrated approach that combines multiple perspectives.

Most English language teachers are non-native speakers and the majority of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) teachers work in primary and secondary schools (Yuan, 2019). According to Nazari et al. (2023), literature on EFL/ESL teachers' emotions and identity in teaching young learners is clearly still in its early stages. In view of the above, the current study opted to focus on EFL teachers in primary schools, particularly within the context of the "Double Reduction" policy (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). This policy aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of in-school education by enhancing after-school services and addressing students' diverse needs. Consequently, it has raised societal expectations of teachers and extended their on-campus working hours (Zhong & Park, 2023), exacerbating work-related stress (Teng et al., 2023), and occupational anxiety (Yue et al., 2023). Given the early stage of research on EFL teachers' emotions and identity in teaching young learners and the increased professional demands following the "Double Reduction" policy, this study aims to explore the dynamic interplay between emotions and professional identity among urban primary school EFL teachers in Northern China, through the theoretical lenses of social psychological identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) and control-value theory (Pekrun, 2024; Pekrun et al., 2007). Specifically, this

study was guided by the following research question: What is the dynamic connection between EFL teachers' emotions and identity during their professional practice?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Identity Construction

The emotional turn in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) and applied linguistics highlights the need to consider the influence of emotions on EFL/ESL teachers' identity and its development (Nazari & Karimpour, 2023; Weng et al., 2024). Studies have explored the interconnection between EFL/ESL teachers' emotions and identity and found that emotions manifest identity dynamics, mediate identity tensions, and develop identity among language teachers. Conversely, teachers' identity also influences their emotional experiences and emotion regulation motivation.

Emotions as the Manifestation of Identity Dynamics

EFL/ESL teachers' emotional experiences manifest their identity dynamics. Specifically, teachers' negative emotions stem from identity vulnerability due to threats to their authority from various stakeholders. For example, Iranian EFL teachers felt angry when their authority was challenged by disobedient students (Nazari & Karimpour, 2023) and parents' intrusion in their decision-making (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2023). Negative emotions also emerge when teachers' pedagogical freedom is restricted by mentors (Goktepe & Kunt, 2021; Zang et al., 2024). Additionally, teachers' negative emotions manifest in identity conflicts when their multiple identities do not share the same meaning, including the conflict between their actual and ideal identities (Lu & Zhang, 2023; Zhao & Wang, 2024).

Conversely, teachers' positive emotions from community recognition (Zembylas, 2005), community support (Nazari et al., 2024), and emotional attachment to past identity and future identity (Yang et al., 2021) serve as authority resources that reinforce their identity system. A study further confirmed such influence through EFL teachers' happiness from their teaching role and anger from their social role (Nazari & Karimpour, 2023). All of these studies indirectly highlighted the significance of identity consistency and authority resources in shaping teachers' emotions, reflecting the role of emotions in manifesting identity dynamics.

Emotions as the Mediator of Identity Tensions

EFL/ESL teachers' emotions mediate identity tensions through their emotional competence, particularly their vulnerability. Teachers' identity tensions arise from the internal dissonances between who they are and who they aspire to be, as well as the external dissonances between their self-perception and others' expectations (Fairley, 2020). For instance, South Korean EFL teachers in a study reported experiencing identity tensions as their authority was challenged by study-abroad returnee students with advanced English skills; some of these teachers exhibited open vulnerability (willing to risk opening in the challenged situation) to adjust their initial beliefs (e.g., the expectation to be all-knowing), helping them resolve identity tensions and build confidence (Song, 2016).

Similarly, Kamali and Nazari (2023) demonstrated the mediating role of vulnerability in the identity construction of Turkish transnational language teachers. The study's findings revealed that emotional vulnerability hindered identity verification by affecting context adaptation while promoting professional identity transformation through teachers' reflection and context-sensitive coping strategies. This highlights the importance of harnessing the positive role of teachers' emotional competence in constructing their identities.

Therefore, a few prior studies explored this domain from language teachers' positive psychology, including their emotional intelligence (Xing, 2022), emotional immunity (Namaziandost et al., 2024), and emotional literacy (Ghiasvand et al., 2024). In sum, the literature emphasizes the importance of emotional competence in teachers' identity development, offering insights for enhancing teachers' emotional awareness and skills during identity construction.

Additionally, constructing contextually appropriate identities to resolve teachers' identity tensions heavily relies on their emotion regulation. Teachers' emotion regulation, when and how they experience and express emotions (Gross, 1998), is affected by sociocultural factors, such as teaching contexts and students' sociocultural background (Wu et al., 2023). For instance, Morris (2023) found that the use of emotion regulation strategies among non-Japanese EFL teachers, affected by the Japanese education system, to handle emotional dissonance and build motivating and caring identities. Another study with non-Japanese EFL teachers parallels the mediating role of emotion regulation among Chinese as a second language teachers, helping them manage identity tensions by temporarily prioritizing one sub-identity to balance diverse motivations (Han et al., 2024).

