

The Influences of Online Teaching on Iranian EAP Teachers' Professional Identity (Re) Construction

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Abstract

In recent years, online education has become a significant part of teachers' professional career. Moreover, it has been argued that contexts of teaching are significantly influential in EAP teachers' practices and identities. Despite these points, little research has examined EAP teachers' identity construction in online contexts. The present study addressed this gap by exploring the impacts of online education on 20 Iranian EAP teachers' identity construction. The participants were interviewed and thematic analysis was run to analyze the data. The findings revealed that online education influenced the teachers' personal, pedagogical, and social identities. More specifically, it was found that the teachers could reconstruct their identities in light of the challenges and affordances of online teaching and adopt new identities that featured concerns with both their EAP and educator responsibilities. These findings are then discussed and implications for teacher educators are offered so that they could help EAP teachers construct their identities in online settings effectively.

Keywords: EAP teacher identity, identity reconstruction, Iranian EAP teachers, online education, online teacher identity

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Introduction

Over the past decades, the interest in the research on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers has substantially grown. This emerging body of knowledge attempts to explore different dimensions of EAP teachers' professionalism, including their disciplinary knowledge, institutional work, and sociocultural performances (Alexander, 2012, Atai et al., 2022; Dhillon & Murray, 2021, Campion, 2016, Ding & Campion, 2016, Farrell & Yang, 2019; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). Moreover, in an attempt to discuss the "conditions and materiality that govern what [EAP practitioners] can realistically achieve or would like to achieve" (p. 70), Ding (2019) discussed the role of three sociocultural, institutional, and disciplinary factors that influence EAP teachers' identity construction. From this perspective, not only do EAP teachers function as individuals developing mastery over content, but they are also in the process of constructing their identities as professionals (Tao & Gao, 2018). A significant part of EAP teachers' identification process involves the contexts that they work in. In this regard, Basturkmen (2014) and Campion (2016) have argued that the contextual parameters that shape the environment in which EAP teachers work can significantly influence their understanding and practice of their profession.

One such context that has gained increasing attention in recent years is online teaching. Online contexts "are now seen as flexible and effective ways to reach teachers" (van Bommel et al., 2020, p. 1) in that they, according to Lantz-Andersson et al. (2018), could significantly define and shape teachers' identities. However, despite the recognition that EAP teachers' work and identity construction are profoundly shaped by the contexts they work in, little has been done on their identity in online contexts, as also argued by Atai et al. (2022). Thus, there is a gap in the EAP literature with regard to EAP teachers' professional identity construction in online contexts. The current study aims to fill this gap by exploring Iranian EAP teachers' identity construction in online contexts. This line of research is particularly significant because (a) little research has explored EAP teachers' identity in online contexts, and (b) it could offer implications for teachers and teacher educators in how to tailor online

instruction to teachers' identities.

Literature review

EAP Teacher Identity Construction

Since the seminal work of Dudley-Evans and St John's in 1998, which defined the roles of EAP teachers, research on EAP instructors has experienced a significant surge in growth. (Campion, 2016; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). While Dudley-Evans and St John enumerated six roles of EAP teachers, later developments have added to these roles, including intercultural workers or interpersonal knowledge constructors, which have been chiefly discussed in Basturkmen (2014). Moreover, in his review of research on EAP teachers, Nazari (2020) discussed the lack of research on different dimensions of EAP teachers' professionalism. Defining EAP teacher education research as "studying practitioners' (subject-specific) cognition(s), the way they practically address the interplay between content and language, and the multiplicity of factors influencing and being influenced by their professionalism and professional career" (p. 9), Nazri (2020) advocated for more research on EAP teacher identity construction, which has also been continued by other researchers.

Over the past decades, there has been a significant increase in research focused on the construction of identity among EAP teachers (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Tao & Gao, 2018). This body of knowledge shows that EAP teachers could take agentive roles in their own identity construction in the different ecologies that define their work (Mahendra, 2020). Furthermore, EAP teachers could be influenced by the various sociocultural and structural forces that shape their identification processes. In this regard, Ding (2019) argued that a large part of the way EAP teachers construct their identities is determined by how policy and planning and broader discourses and dominant cultures are socioculturally defined. From this perspective, sociocultural and institutional contextualities of teaching are central to EAP teachers' identity construction (Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). Additionally, the content knowledge that defines EAP work is also recognized as a key factor in that EAP teachers should balance language and

content knowledge because content forms many of the daily interactions that occur between teachers and students, and thus shape their identities (Gu & Benson, 2015; Rebenko et al., 2021; Tao & Gao, 2018).

