

Multiplicity for Survival: English Language Teachers' Identity Performance in Iranian Private Language Institutes

Multiplicidad para la supervivencia: la expresión de la identidad de los profesores de inglés en institutos privados de idiomas en Irán

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This interpretivist multiple case study investigates how five teachers at Iranian private language institutes strategically perform their frontstage (classroom) and backstage (private) personas. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Findings reveal that teachers consistently perform frontstage personas that contrast with their backstage selves, adjusting their identities to students' demographics, institutional expectations, and economic pressures. Identity performance emerged as both a common challenge and pedagogical necessity, sustained through surface and deep acting. By reframing teacher identity as a contextual performance through a poststructuralist-dramaturgical lens, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of identities in English language teaching.

Keywords: dramaturgical theory, post-structuralism, teacher identity, teacher performance

Este estudio de caso, de carácter múltiple e interpretativo, investiga cómo cinco docentes de institutos de lenguas privados representan estratégicamente sus personajes tanto en el aula como en el ámbito privado. Los datos se recopilieron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y se encontró que los docentes representan personajes en el aula que contrastan con sus identidades privadas. Así, sus identidades se ajustan a las características demográficas de los estudiantes, a las expectativas institucionales y a las presiones económicas. La expresión de la identidad emergió como un desafío común y una necesidad pedagógica, sustentada por representaciones superficiales y profundas. Al replantear la identidad docente como representación contextual desde una perspectiva posestructuralista-dramatúrgica, esta investigación contribuye a una comprensión más profunda de la multiplicidad de la identidad en la enseñanza del inglés.

Palabras clave: identidad docente, posestructuralismo, representación docente, teoría dramatúrgica

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Introduction

Recently, teacher identity has been at the forefront of research on teacher education, especially for English language teaching (ELT). Encompassing key elements such as commitment, self-esteem, agency, and self-efficacy, teacher identity significantly shapes how teachers evolve professionally (Richards, 2023), refine their teaching skills, and collaborate with colleagues (Yazan, 2023). Teacher identity also affects teachers' perceptions of effective teaching, the roles they adopt (e.g., guide, mentor, or manager), and their teaching purpose (e.g., empowering students or fostering autonomy; Richards, 2023). Furthermore, it has been shown that a strong teacher identity promotes retention in the profession, encourages participation in professional development, and enhances the enjoyment of teaching (van Lankveld et al., 2021).

Teacher identity has been examined in relation to contextual factors (van Lankveld et al., 2017), historic-sociocultural factors (Derakhshan et al., 2023), race and gender (Park, 2017; Vitanova, 2018), the students' language proficiency level (Derakhshan et al., 2024), working conditions (Canrinus et al., 2011), school organization (Day et al., 2005; Nazari & Karimpour, 2022), and teacher emotions (Song, 2016; Wolff & De Costa, 2017; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

Many studies that focus on English language teacher identity (e.g., Gholamshahi et al., 2021; Nazari & Karimpour, 2022; Nazari et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025) regard it as a combination of authentic and adaptive elements shaped by internal beliefs and external demands. Internally, teachers construct their professional identities by reflecting on the contrast between their current selves and their ideal ones (El-Soussi, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025). Externally, many teachers experience tensions between their personal identities and those they are compelled to perform for their managers, supervisors, and learners, among others. Teachers navigate these demands by adopting different identities (Gholamshahi et al., 2021). In

this sense, teachers perform multiple identities in relation to their students, institutional culture, and sociocultural expectations more broadly. For example, recently on a LinkedIn post (Raeisy, 2025), an Iranian English teacher described her identity performance in different situations:

One term, the class is full of guys, and it feels like a martial arts gym! My animus rises to the top. Another term, there are mostly ladies, and mid-lesson we end up talking about diets, cosmetics, turmeric lattes, matcha, and more. Sometimes the class is full of teens and younger students, and my inner child gets more active. Then comes a wave of adults and middle-aged folks, and the class turns into a philosophy café! (Translated by the author)