Specifically, teachers regulate emotions to maintain authority and self-protection through emotional distance from students and display appropriate emotions to fulfill pedagogical or social motives. These strategies differ from emotional honesty that language teachers in the United States, United Kingdom, Norway, and Germany use to strengthen teacher-student relationships (Gkonou & Miller, 2023). This may result from different emotional rules and sociocultural norms for teachers in Western and Eastern countries, emphasizing the role of teachers' emotional competence in prioritizing sub-identities to meet pedagogical goals, sociocultural norms, and professional ethics.

Emotions as the Catalyst of Identity Development

Emotions serve as a catalyst to stimulate language teachers' identity development through their agency. Teachers' emotions are not passive but performative, enabling them to influence identity through agency (Zembylas, 2005). For instance, Nguyen and Ngo (2023) noted the unity of coexisting tensions-emotions-agency-identity in Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' identity construction. Explicitly, emotions triggered by these tensions were described as a catalyst that promoted them to develop their identities through agency, including more investment in self-study. Similarly, Chen et al. (2022) elaborated that Chinese EFL student teachers' negative emotions invoked them to exert agency to narrow the gap between their goals and reality, while the positive emotions bolstered their confidence and fostered emerging identities. The

study also highlighted the influence of the participants' professional identity on their emotional experiences and emotion regulation motivation.

Furthermore, the influence of emotions was found evident in a secondary school ESL teacher's career, named Joyce (Huang & Yip, 2021). Unlike the negative emotions derived from the obstacles to connecting to the teaching community in Joyce's first school, the positive emotions about her future teaching career and friendly relationships with colleagues and students stimulated her to exhibit pragmatic agency, developing herself in the second school. The literature suggested the transformative power of both positive and negative emotions in the development of language teachers' identity through agency, influenced by teachers' personal goals, self-confidence, and context-specific community relationships.

In addition, emotions are the catalyst that promotes teachers' cognitive development, thereby fostering their identity development. In regulating emotions through "masking and manipulating" (Loh & Liew, 2016, p. 268), "the conflict between psychological feelings and feeling rules" (Zhang & Zhang, 2024, p. 3) generates emotional labor for teachers. Such emotional labor may promote teachers' reflection on emotions. Specifically, a senior Latinx elementary ESL teacher experienced emotional labor by hiding negative emotions to meet the demands of neoliberal and raciolinguistic policies and expectations. At last, her reflection on such emotional experience facilitated her identity negotiation with strategies to resist unjust practices and policies (Maddamsetti, 2021).

The catalyst role was also evident in the self-knowledge growth to improve the professional competence of Turkish novice EFL teachers (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2023) and the cognition changes to deepen the understanding of livestream teaching among early-career Chinese EFL teachers (Gu et al., 2022). It can be explained that critical emotional events may shape teachers' cognition on pursuing teaching goals, as the key information for identity development (Hong et al., 2018), including senior teachers' reflection and novice teachers' ongoing learning. This suggests that emotions stimulate teachers' cognitive development, providing a transformative site for identity development.

Theoretical Framework

Social Psychological Identity Theory

As illustrated in Figure 1, Burke and Stets' (2009) identity theory explained the hierarchical control system of identity, which outlined four core components: input, identity standard, comparator, and output. The theory depicted how teachers' identity components function within a perceptual control system. When an identity is activated, identity processes work to align the cultural expectations (identity standard) with reliable information regarding current events (the perceptions of identity-relevant meanings). The system links perceived self-meaning (input) to meaningful behavior (output) through the social environment with symbols and resources. As a continuously operating self-adjusting feedback loop, identity processes continuously modify behavior to counteract disturbances (the result of one's and others' behaviors or ongoing physical

processes), ensuring alignment with the identity standard. Identity verification occurs when perceptions match the standard, leading to positive emotions, while non-verification results in negative emotions. This theory, particularly in the context of language teachers' emotions and identity, offered a framework for understanding the dynamic process of teachers' role identity verification (Chen, 2021; Yang et al., 2021).