For example, Atai et al. (2022) explored the process of identity construction of a novice teacher of Sports Sciences in the Iranian context. Drawing on data from interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals, the authors found that the teacher faced challenges in effectively constructing his identities, which were associated with emotional and agentic conflicts as well. Moreover, Tao and Gao (2018) explored the identity construction of Chinese teachers and found that their identities were defined by sociocultural contextualities, disciplinary considerations, and personal understandings. In another study, Chang (2017) explored how an EAP teacher moved to the ESP context, and how this process was replete with identity and emotional tensions, which complicated the professional side of her work.

Online Teacher Identity Construction

Following the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, many educational institutions moved to online settings. This form of learning delivery brought about ramifications for the way teachers defined their identities. Flores and Swennen (2020) argued “[t]he implications and effects of the pandemic on education are yet to be known; indeed, they will surely be more challenging for educators and learners in more fragile and unstable contexts” (p. 1). Relatedly, it was later revealed that online education could challenge the teachers in many respects, especially in relation to their identity construction. From this perspective, Parsons et al. (2019) argued that online settings “can effectively support individual teachers’ professional learning if it allows for social educative engagement with other professionals” (pp. 34-35). Thus, online education can bring about multifarious contributions for the way teachers construct their identities in relation to the other members and the content of the work.

In online education, researchers have developed various understandings of how this context shapes teacher identities. As an example, Robson (2018) proposed a framework for exploring teachers’ online identities.

His framework was grounded on the idea that capturing teacher identities should move beyond describing the factors that influence such an identification process toward accounting for the complexity of this setting. His framework involved the components of agency, social complexity, context, and structure. Moreover, Lantz-Andersson et al. (2018) reviewed research on teachers' online communities and suggested that there is a lack of research on teacher identity construction and that this area should receive more attention from researchers.

Motivated by these ideas, research has addressed teachers' identity construction in online contexts (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2019; Lu & Cruwood, 2015; Nazari & Seyri, 2023; Nazari & Xodabande, 2022a). For instance, Nazari and Seyri (2023) explored six Iranian teachers' identity construction during the COVID-19 pandemic. They collected data from semi-structured interviews, self-reported practices, and online interactions. The study findings revealed that "Subject-related instructional variation; tensions, such as low agency, greater responsibility, and low professional preparation; emotional labour; conceptual change in becoming technophile teachers; (in)congruities in identity extension; and enhanced reflectivity" (p. 1) were the major factors defining the teachers' online identities. Moreover, Nazari and Xodabande (2022b) used sociocultural theory and more specifically a genetic analysis approach in tracking five Iranian teachers' online interactions and collegial identity during participation in a professional development course structured around mobile phone usage. Data were collected from the teachers' online interactions and semi-structured interviews. Data analysis showed that the teachers referred to different aspects of their membership and highlighted how collegial support and gendered identities featured in their professional and effective membership in the course.

The aforementioned literature reveals that research has not adequately examined teachers' identity construction both in EAP and online contexts. Thus, there is a need for more research on each of these contexts. More importantly, there is far less research available on EAP teachers' identity construction in online contexts. This issue is important because many classes have been delivered to the online context and it is needed to explore how this context shapes EAP teachers' identities. Moreover, considering that EAP

teaching is significantly dependent on the context in which it is delivered (Atai et al., 2022; Ding, 2019), exploring how online teaching can influence EAP teachers' identities warrants more empirical attention. This, subsequently, can assist teachers and teacher educators in running professional online development courses more effectively, knowing how online teaching influences teachers' identity construction. The current study aims to explore this issue among Iranian EAP teachers who taught at different universities in Iran by addressing the following question:

How do Iranian EAP teachers perceive the process of constructing their identities in online teaching?