These types of narratives illustrate that identity is enacted in real-time interactions, thereby revealing the multiple, multifaceted, contradictory, and context-dependent nature of English language teacher identity (Norton, 2010). The present study seeks to advance understanding of English language teachers' professional identity within Iran's increasingly market-driven private language institute sector, a context that is largely overlooked in current research. By adopting an interpretivist multiple-case study approach, I analyze how teachers perform multiple identities amid economic precarity and client-centered pedagogical pressures. The study extends Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor and Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labor, demonstrating how teachers' identity performances function as adaptive strategies. By situating these dynamics within Iran's socioeconomic and institutional realities, I aim to challenge Western-centric perceptions in ELT and to highlight identity as a performative notion shaped by broader structural forces. Specifically, the present study focuses on English teachers' lived experiences in Iranian private language schools to explore how and why they perform different identities in the classroom compared with their private lives.

Theoretical Framework

Teacher identity has been examined through various theoretical perspectives, which manifests the complex nature of this construct (Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Yazan, 2023). Nevertheless, the essence of this multifaceted construct remains elusive (Pishghadam et al., 2022). Numerous scholars adopt poststructuralist perspectives in their research on identity (Aneja, 2016; Norton, 2013; Yazan, 2023), which is multidimensional, contradictory, context-dependent, and constructed through language (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Pishghadam et al., 2022). From this paradigm, teacher identity theory emerged, conceptualizing teacher identity as a dynamic, complex construct shaped by classroom interactions, student expectations, and institutional norms (Rushton et al., 2023).

While poststructuralist perspectives regard identity as discursively constructed, they do not fully account for the embodied and performative nature of teaching. The dramaturgical theory (Goffman, 1959) fills this gap by turning the spotlight on identity as performance. Initially, the research question of the present study was mainly informed by post-structural perspectives about the multiplicity of teacher identity. However, during data collection and analysis, I observed that the multiplicity of teacher identities could be rooted in two related theories: Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory and Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor. In dramaturgical theory, teaching is seen as a performance. Goffman conceptualizes social interactions as theatrical, with individuals engaging in "front stage" behaviors in public settings and "backstage" behaviors in private. In line with this theory, the activities that teachers undertake in classrooms can be conceptualized as performances, where teachers manage impressions in the "frontstage" (i.e., the classroom) while maintaining aspects of self in the "backstage" (out-of-class contexts).

In this sense, teachers are social actors who adapt their personas to their audience (demographics such

as age or proficiency levels; Keiler, 2018; Ou & Gu, 2024), and audience expectations (i.e., seeing them as clients; Guilbault, 2016), to navigate institutional stages (i.e., classrooms governed by market logic; Block, 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018). Teachers need to adjust their professional identities strategically in line with institutional ideologies and, sometimes, must even set aside their personal beliefs to meet external expectations, leading to internal tensions (Singh, 2018).

As a complement to dramaturgical theory in revealing the multiplicity of identity, Hochschild's (1983) notion of emotional labor establishes the close connection between language teacher identity and emotions (Nazari et al., 2023; Toker-Bradshaw & Tezgiden-Cakcak, 2024). Thus, negative emotions (such as frustration) hinder the construction of teacher identity, whereas positive ones foster robust professional identities (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021; Teng, 2017).

With its focus on the affective demands of teaching, Hochschild's (1983) notion of emotional labor asserts that teachers must regulate their emotions in accordance with institutional and societal expectations. Thus, teachers need to display "appropriate" emotions in specific contexts (Chang, 2020) to fulfill institutional rules (Hochschild, 1983). Teachers often need to suppress or mask their authentic emotions by engaging in surface acting (displaying unfeigned emotions) or deep acting (aligning internal feelings with external expectations) to meet classroom norms (Benesch, 2017). This process can be mentally demanding and, if poorly managed, may cause emotional exhaustion and burnout (Loh & Liew, 2016). In a privatized ELT context, emotional labor is further interpreted in monetary terms, as teachers are expected to exhibit a positive demeanor and enthusiasm to ensure client-student satisfaction, which in turn helps maintain their market value (Aminifard et al., 2023; Block, 2018).