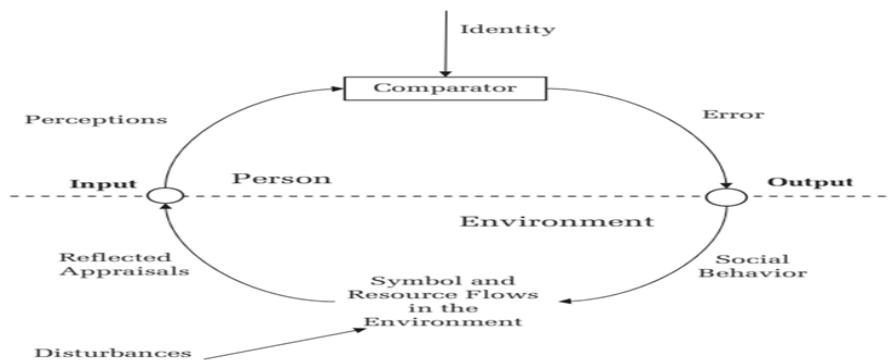


Figure 1

Identity Theory

Note: Adopted from Burke and Stets (2009, p. 62)

Control-Value Theory (CVT)

CVT provided an integrative framework for analyzing and explaining the antecedents and effects of emotions through control and value appraisals (Pekrun, 2024; Pekrun et al., 2007). The present study focused on achievement emotions, which arise from teachers' goals and interactions with students, and their effects on cognitive, motivational, and regulatory processes. Achievement emotions include three dimensions, namely valence (positive emotions and negative emotions), physiological arousal (activating emotions and deactivating emotions), and object focus (current activity emotions and outcome emotions).

As shown in Table 1, these achievement emotions (positive emotions and negative emotions) depend on how individuals perceive their control over the activities and outcomes, with control and value appraisals being the key factors. How competent individuals feel and how valuable they perceive the activity influence emotions. For example, teachers may experience anxiety (emotions in prospective outcomes) when they are uncertain about their ability (control) to help students pass their examinations (value). Teachers may experience enjoyment (emotions in the current activity) in organizing teamwork when they recognize its meaning in L2 acquisition (value) and gain the competence to organize group learning (control). This theory can be used to understand teachers' achievement emotions and the antecedents of related emotions by analyzing the narrative appraisals of their pedagogical decisions and actions. Additionally, achievement emotions are shaped by individual and social factors, which can affect one's behaviors, including increasing motivation to make more effort, distraction from the task, mental and physical health, emotion regulation, and others.

Table 1

Control-Value theory: Basic assumptions on control, values, and achievement emotions

Primary School	Appraisals		Emotions
	Value	Control	
Outcome/prospective	Positive (success)	High	Anticipatory joy
		Medium	Hope
		Low	Hopelessness
	Negative (failure)	High	Anticipatory relief
		Medium	Anxiety
		Low	Hopelessness
Outcome/retrospective	Positive (success)	Irrelevant	Joy
		Self	Pride
		Others	Gratitude
	Negative (failure)	Irrelevant	Sadness
		Self	Shame
		Others	Anger
Activity	Positive	High	Enjoyment
	Negative	High	Anger
	Positive/Negative	Low	Frustration
	None	High/Low	Boredom

Note: Adopted from Pekrun (2006, p. 320)

METHOD

Given the context-dependent and performative nature of emotions (Shea et al., 2022; Qin et al., 2024) and the dynamic characteristics of identity influenced by context, experience, and personality (Alsup, 2018), the current study adopted a qualitative case study approach. This approach enabled a detailed exploration of teachers' real-life emotional experiences in their ongoing identity construction within specific contexts despite the small number of cases involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Similar to other studies with fewer than three participants that explored language teachers' emotions and identity (see Maddamsetti, 2021; Lu & Zhang, 2024), this study is a single case study with the unit of analysis focusing on the experiences of two EFL teachers' emotions and identity construction, bounded by the specific geographical and educational context of an urban primary school in Northern China, during the first semester of 2024.

Research Context and Participants

Focusing on the exploration of emotions and identity of EFL teachers in Chinese primary schools, this study was conducted in an urban public school, BH Primary School, in northern China, near Beijing. English is a compulsory subject in primary schools in China, usually starting from Grade 3 (out of a total of six grades). In primary schools, EFL teachers are typically full-time subject teachers responsible for students' English learning. As English is part of the university entrance examination, both schools and parents place significant emphasis on students' English performance.

In the teacher-centered approach to EFL teaching remains dominant in the selected district due to the large class sizes and heavy workloads. The selected school is high-performing, reflecting the prevalent teaching conditions in primary schools across China. Notably, the school has been recognized as National Quality Demonstration

Schools and Experimental Schools, actively implementing recent education policies like the “Double Reduction” policy.

Considering the interactive and ongoing nature of teachers’ emotions and identity, the purposive sampling technique (Creswell & Poth, 2017) was employed, with two criteria: (1) with education qualification certificates; (2) full-time EFL teachers with over 10 years of experience. Two senior full-time English teachers, Wei and Sheng (names are pseudonyms), consented to participate in the study. Table 2 presents their detailed background information.