Method

Context

This study was conducted during the first year of COVID-19 pandemic when the higher education of Iran moved to online education like many parts of the world. In Iran, EAP teaching is delivered in both English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purpose (ESAP) forms, and teachers generally come from the field of Applied Linguistics. Policy and planning of this sector are done by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. Moreover, the SAMT organization designs the textbooks that are used by different disciplines. This organization "has been supporting growing needs of the higher education of Iran by composing, compiling, translating and publishing textbooks, and journals specific to writing university textbooks in collaboration with educators, professors and researchers of prominent universities and research institutes" (SAMT, 2022)

Participants

The participants of this study were twenty English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers from Iran who had been teaching in online settings for at least two years. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling (in particular maximum variation sampling as they had different experience and background ranges), based on their experience and willingness to participate in the study. They were all employed by different universities in

Iran and had diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender, and educational qualifications. This was done to gain as much useful information as possible from the teachers regarding their identity construction in online teaching.

The participants were Persian native speakers, ranged in age from 31 to 47 and their teaching experience ranged from a few months to 15 years. All participants held at least a master's degree in English language teaching or a related field and had extensive experience teaching EAP courses to Iranian university students in various fields of study including medicine, chemistry, engineering. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

The participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study and provided written consent to participate. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of research involving human subjects.

Design and Data Collection Procedure

For the purposes of this study, a basic qualitative research design was selected (Creswell, 2014) as it helps researchers obtain in-depth information about people's ideas and perceptions. The design of this project is structured around a flexible and iterative process, allowing for the exploration of new ideas and themes as they emerge from the data. It employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method and thematic analysis were applied to the interview transcripts as the method of data analysis. Since we could not have access to the classes of the teachers due to systemic problems and the teachers' own discretion, we could not observe their classes. The interviews were conducted via phone calls or online via video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom and Skype, to accommodate the participants' geographical locations and schedules. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Prior to the interviews, a set of open-ended questions was developed based on the research question and objective of the study. The questions were in line with the definition of identity Yazan (2018) provided as "teachers'

dynamic self-conception and imagination of themselves as teachers, which shifts as they participate in varying communities, interact with other individuals, and position themselves (and are positioned by others) in social contexts” (p. 1). The questions were designed to elicit the participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices related to their professional identity construction in online teaching. The questions were pilot-tested with two EAP teachers who were not included in the study to ensure their clarity and relevance. The teachers' responses led to minor changes that strengthened the accuracy of the questions for the purposes of the study.

The interviews were conducted individually with each participant, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English, as it was the language of instruction for EAP courses in Iran. The interviews were conducted by the first author, who had experience conducting qualitative research and had received training in interview techniques.

The interviews began with a brief introduction clear explanation of the study's purpose and objectives. The participants were then asked to provide their demographic information, including their educational qualifications, teaching experience, and online teaching experience. The interview questions then focused on the participants' experiences and perceptions of their professional identity construction in online teaching, including their beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices related to online teaching.

The interviews were conducted in a conversational style, allowing the participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely. The interviewer used probing questions to clarify and deepen the participants' responses, and encouraged them to provide examples and anecdotes to illustrate their points. After each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved identifying patterns and themes in the participants' responses. The analysis was conducted by the first author, who read and re-read the transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns and subsequently the themes were then organized into subthemes.

The process involved moving from codes to themes in which first the codes emerging from the teachers' responses were noted down and then they were developed into broader themes. The themes were analyzed comparatively to see their accuracy and were reviewed and discussed with the co-authors to ensure their validity and reliability. Inter-coder reliability was obtained by asking a fellow researcher to independently code the same set of data using the same coding scheme or guidelines. There were some discrepancies in the coding and the coders discussed and resolved them until an agreement was reached. The level of agreement between the coders was ICR=88% in percentage agreement. Moreover, we used member-checking of the data with the participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations and minor points of disagreement were resolved.

Findings

Based on the obtained data, online teaching impacts EAP teachers' professional identity in three personal, pedagogical, and social aspects. These major themes are presented in three tables along with their subthemes. Each sub-theme is then elaborated on.