To sum up, guided by the presumption that teacher identity is multiple, performative, and affective, the

present study theoretically links discursive accounts of identity (Norton, 2013; Varghese et al., 2005) to those offered by dramaturgical and emotional perspectives (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983). The performative dimension of teacher identity is particularly marked, although under-researched, in the Iranian ELT landscape.

Embracing multiple theoretical frameworks can facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the processes that shape teacher identity (Varghese et al., 2005). By employing Goffman's metaphor and Hochschild's theory of emotional labor, I explore how teachers negotiate potential contrasts between their classroom personas and private selves. Thus, the study offers localized insights into the underlying reasons for teachers' identity performance in Iranian private language institutes, which stand out as a critical context in light of Rushton et al.'s (2023) suggestion to explore Global South countries for future research on teacher identity.

Method

This study followed a qualitative interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), which enabled me to understand the participants' subjective experiences and see teacher identity as a dynamic, context-embedded construct. I employed a multiple case study design (Stake, 1995), treating each of the five participants as a bounded case. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor, the study examined how teachers performed different in-class and out-of-class personas. Merriam's (1998) guidance on case study research informed a holistic, context-sensitive approach to each case, and cross-case analysis allowed me to identify patterns across teachers.

Participants

The participants were five English-language teachers (two men and three women) who worked at private language institutes in Arak, Iran. They

were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling, ensuring that each had at least two years of teaching experience and had taught both children and adult learners. These criteria ensured a sample with relevant teaching backgrounds (see Table 1). The use of purposive sampling is consistent with qualitative research practices, as participants are selected for their specific knowledge or characteristics relevant to the study's objectives. Potential participants who met the criteria were contacted and provided with information about the study.

Table 1. Participants' Main Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Experience in years
Milad	25	Male	7
Hamid	41	Male	21
Sima	37	Female	12
Mina	26	Female	9
Hoda	28	Female	2

Context

With the expansion of private language schools in Iran, ELT has inevitably become market driven. The marketization of ELT has redefined teacher-student relationships. First, students are seen as clients, whose expectations teachers need to satisfy (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010). Second, income instability and job insecurity amplify performative demands for teachers (Block, 2018). Finally, retention is prioritized over rigor and ELT ideals. That is, student mobility forces teachers to prioritize likability over accountability (Moosa Taromsari & Tajik, 2025) to strike a balance between economic reality and pedagogical integrity (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Mansouri, 2021; Nazari et al., 2023).

Dealing with economic precarity, in which teachers' income is tied to student enrollment (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010), places pressure on teachers to perform their identities. Yet, private language institutes, despite being the predominant context in which ELT is practiced in Iran, remain unexplored territory for identity research (Khezri et al., 2025).

Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Persian (the teachers' native language). The interview protocol included domains relevant to identity negotiation (e.g., role transitions between professional and personal contexts), self-perception in different settings, authenticity in teaching, and identity management strategies (see Appendix for sample questions).

Each interview lasted about 30 to 45 minutes, and all were audio-recorded with the teachers' permission. Immediately after each interview, recordings were transcribed verbatim. Key quotations illustrating identity dynamics were then translated into English, and another translator verified the translations for accuracy.

Data Analysis

I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, which is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). After repeatedly reading the transcripts, I analyzed them using open coding. Codes were reviewed and merged based on conceptual similarity. Throughout the analysis, codes were grouped into themes with reference to Goffman's (1959) frontstage/backstage construct and Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor. Themes were iteratively refined through constant comparison with the data until a coherent thematic structure was established.

I then employed a cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018) across the five teacher narratives. This involved examining how each theme manifested for each participant.

The similarities and differences between cases helped illuminate the nuances of identity negotiation. Such cross-case comparisons highlighted the range of persona dynamics among teachers. Ethical considerations were strictly observed by anonymizing teachers in all reports (identified only by pseudonyms) and by keeping all data confidential.