Table 2
Participants’ Background Information

Name	School	Gender	Age (years)	Education	Working Experience	Teaching Schedule
Sheng	BH	Male	52	Undergraduate	12 years as a middle school EFL teacher, five years in high school, and 10 years in primary school	Teach English to third and fourth-grade students with 12 class periods per week
Wei	BH	Female	43	Junior college	23 years as a primary school EFL teacher	Teach English to fourth-grade students with eight class periods per week

Positionality Statement and Ethical Matters

It is necessary to clarify the roles of researchers in qualitative research. In this case, the first author was a former Chinese primary school EFL teacher, offering an “insider’s perspective” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). This positionality provided a better understanding of the participants’ context, resulting in interviews that were more in-depth and context-specific (Yang et al., 2021). Simultaneously, the diverse social, linguistic, and occupational backgrounds of other authors played a significant role in reducing bias during data interpretation (Trent, 2017).

All ethical considerations were properly addressed. The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects with the following approval number: JKExxx-2024-074 (dated 27th February 2024). Participants were fully briefed on the overall process of data collection. They were assured that their names and school affiliations would remain confidential and used solely for research purposes. They were also allowed to withdraw at any point in the study. After the briefing, they provided written consent.

Data Collection

Multiple instruments, like the study of Han et al. (2024) and the call for observation in understanding language teachers’ emotions and identity (Dewaele et al., 2018), including semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall interviews were applied to ensure an in-depth description of the case (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Semi-structured interviews ($n = 2$, each lasting 50–60 minutes) were chosen as the main data collection tool because this approach allowed participants to openly and candidly discuss emotionally charged topics (Yang et al., 2021). Besides that, classroom observation ($n = 6$, each for 40 minutes) was employed to capture critical emotional

moments during participants' instruction, which were used in the stimulated recall interviews ($n = 6$, each for 20–30 minutes) to better understand the reasons of teachers' emotions during teaching and triangulate the semi-structured interview excerpts.

Prior to the formal data collection, two experts were invited to validate the content of the interview protocol. The design of the protocol (Appendix A) was based on the social psychological identity theory, with the emphasis on participants' teaching and emotional experiences as EFL teachers (e.g., identity perceptions, challenges, and strategies). The interview protocol was further refined through a pilot study. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin (the participants' first language) to "put them at ease", audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim for analysis (Yuan & Zhang, 2020, p. 8). Back-translation procedures involving two bilingual translators were employed for English presentation (Chen & Boore, 2010).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify, analyze, and report key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Overall, there were two rounds of data analysis, which involved the transcripts of the interview recordings and the relevant classroom observation segments. In the first round of data analysis, participants' emotional experiences (positive emotions and negative emotions) were carefully read and coded with achievement emotions (e.g., anxiety and enjoyment) by analyzing the antecedents (value and control) according to the CVT. Additionally, factors (e.g., community recognition and parental intrusion) and the effects (e.g., self-confidence and emotion regulation) of these emotions were coded. In the second round of data analysis, the effects (from the first round) in relation to the components of the identity model were coded (e.g., perception, behaviors, and reflected appraisal) and summarized as identity dynamics (e.g., authority, vulnerability, salience, stability, and adjustment). Table 3 presents an overview of the study's data analysis.

Table 3
Data analysis

The first round of data analysis				The second round of data analysis	
Emotions	Factors	Antecedents	Effect	Influence on Identity	
Enjoyment	Community recognition	High control + positive value	Self-confidence	Identity authority (perception)	Identity verification
	Motivation		Emotional attachment		
Frustration	Parental intrusion	Low control+ positive value	Community resources	Identity vulnerability (reflected appraisal)	
Anger	Students' misbehaviors and disengagement	Others	Emotion regulation (emotion honesty/ surface acting/ inner feeling modification)	Identity salience (behaviors)	
			Emotional labor		Identity change
	Emotional rules		Empathy		
			Reflection		
Anxiety	Information technology	Medium control + negative (failure) value	Open/ Protective vulnerability	Identity stability/adjustment (identity standard)	

As shown in Table 3, these codes were synthesized into themes to answer the research questions (e.g., enjoyment and identity verification; frustration and identity vulnerability). The coding examples and operational definitions are presented in Appendix B. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the results were member-checked with participants, and the data interpretation was discussed with the research team to avoid researcher bias. Meanwhile, the data from interviews and observations were triangulated to address common flaws in self-reports in the interviews, which enhanced the credibility of the data.

FINDINGS

The study's findings on emotional experiences and perceptions of identity are presented in the following subsections. In particular, five achievement emotions and four identity dynamics emerged.

Enjoyment and Identity Authority

Participants expressed their enjoyment of being teachers, increasing their self-confidence and emotional attachment in their perception. This provided them with the authority resources to verify their identity. Such enjoyment came from the community recognition and their motivation.