Table 1

Personal Identities as a Result of Online Teaching

The impacts of online education	Resulting identity
Poor IT infrastructure, limited access to the required technology and low internet speed	Become more patient and hard working
More time-consuming than face to face teaching	Become effective time manager
The need for teachers to embrace new ways of teaching and learning	Become open minded
The transition to online teaching requires teachers to adapt to new technologies and teaching methodologies	Become more adaptive
The need for teachers to handle an online environment well and keep up-to-date with technology	Become confident technology user, Technology enthusiast
Teachers' understanding of students' numerous problems while learning online	Become more empathic

EAP teachers' personal aspects of professional identity were formed and transformed by online teaching. In this regard, six subthemes were extracted from the interviews that were related to personal identities EAP teachers construct. The majority of the EAP teachers stated that due to the lack of proper IT infrastructure, limited access to the required technology and low internet speed, they had to deal with numerous technical problems, especially at the beginning of their career as online teachers. As a result, they became more patient and hardworking:

Online teaching has made me more patient because I face many problems that convince me to be a more patient person. (Sara)

Moreover, several EAP teachers stated that teaching online is more time consuming as Zeinab said:

I have to repeat myself more in online classes. It is not like in face to face classes that you could tell if students understood the lesson by looking at their facial reactions and expressions.

Therefore, some of the teachers came to the realization that they had to manage their time more effectively both in and out of class and eventually they had to train themselves to become effective time managers:

Because we had many problems in teaching online and managing time, I looked for strategies to save time and I did it by thinking about my use of time. (Fateme)

With the introduction of online teaching to Iranian universities due to the pandemic, EAP teachers cited that they were first confused and sometimes frustrated to see a completely different teaching context. As for the requirements of Covid safety protocols, online education was obligatory. Teachers stated that they had no choice but to embrace new ways of teaching and learning they previously did not take seriously. As a result, they became more open-minded towards other teaching approaches when they found out more about online teaching classroom conduct and methodology as Sahar's statement shows this:

I used to think there are only a hand full of acceptable ways to teach EAP. When I started to teach online, I realized there are other new ways of

teaching that should not be ignored.

Teachers also noted that the transition to online teaching required teachers to adapt to new technologies and teaching methodologies. They had to give up on their old and sometimes rigid beliefs on teaching mythology and adapt themselves and their teaching styles to this new environment as Fatemeh explained that:

At first, I felt frustrated. I didn't know how to teach with those online tools. Gradually, I started to adapt my personal teaching preferences to fit this new environment.

The EAP teachers expressed that they felt more confident at online teaching after the first few months of struggling. After teaching online for a while, they saw themselves as efficacious users of technology as they could run their classrooms on a range of different teaching tools and platforms. Some of the teachers talked about their excitement every time they found out about a new tool and their eagerness to try it in their teaching. Sina stated that:

I have become really interested in technologies and their application in educational technology. I am a member of different technology groups now to be informed of the latest trends in technology.

The last but not the least subtheme relates to EAP teachers' change in their personality. They stated that as they were witnessing first-hand the problems students were having in online environments, they became more empathetic towards their students. Zahra said:

I used to believe students always look for excuses to be absent, leave or cancel classes. The experience of teaching online made me realize that their problems are real especially in online environments. I become more compassionate and tried to help them as much as I could.

Table 2*Pedagogical Identities as Result of Online Teaching*

The impacts of online education	Resulting identity
The need to tailor the existing materials to the needs of students and to create more engaging and interactive activities	Content creator
Special sophisticated pre-planning is required in online teaching	Online course designer
Change in teaching methods and practice and lack of student participation and collaboration	Become creative
Incorporating group works and peer reviewing, managing online discussions, setting rules and regulations	Online manager
Promoting student-centeredness, encouraging learners to assume greater responsibility for their own learning	Online facilitator
Providing feedback online in a range of innovative ways	Online feedback provider
Dealing with the challenges of online teaching including maintaining interactivity and focus among my students.	Become reflective
Troubleshooting any technical issues that arise during online classes	Become a problem solver
The need for teachers to get familiar with the communication norms in academia including academic writing, critical thinking especially in the virtual environment	Online academic English specialist
Challenges to assume appropriate professional identity (most online educational platforms reinforce teaching roles such as a classroom manager/lecturer rather than a facilitator)	Become a lecturer
Using more translation due to lack of nonverbal cues and facial expressions	Become a translator
The responsibilities of providing new evaluation methods to assess academic progress in online environments such as assessing digital portfolios	Become digital assessment specialist

The pedagogical identities that EAP teachers constructed are, as expected, by far more than their personal and social identities. Twelve identities were extracted; each is further elaborated on in order of their

presentation in Table 2.