Results and Discussion

Identity Performance as Both a Challenge and a Pedagogical Necessity

Teachers' narratives revealed a consistent pattern of strategic identity presentation in line with Goffman's (1959) frontstage/backstage metaphor. In the classroom frontstage, teachers consciously function as actors. All the participants perform their personas adapted to their contextual demands and audiences, whereas in private backstage moments, they express more of their authentic feelings. The existence of dual, contradictory selves and the contrast between the classroom persona (which is performed) and the internal persona (which is private) align with Goffman's frontstage/backstage life. The participants described how they tailored their own identities to fit their students' characteristics. For example, Milad described modulating his teaching style: "When I teach, I'm not my real self at all. I change my personality based on my students' age, gender, and proficiency level, as well as the specific situation. My personality even varies from class to class."

Milad's explicit rejection of his real self and the identity shift he describes in response to the students' characteristics align with Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, grounded in audience expectations. That is, Milad makes deliberate identity adjustments to meet his audience's expectations or demographic characteristics.

When Hoda was asked which part of the teaching profession was most challenging to her, she replied,

“Being flexible and adaptable to the specific needs of each class.” Then, she added that satisfying the different expectations of older students compared to those of others was one of the challenges she struggled with. The very same idea was repeated in Sima’s remarks. She noted that one of her challenges is meeting the unreasonable expectations of the older students, who constantly ask her to explain everything to them in Persian. She added, “It is so difficult to adapt to these conditions!” Persona adaptation has therefore been reported to be not only necessary but also challenging.

Hoda further stated: “In my personal life, I’m serious and somehow short-tempered. But when I’m in the classroom, I try to look warm and engaging.” Additionally, Hoda found it difficult at first to prepare for unforeseen situations. She clarified that, in the past, she had been anxious about situations in which students asked questions she could not answer. But now she knows how to use strategies to manage these kinds of situations.

When asked to compare her in-class and out-of-class character, Mina noted, “I’m punctual at work but not in my personal life; if I keep that trait, I will lose the job altogether.” This is in line with Goffman’s assertion that the frontstage is where we perform social roles to project a desired image.

The interviews also showed that all the participants clearly maintained enthusiastic and patient personas in front of students, even if those masks concealed their private (contradictory) realities. This is evident in Hoda’s description of appearing “warm and engaging” in class despite being “serious and somehow short-tempered” in her personal life, Sima’s account of acting “energetic and smiling” even when feeling unwell or annoyed, Hamid’s portrayal of himself as “energetic and happy” in the classroom while feeling “hopeless and pessimistic” in reality, and Mina’s emphasis on being punctual at work to avoid losing her job, unlike in her personal life.

Just as Derakhshan et al. (2024) demonstrated how English language teachers shift identities between beginner and advanced English classes, teachers in the present study also adapted their personas based on student proficiency levels, such as Milad’s adjustments for students’ varying language proficiency levels, Hoda’s adaptations to the differing expectations of older versus younger students, and Sima’s responses to older students’ requests for Persian explanations (which potentially reflect lower English proficiency levels). Therefore, students’ language proficiency levels are an important factor that can lead teachers to perform differently.

The dramaturgical stance not only highlights the multiplicity of identities across contexts but also gives teachers agency in shaping their professional personas (Varghese et al., 2005). This is evident in the participants’ conscious choices when modulating their identities, such as Milad’s deliberate shifts based on students’ age, gender, and proficiency level; Hoda’s strategic efforts to appear “warm and engaging” despite her personal temperament; and Sima’s appearing “serious or strict” when needed for classroom management.

Interestingly, the teachers’ identity performances were underpinned by extensive emotional labor. The teachers constantly regulated their emotions to comply with occupational norms. Sometimes they engaged in surface acting, displaying emotions without actually feeling them. All the participants reported making an effort to appear cheerful, motivated, warm, or patient in the classroom. For instance, Sima noted that “even if I feel unwell or annoyed, I still have to act energetic and smiling. It is challenging for me to look happy despite my inner sadness.” This exemplifies surface acting as a conscious strategy. Hoda, similarly, confessed, “I pretend to be happy when I am actually sad. This is quite annoying.” Hamid also asserted: “In class, I’m energetic and happy... But in reality, I’m hopeless and pessimistic.” These examples reveal surface acting or feigning emotions contrary to internal feelings. Teachers must suppress their inappropriate emotions (Hochschild,

1983) and instead project suitable emotions to fulfill their role demands. Here, “appropriate” emotions refer to the display of socially and professionally accepted emotions that are compatible with context-specific norms and expectations in teaching (Chang, 2020).