When participants were asked about the aspects they were most satisfied with, Wei expressed that "the enjoyment from students' improvement in English and parents' praise" made her confident, and Sheng expressed the following: "It is when parents tell me that their children have made significant progress in English." Both participants also mentioned that they felt enjoyment and pride when the young teachers they mentored won awards in teaching competitions. They expressed that the recognition from these individuals demonstrated their professional competence and increased their confidence to exercise their agency in teaching. Participants' confidence served as the positive personal information for their identity authority (Alsup, 2018), termed as "positive information of perceptions"—this facilitated them to verify their current identities.

Interestingly, the motivations behind Wei's and Sheng's decisions to be EFL teachers differed significantly. Wei has harbored a passion for teaching since childhood, driven by the intrinsic motivations of "thoroughly enjoying teaching English". In contrast, Sheng initially sought to avoid becoming a teacher, attempting the university entrance examination twice before she eventually enrolled in a normal university that provided job assignments. When Sheng was asked why he did not change careers, he mentioned "the unaffordable breach penalty" and "emotional attachment" to teaching, which grew with his "developed teaching ability and sense of responsibility". This illustrated the dynamic interplay between emotions and identity through emotional attachment. Specifically, Wei's intrinsic interest motivated her to "attach more emotions and value to teaching". Sheng's gradually developed identity fostered an emotional attachment to his sense of responsibility and agency to meet the expectations associated with his teaching role (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007).

Both Wei's and Sheng's emotional attachment served as emotional positive information for their identity authority. Notably, Wei's emotional investment and Sheng's developed teaching ability and responsibility increased their intrinsic value of being a teacher, suggesting the influence of identity on emotional experience through the positive value of teaching.

Frustration and Identity Vulnerability

Both participants described their frustration with parental intrusion, which led to identity vulnerability. Such frustration came from their low control over meeting parents' educational expectations and the positive value they placed on their pedagogical practices. When participants were asked about moments when they considered quitting teaching, they mentioned the frustration caused by conflicts with parents:

Wei: I lightly tapped a student with a book for not doing his homework. His mother argued that I didn't care about her child. She even spat at me at the school gate ... I'm frustrated and have no one to confide in.

Sheng: I did not hit the child at all. I was merely stopping him from fighting with another student. I went to the principal to explain, but the principal didn't trust me and forced me to apologize.

Similar to Wei's conflicts with parents, Sheng experienced similar frustration when a parent accused him of hitting his child. The above excerpts highlighted the influence of parental intrusion on participants' emotions, especially when they were unable to seek community support. Such emotional experience and lack of community support influenced their reflected appraisal, termed as "meaningful feedback received from others" (Burke & Stets, 2009). This negative feedback from the community, termed as "negative community resources", led to participants' identity vulnerability, reflecting "the lack of control over crucial working conditions" in their identities (Kelchtermans, 2018, p. 234).

Anger and Identity Salience

The most frequently mentioned emotion by participants was anger from others, triggered by students' misbehavior and disengagement. This prompted their use of emotional expression and regulation strategies, resulting in identity salience (degree of identity change).

For example, in one of the observations, Sheng coldly handled a disruptive student to highlight his teaching role: "I reminded that student to focus, but he swore at me. I suppressed my anger, or I need to speak Chinese to educate him, which will disrupt English teaching." Similarly, Wei recalled a student who refused to answer questions and started shouting. She suppressed her anger and prioritized her caring identity to reassure him: "I didn't care about his learning at that time. English, unlike Chinese, lacks a natural language environment, making it inherently challenging for students. His emotional well-being is my top priority."

These findings showed that, when these participants encountered students' inappropriate behaviors, they suppressed their emotions to achieve identity salience, termed as "invoking a specific identity across situations" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 36) to fulfill their pedagogical goals. This suggested the power of emotions in guiding participants' behavior adjustments for identity salience, including alleviating young learners' foreign language learning anxiety (caring identity) and adhering to monolingual ideologies in feedback (teaching identity). This process reflected the subject-related emotional labor for participants to exhibit organizationally wanted feelings in teaching (Yin et al., 2013).

It was deemed noteworthy that both participants shared their emotional honesty when they were asked about their memorable emotional experiences. Wei shared an emotional story with a reflective attitude: "My brother passed away ... a student's disrespectful comment during class deeply hurt me. I spent the entire class period arguing in Chinese. But afterward, I reflected and called the student to my office to explain. With more experience, I am good at concealing my true emotions and more considerate of students' feelings." Wei's emotional honesty was akin to Sheng's physical confrontation with a student during his first year of teaching: "Looking back, how could I have been angry with students? Now I can empathize with them more and avoid getting angry."