When EAP teachers first started to teach online, they soon realized the need to create materials usable and tailored to this new environment. They started to make or find photos, PowerPoint slides, videos, podcasts, and many other online tasks and activities. Susan said:

Most of the materials I used in my classes were unusable in online teaching, even the book. I had to make PowerPoint slides for the book I used because there was no electronic version of it. To teach academic genres, I created some videos and shared them in their online groups.

The teachers also held that they had to design an online course where all the materials needed to be digital. As online course designers, EAP teachers needed to tailor their courses to meet the specific needs of their students, to incorporate multimedia resources, interactive activities, and other digital tools to enhance the learning experience of their students. Designing online courses also allowed these EAP teachers to have more control over the content and structure of their courses, enabling them to create a cohesive and comprehensive curriculum that covers all necessary topics and skills:

I think that the pandemic gave me the opportunity to design the lessons more effectively and I included many more interesting topics (Sara).


This can be especially important in EAP instruction, where students may need to develop specific language and academic skills to succeed in their academic pursuits. In addition, a few EAP teachers also mentioned that they had to carefully pre-plan their lessons and even create plan B and C and, in case technology fails.

The teachers indicated that changes in pedagogy, teaching and learning practices were huge which made them look for innovative teaching methods and became more creative in their use of online tools and their teaching practices. They stated that running an online classroom was drastically different from a face-to face one. Different set of rules were needed to be established to regulate different online activities including group work, peer collaboration and classroom discussions. Maryam states that:

Managing an online class is really hard. For instance, I once asked

students to discuss a topic in 6 breakout rooms in Adobe connect. As it is not possible for the teacher to be present in all rooms simultaneously, so in some rooms students were not participating or were talking about some unrelated topics. It was also difficult and time-consuming to provide quality feedback to them. After that incidence, I asked them to do the discussion part using an online forum which turned out to be more efficient.

Moreover, they stated that they worked hard and spent more time on finding workable solutions for the complex problems they were facing in a new situation. According to the participants of the study, one of the major problems they had to tackle was limited interpersonal interaction in online environments which made both teachers and students less interested in online learning and teaching and made classes less engaging and appealing. The teachers stated that they tried hard to think creatively to find new ways of maintaining interaction in online teaching as Mohsen indicated that:

I tried to be more creative and use different resources to make my  classes less boring.

The professional identity of teachers as online facilitators in online teaching, as stated by EAP teachers, involves developing skills and competencies that are specific to the virtual environment. This includes using technology to engage students, creating interactive and collaborative learning experiences, and providing timely feedback and support. EAP teachers teaching online believed that it is not possible to be a facilitator in the same way as face-to-face teaching. They thought that, when teaching online, teachers should encourage learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning and promote student-centeredness. Elnaz said that:

I try to encourage my students to take an active role in their own learning process and look for and rely on additional online resources to improve their language skills.

Teachers who viewed themselves as online feedback providers recognized that feedback was essential for student learning and growth. They cited their use of a variety of methods to provide feedback, including written

comments, audio recordings, and video conferencing. They also mentioned their use of online tools such as learning management systems and digital assessment tools to provide feedback on assignments and track student progress. To facilitate learning in an online environment, EAP teachers utilized a variety of tools to and provided online feedback on their writings using word processor. Sara said:

I would ask my students to read certain passages and send me the summary of it in the form of voice messages in Telegram. I would listen and give them feedback in their language use in voice messages.

The EAP teachers also believed that they have become more reflective in online teaching due to various reasons such as adapting to a new teaching environment, lack of face-to-face interaction, increased flexibility, and technology integration. They said online teaching requires them to adapt to new tools and platforms, which can be challenging at first. This may lead them to reflect on their teaching practices and find ways to improve. Additionally, the majority of teachers thought that reflecting on their teaching methods can help them find ways to engage students and create a more interactive learning experience. Amir commented:

When my online classes end, I usually think about my experience in those classes, I try to learn from my experiences, good or bad, for my future classes.

The EAP teachers held that in online teaching, teachers were required to become problem solvers as they face various challenges such as technical issues, student engagement, and assessment. Teachers stated that they needed to identify and solve problems quickly and efficiently to ensure that students receive a quality education. In this regard, Elham's statement could be referred to:

When teaching online, it is not unusual for something to go wrong. I think every challenge that arises is an opportunity to find creative solutions and improve the learning experience for my students.

In online teaching, the teachers argued that they also played the role of digital assessment specialist. This means that they were responsible for

evaluating student learning and providing feedback on their progress using various digital tools and platforms. Sahar mentioned:

I am fascinated by the capacity of online assessment. Ever since I have learned about online tests and quizzes. I often create online tests to assess my students' progress. They are easier to administer and score and students like it.

The EAP teachers participating in the study stated that may lecture more in online teaching because it is a common method of delivering content in virtual environments. Additionally, they indicated that online teaching may require more direct instruction and guidance from the teacher, as students may have limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction or support from peers. As a result, the EAP teachers pointed out that may find themselves lecturing more frequently in order to provide the necessary structure and direction for their online courses. Susan voiced this concern:

I tend to lecture more in online classes. Because of the limitations of the technology to convey information effectively, lecturing seems like the easiest option.

Some of the EAP teachers reported that they usually translate more in online classes because they want to ensure that their students understand the material. Online classes may present more challenges for students who are not fluent in the language of instruction, so teachers may use translation as a tool to facilitate comprehension as Mohsen said:

I relied more on translating during online teaching as a way to make sure students fully understand the passage.

Table 3

Social Identities as a Result of Online Teaching

The impacts of online education	Resulting identity
The need for teachers to mentor or coach individual students on tech use	Become technology advisor
Setting online office hours and using communication applications as valuable ways to establish one-on-one communication, listen to student feedback and help them with	Online mentor

their assignments or questions	
Teachers' recognition of the importance of asking for support during difficult times	Support seeker
Collaborative relationships among colleagues such as sharing ideas, resources and strategies through creating virtual professional communities	Online collaborator
Teachers struggle to build rapport with their students, being unable to rely on nonverbal cues or physical presence to communicate with students.	Online rapport establisher
Engaging in continuous professional development to adapt to new online tools	Become a lifelong learner
The need to be part of a recognized EAP community and the affordances of internet for online international forums and communities	Active international network participant

With regard to the social identities teachers construct, seven identities along with their subthemes were extracted. Each one is further elaborated on in order of their presentation in Table 3.

The teachers stated that they gradually became technology advisors in online teaching because they needed to have a good understanding of the technology tools and platforms they were using to deliver their classes. They needed to be able to troubleshoot technical issues, provide guidance on how to use different features, and help students navigate the online learning environment. By becoming technology advisors, teachers believed they could ensure their online classes run smoothly and that their students have access to the best possible learning resources. Parisa held that:

I am not just teaching English; I also strive to equip my students with the right digital tools to excel in their studies.

EAP Teachers stated that they act as online mentors to provide guidance and support to their students, help students navigate the online learning platform, to foster a positive and supportive learning environment, to provide feedback on assignments, and answer questions about course content. They also stated that they offered encouragement and motivation to keep students engaged and on track with their studies. One of the teachers made a

statement in this regard:

I feel privileged to be a mentor to my online students, guiding them towards their academic success and personal growth. (Zohreh)

The EAP teachers who viewed themselves as support seekers recognized that they could not operate in isolation and that they needed to collaborate with other educators, administrators, and support staff to provide the best possible learning experience for their students. They actively sought out opportunities for professional development, such as attending workshops, conferences, and webinars, and engage in ongoing conversations with colleagues to share ideas and best practices. Fatemeh, one of the EAP teachers stated that:

Before starting to teach online, I preferred to rely more on my own abilities than asking for support, but I have changed ever since when I faced this new situation with novel problems.