Both examples highlighted how teachers' emotion regulation (emotional honesty) increased the salience of their personal identity over their teaching or caring identity. However, as their teaching experience grew, they became more reflective, which is vital for their professional development (Karimi et al., 2025). They also became adapted to applying emotion regulation strategies to handle unexpected situations and considered young learners' emotions. These strategies included surface acting to regulate emotions (concealing emotions) and deep acting to modify inner feelings (empathy with students) to display the required emotions in alignment with emotional rules (Hochschild, 2012), guided by the "ethical codes" and social expectation of their professional identity (Zembylas, 2002, p. 201). This suggested the influence of emotions on identity salience through cognitive development (reflection on emotions) and emotional competence (emotion regulation and empathy). Conversely, participants' identity influenced their emotion regulation and emotional labor through emotional rules and social expectations.

Anxiety and Identity Stability or Adjustment

Both participants shared their anxiety from the uncertainty of their competence and failure to teach with artificial intelligence (AI) technology. This anxiety disrupted their original identity standard, driving them to either change or maintain their original identity, mediated by their vulnerability. When they were asked about the challenges they faced as EFL teachers, Sheng mentioned: "It's really difficult for me to use new information technologies, I learn too slowly." His challenges were observed in his class; sometimes, he needed students to remind him how to operate the interactive whiteboard. A similar challenge was mentioned by Wei: "Last time I saw young teachers skillfully using AI-driven chatbots to assist student learning in teaching competitions, I was

shocked and felt outdated.” These excerpts revealed both participants’ anxiety about the potential failure to provide effective language teaching, compounded by their uncertainty in mastering new digital skills.

However, when they were asked about their strategies to deal with such anxiety, they applied different strategies:

Sheng: Language teaching is interactive, inevitably integrating with AI and compelling teachers to transform themselves. I seize every opportunity to learn new technologies and apply them in teaching.

Wei: The anxiety doesn’t last long. At my age, lacking AI skills isn’t embarrassing. I believe traditional teaching still educates students effectively.

As shown in the excerpts, Sheng’s investment in learning and practicing new technologies in teaching by considering the interactive characteristics of language teaching showed his open vulnerability to risk opening himself to AI-driven teaching (Lasky, 2005). Such open vulnerability influenced Sheng’s identity standard (changing from a traditional identity to an AI-driven digital identity) and his traditional teaching beliefs; it adjusted his behaviors to learn and practice, as learning is a process of identity construction (Varghese et al., 2005). While Wei demonstrated protective vulnerability to insist on the traditional teaching method, avoiding placing herself at risk, showing her identity stability, termed as “resistance to change” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 176). This suggested the influence of emotions on their identity standard to change their identity through the mediating role of vulnerability.

The comparison between Sheng’s digital identity and Wei’s traditional identity also revealed the influence of their identity as a teacher on their value judgments regarding AI-driven teaching and digital competence, thereby affecting their emotions. Concretely, Wei’s vanished anxiety was closely connected to her traditional teacher identity stability, which made her perceive the negative value of AI-driven teaching. Meanwhile, Sheng’s improved digital competence during the construction of his digital identity helped alleviate his anxiety.

DISCUSSION

In this section, a thematic view of the dynamic process is discussed in response to the existing literature. Two Chinese EFL teachers were interviewed and observed in this study to explore the dynamic process of the mutual influence between emotion and identity during their professional practice, which is depicted in Figure 2. Participants’ intrinsic motivation for being EFL teachers, emotional attachment to the teaching profession, enhanced self-confidence, and community recognition and support collectively served as authority resources for their identity verification. These findings resonated with the positive influence of emotion on language teachers’ identity development through community recognition and support (Zembylas, 2005; Huang & Yip, 2021; Nazari et al., 2024) and the mediating role of self-confidence (Chen et al., 2022). Similar to Emily, a university EFL teacher, her self-agency of researcher identity was hindered by diminished intrinsic research motivation due to the challenges in

balancing teaching duties, family responsibilities, and research interests (Lu & Zhang, 2024).