The teachers believed that their identity as online collaborator is a crucial aspect of their role in online teaching environments. They mentioned that collaboration allowed them to share ideas, resources, and strategies, which could lead to a more effective and engaging learning experience for students. According to the teachers, collaboration in online teaching could be with teachers such as sharing lesson plans, co-teaching as Mina said:

I used to think that teaching online meant I was alone in my virtual classroom, but now I see that I can easily connect with other educators to share teaching ideas, resources and lesson plans.

Or it could be with students, including being present online and providing feedback on student work as Amir said:

Since there is no physical presence, I have to increase my online presence so that students feel that I am more available and more reachable to guide them.

Some of the teachers mentioned that online teaching requires them to be proficient in the use of technology and digital tools as well as to stay up-to-date with new developments and trends in online education. They referred to various ways of learning, such as attending professional development

workshops and conferences, participating in online courses and webinars, reading educational literature, and collaborating with other educators. They referred to themselves as lifelong learners as one of the teachers indicated:

From the moment I started to teach online, I have been constantly learning and growing alongside my students, discovering new ways to engage and connect with them in this ever-evolving world of technology.
(Ramin)

Moreover, the teachers believed that in the rapidly changing field of online education, it is essential for teachers to continually update their knowledge and skills to ensure they are providing best possible learning experience for their students. According to the participants of the study, one way for teachers to do this is to become active international network participants in online social networks and become actively engaged in global communities of practice related to EAP instruction. Sara commented:

Before starting online teaching, I was not aware of the existing international community for EAP teachers. As I was looking for professional development opportunities online, I become familiar with many international forums related to online teaching and EAP. They would set up online speeches and conferences.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how online teaching influenced Iranian EAP teachers' professional identity construction. It was found that online education had significant effects on the teachers' personal, pedagogical, and social identities. With respect to personal identities, it was found that the teachers in this study faced a multitude of challenges that influenced their identity construction. Particularly, online education influenced the teachers' personal attributes and characteristics in terms of influencing their socio-affective states. Previous research (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Tao & Gao, 2018) has shown that EAP teachers' identities are highly influenced by their personal characteristics. However, the findings of this study reveal that the challenges of online education have added to these complexities in that the teachers have

defined new identities for themselves in terms of becoming more adaptable and enthusiast. Thus, it appears that online education can significantly influence EAP teachers' personal identities by moving them toward adopting new identities that facilitate their work in these contexts. This finding is also in line with Lantz-Andersson et al. (2018) who found that online communities are likely to shape the personalized dimensions of teachers' understandings.

At the pedagogical level, it was found that online education influenced the EAP teachers' identities in a way that they were more oriented toward reconstructing their identities in relation to the content of EAP. The range of identities that emerged from the data showed that content figured as a key dimension of the teachers' online identities. This finding is in line with the role identities that Atai et al. (2018) mentioned for Iranian EAP teachers. Moreover, the findings align with Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) and Basturkmen (2014) in terms of the EAP teachers' role identities. Nevertheless, the findings add to these discussions because they provide a more comprehensive categorization of EAP teachers' identities. Moreover, these findings are more worthwhile because they paint the picture of EAP teacher identities in online settings, which is a novel dimension of EAP teachers' work. In particular, these findings corroborate the claim made by Lantz-Andersson (2018) that "the continuous growth of teachers' online interaction for professional use reflect[s] a growing sense amongst teachers that these are meaningful and beneficial professional activities" (p. 313) because the teachers' constructed identities show how they have come to adopt new roles and identities.

It was also found that the teachers' reconstructed identities were not limited to personal and pedagogical dimensions, and they came to develop identities that extended to a social level. It has consistently been argued that EAP is closely related to and defined by the sociocultural contextualities of teaching (e.g., Ding, 2019; Rebenko et al., 2021; Tao & Gao, 2018). Such a character of EAP teacher professionalism stems from the nature of this area in that, as Campion (2016) emphatically argued, EAP attempts to constantly respond to the demands of the society. Similar observations have been made by Ding (2019) regarding the effects of neoliberalist forces on EAP teaching and

specifically on EAP teacher identity construction.

However, the findings of the current study show that not only can online education influence the EAP teachers' technology-related identities, but it also shapes their EAP identities. That is, the teachers reconstructed their identities in both technological and EAP terms. This finding is a novel finding in the context of both online and education and especially EAP teaching. This finding shows how the teachers could extend beyond their institutional level and adopt identities that help them in both settings. This finding is in line with Atai et al. (2022) and Tao and Gao (2018) in showing the complexity of EAP teacher identities. Moreover, it shows how context of teaching, as argued by Basturkmen (2014) and Campion (2016) discussed, comes to significantly influence EAP teachers' diverse identities, which happened in particular relation to EAP teachers' identities in online education in this study.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how online education influences Iranian EAP teachers' professional identity construction. The study findings revealed that online education provided a context that profoundly influenced the restructuring of the teachers' identities in personal, pedagogical, and social levels. It was found that the teachers' identities are significantly defined by the content of EAP teaching as well as their adoption of the role of an online educator. These findings add to the body of knowledge on both EAP teaching and online education by showing how context makes and helps teachers adopt identities that respond to their needs in that context. Moreover, the findings show the multidimensionality and complexity of EAP teacher identities in being online educators in that these identities are formed by personal, social, pedagogical, institutional, and disciplinary considerations.

The study findings offer implications for teachers and teacher educators. Teachers can benefit from the study findings by reflecting more on their identities and how online teaching influences their professional practices. This will help them become more cognizant of how online teaching shapes their identities and professional performance. In addition, in their discussion of EAP

teacher professionalism, Atai and Nejadghanbar (2017) argue that lack of systematic teacher education in Iran “has resulted in a fuzzy state in which teachers basically follow their own tentative conceptualizations of the nature of EAP instruction” (p. 44). The findings of this study could provide a useful alternative for such teacher education courses. In this regard, teacher education courses can embrace the identities that this study showed because they can help the teachers contribute to teachers’ professional growth in different personal, pedagogical, and social terms. Moreover, these findings could also be helpful for online education courses because this study is one of the few ones that offers such a neat categorization of online teacher identities. Thus, these identities could be the focus of professional development courses so that the teachers face fewer tensions in transitioning to online education.

The current study had some limitations that could be addressed in future research. The first limitation is that data were only collected from interviews. It is apparent that collecting data from more instruments such as reflective journals and classroom observations could effectively unpack different dimensions of EAP teachers’ online identities. The second limitation concerns the number of teachers. Future research can examine EAP teachers’ identities with a greater number of teachers, especially if done across different contexts. It would also be helpful to explore how EAP teachers’ practice in online education influences their identities because EAP teachers’ practice carries the additional component of content in comparison to general English education. It is hoped that the findings of this study could help EAP teachers and teacher educators effectively address the challenges and construct their identities more effectively.

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Appendix

Interview Questions



1. How has your experience with online teaching impacted your professional identity as an EAP teacher?
2. Have you experienced any challenges in maintaining a sense of professional identity while teaching online? If so, can you describe these challenges?
3. How do you think that online teaching affects the way that you interact with your students and colleagues, and what impact does this have on your professional identity?
4. Have you noticed any changes in the way that you approach lesson planning or curriculum development as a result of teaching online?
5. Do you feel that your professional identity as an EAP teacher is influenced by the technology and tools that you use to teach online? If so, how?
6. How do you think that your professional identity is affected by the increased flexibility and autonomy that comes with teaching online?
7. Do you believe that online teaching has led to any changes in your teaching style or pedagogical approach, and if so, how has this impacted your professional identity?
8. Have you noticed any differences in the way that students perceive you as a teacher when you are teaching online versus in-person? If so, can you describe these differences and their impact on your professional identity?
9. How do you balance the need for student engagement and interaction with the limitations of online teaching platforms?
10. How do you build rapport and establish trust with students when teaching online?
11. In what ways do you believe that online teaching has impacted your ability to assess student learning and provide feedback?
12. Have you noticed any differences in the types of assignments or assessments that are most effective when teaching online versus in-person?
13. How do you maintain a sense of community and collaboration among students when teaching online?
14. How do you balance the need for structure and organization with the flexibility that comes with online teaching?
15. In what ways do you believe that online teaching has impacted your professional development and continuing education as an EAP teacher?