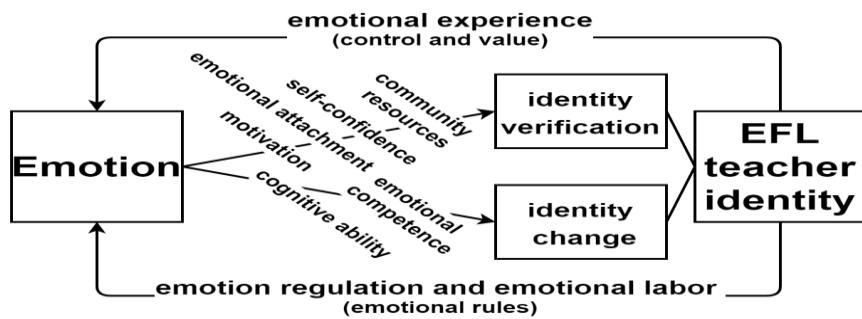


Figure 2
The dynamic connection between EFL teachers' emotion and identity

This study explained the influence of motivation on identity from the perspective of the CVT (Pekrun, 2024). Specifically, Wei's intrinsic motivation for teaching provided a positive value to the profession, facilitating the mutual verification of her personal (intrinsic motivation) and professional identities when both align in meaning (Burke & Stets, 2009). The intrinsic motivation derived from the high value of teaching provides more stable positive information for teachers' identity verification. Notably, it was different from the colleague English teacher, Summer; her emotional attachment to past identity and future identity provided self-related goals to construct her current role identity (Yang et al., 2021). Sheng's emotional attachment was derived from the increased responsibility of fulfilling the expectation of this teaching role (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). This suggests that fostering a sense of professional responsibility can facilitate identity verification. All these studies illustrated that the provision of positive information can effectively support their identity verification and professional growth, including community resources (e.g., community recognition and support) and personal resources (e.g., intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and emotional attachment).

Additionally, emotions act as motivators, facilitate identity changes, connect with teachers' cognitive abilities and emotional competence. Participants reported reflecting on or regulating their emotions to make one of their multiple identities more salient (e.g., caring identity and teaching identity). It can be attributed to the hierarchical nature of identity, where one of the multiple identities can be activated in a specific situation (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). It was found similar to the mediating role of emotion regulation in shaping university EFL teachers' motivating and caring identities salience (Morris, 2023) and the mediating role of reflection to make an elementary ESL teacher, Daniela's identity negotiation (Maddamsetti, 2021). Notably, beyond conventional emotion regulation strategies like emotion honesty (Gkonou & Miller, 2023) and suppression (Han et al., 2024), this study's findings on Sheng's emotion regulation strategies that shape his identity highlighted the influence of empathy in emotion regulation, a key component of emotional intelligence (EI) (Petrides, 2010). Unlike the mediating role of EI in the relationship between work engagement and teachers'

professional identity (Xing, 2022), this study highlighted the connection between EI (empathy) and identity through emotion regulation. All these differences also reflected the importance of teachers' cognitive and emotional competence in teaching young learners, who are sensitive to teachers' feedback (Butler, 2019) and possess strong emotional dependence on teachers (Zein, 2022).

Moreover, this study found the facilitative role of emotional competence like vulnerability in participants' identity development. The influence of vulnerability on Wei's and Sheng's differing digital identity dynamics supported the notion that it can either hinder identity verification by negatively affecting teachers' adaptation to contextual challenges or foster identity transformation through context-sensitive coping strategies (Kamali & Nazari, 2023). Such influence resonated with its transformative power to encourage a Korean EFL teacher teaching study-abroad returnee students, Sunmi, to reconsider her original beliefs and build confidence in challenging situations (Song, 2016). These insights suggested identity development as an interplay of cognition and emotion. Strengthening cognitive abilities and emotional competence can better prepare teachers to navigate emotional challenges and foster identity growth effectively.

Furthermore, this study emphasized the mutual interaction between emotions and identity, with identity influencing emotional experience, emotion regulation, and emotional labor. These findings were consistent with teachers' negative emotions from identity vulnerability caused by students' misbehaviors (Nazari & Karimpour, 2023) and parents' intrusion (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2023). This study also echoed the influence of identity on teachers' emotion regulation motives to fulfill their pedagogical goals (Han et al., 2024) and emotional labor by concealing negative feelings in front of the students in order to adhere to emotional rules (Maddamsetti, 2021). It can be explained that emotional rules, shaped by institutional policies and social expectations of the teaching role (Zembylas, 2002), influence teachers' emotion regulation strategies and emotional labor to exhibit organizationally wanted feelings in teaching (Yin et al., 2013).

More importantly, this study expanded on prior research, showing that emotional labor extends beyond merely concealing emotions to care for students (Liu et al., 2024; Yin & Lee, 2012) and to meet the demands of neoliberal and raciolinguistic policies (Maddamsetti, 2021) and encompassing adherence to cultural and linguistic dimension of emotional rules in EFL teaching. This includes avoiding Chinese in feedback (monolingual ideologies) and managing students' emotions to alleviate their foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). Furthermore, this study expanded the literature to emphasize the influence of identity on emotions (e.g., anxiety) through the adjustment of value (Wei's negative value of AI-driven teaching) and competence development (Sheng's improved digital skills). This study provided new insights into how teachers address emotional challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the dynamic connection between emotions and identity through an integrative approach. The identity dynamics were found to influence participants' emotional experience through their appraisals of value and control, as well as their emotion regulation and emotional labor through emotional rules. These emotions subsequently affected participants' identity verification and change through different pathways, forming a cyclical process. Based on this dynamic process, this study summarized four key implications to help EFL/ESL teachers better deal with emotional challenges and facilitate their identity development.

Firstly, pre-service training should focus on designing practical teaching activities with constructive feedback to increase student teachers' self-confidence and teaching abilities, fostering their positive value of the teaching profession and sense of responsibility as teachers. Secondly, teacher training programs should emphasize the development of both teachers' cognitive ability and emotional competence, including reflective skills, emotional intelligence to identify and manage students' emotions, emotion regulation, and open vulnerability. Thirdly, school administrators and policymakers should prioritize teachers' emotional labor under the cultural and linguistic emotional rules and provide community support, including preventing parental intrusion, critically implementing monolingual ideologies in language teaching, and providing a safe space for teachers to share their emotional stories for support.

The study was not without limitations. The data should be interpreted with caution, as this study was conducted over only one semester with two senior EFL teachers within the Chinese context. Exploring this dynamic connection among language teachers with varying teaching experiences in different teaching contexts would provide further insights. Additionally, the focus was restricted to teachers' achievement emotions. Future research should include a broader range of emotions, such as epistemic and social emotions, and emotional competence like emotional intelligence in the process of language identity construction.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-structured interview protocol

Q1: What motivated you to pursue a career as an EFL teacher?
Q2: How do you perceive or understand the professional identity of an EFL teacher?
Q3: What aspects of being an EFL teacher bring you the greatest sense of satisfaction?
Q4: Can you share your memorable emotional experiences as an EFL teacher?
Q5: How do you deal with such emotions?
Q6: Have you ever encountered an emotional event that led you to consider leaving your teaching position? If so, could you describe it?
Q7: What are the main challenges you currently face as an EFL teacher?
Q8: Do you have any strategies to deal with such challenges? If so, could you share it?
Q9: Do you have any suggestions for other teachers or administrators? If so, could you explain it?

Stimulated recall interview protocol

Q1: How did you feel at that time?
Q2: How did you regulate your own emotions at that time?
Q3: What role did you play as an EFL teacher at that time?
Q4: What do you think is the interconnection of emotions and your role identity at that time?
Q5: What's your reflective thinking about this lesson?

APPENDIX B**Code Book**

Code Name	Code Description	Exemplar Quotes
Achievement Emotions		
Enjoyment	Positive emotional experiences that indicate teachers' appraisal of the current activity, reflecting their high control over this activity and its outcomes as well as high values of this activity and its outcomes.	Sheng: I felt pride and happy when the young teachers I mentored won awards in teaching competitions.
Frustration	Negative emotional experiences that indicate teachers' appraisal of the current activity, which is not sufficiently controllable, such as parental intrusion.	Sheng: I didn't hit the child at all. I was merely stopping him from fighting with another student. I went to the principal to explain, but the principal didn't trust me and forced me to apologize.
Anger	Negative emotional experiences from the failure outcomes of the activity caused by others.	Sheng: I reminded that student to focus, but he swore at me. I suppressed my anger.
Anxiety	Negative emotional experiences that indicate teachers' appraisal of the prospective outcome of the activity, reflecting the high value of the activity and its outcomes and medium control of this activity and its outcomes (the failure may occur).	Wei: Last time I saw young teachers skilfully using AI-driven chatbots to assist student learning in teaching competitions, I was shocked and felt outdated...The anxiety doesn't last long.
Identity Dynamics		
Identity Authority	The positive information of teachers' perceptions as EFL teachers to obtain the ability to make choices without hesitation to verify their current identity, such as emotional attachment and self-confidence.	Sheng: I wouldn't say I have a passion for this profession, but I do have feelings for it. I have already become accustomed to being responsible for my students and teaching...
Identity vulnerability	Teachers' lack of control over crucial working conditions when they receive negative feedback from others, such as parental intrusion.	Wei: I lightly tapped a student with a book for not doing his homework. His mother argued that I didn't care about her child. She even spat at me at the school gate...I'm frustrated and have no one to confide in.
Identity Salience	Teachers' behavior to invoke a specific identity across situations, reflecting a degree of identity change.	Wei: I didn't care about his learning at that time. English, unlike Chinese, lacks a natural language environment, making it inherently challenging for students. His emotional well-being is my top priority.
Identity Stability	Teachers' resistance to change.	Wei: At my age, lacking AI skills isn't embarrassing. I believe traditional teaching still educates students effectively.
Identity Adjustment	Teachers' behavior adjustment to meet the identity standard (a set of expectations in the form of meanings in culture).	Sheng: Language teaching is interactive, inevitably integrating with AI and compelling teachers to transform themselves. I seize every opportunity to learn new technologies and apply them in teaching.