The results are consistent with prior studies indicating that teachers often experience tensions and struggles while reconciling their professional and personal identities within educational contexts (Iszatt-White et al., 2017; McNaughton & Billot, 2016; Trent, 2024; Uştuk & Yazan, 2023). Such challenges can occur as identity tensions, forms of resistance, and the need to mediate between personal beliefs and institutional roles (Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Trent, 2024; Uştuk & Yazan, 2023). Notwithstanding these challenges, purposeful engagement with professional identity enhances engagement, inclusivity, and learning outcomes (Forbes et al., 2021; Marcel, 2024; Nilsson & Damiani, 2023).

Identity Performance as a Survival Strategy in the Market

Data analysis revealed that teachers' identity performances occur under market-driven pressures that further shape their choices. In private language institutes, teachers function as key service providers. They are held accountable for their students' satisfaction and retention. Teachers' concerns over student retention limit their agency and autonomy. Several teachers explicitly associated their identity performance with economic pressures. Hamid, for example, emphasized that “teachers don't have enough authority to force their students to study.” He clarified, “If you get strict or rigid, the students might leave and enroll in another institute for the next term.” The fact that student retention determined his job security forced him to shy away from implementing his desired teaching style of discipline. Similarly, Milad lamented that “low payment and unstable income make it hard to stay motivated...and even to keep this low-paid job

you need to make shows.” The mismatch between institutional expectations and economic pressures was also stated by Hoda:

My main issue as a teacher is that teaching is not limited to the time you spend in the classroom. Even when I'm outside the classroom, I'm spending time and energy on improving the lesson content and planning how to present it. What makes it ridiculous is that we are paid only for the hours in the classroom. Also, it is quite unfair that principals can decide whether to extend our contract based on students' retention.

Such comments emphasize an economically-driven performance norm: instead of exercising pedagogical rigor, teachers feel compelled to prioritize friendly, entertaining teaching to preserve their customers (Adisa et al., 2023; Blackmore, 2009). In other words, they operate under the market strategy of profitability for competitiveness. For example, Hamid's concern about student retention and income instability led him to adjust his frontstage persona. Due to economic precarity, identity performance evolves into a survival strategy (Block, 2018) and a form of economic necessity. Therefore, institutional constraints in Iran's private ELT sector, driven by income precarity and student mobility, serve as the backdrop against which teachers operate.

These findings lend support to studies such as Castro et al.'s (2022) and Gupta's (2019), which illustrate that teachers actively perform and adapt their professional identities to secure and attain job stability. In pursuit of enhanced employability and job security, teachers may accentuate certain aspects of their identity to align with the values or expectations of different institutions, sometimes even diverging from their own personal beliefs (Castro et al., 2022; Gupta, 2019). This performative dimension serves as a coping strategy to survive in settings where job security and professional autonomy are imperiled (Browes & Altinyelken, 2022; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Güvercin-Seçkin, 2024).

Identity Performance May Bring About the Burnout Paradox

Due to prolonged identity performance and emotional labor, the most experienced participants revealed signs of burnout. When Hamid (a male teacher with 21 years of experience) was asked to describe his job and his view of his profession, he used the metaphor of being “passionately addicted to teaching.” He clarified this by explaining, “Teaching gives me peace of mind. I can’t live without teaching; for me, life equals teaching.” Despite maintaining such intrinsic motivation for English teaching, Hamid also expressed deep fatigue, reflecting the coexistence of emotional investment and psychological exhaustion. He explained, “When I’m in the classroom, I’m energetic and happy. Anyone who sees me would think that I have no problems in my life. But, in reality, I’m hopeless and pessimistic.”

Hamid’s dependence on the profession of English language teaching contrasts with his hopelessness in life. The participant’s dual, contradictory identities, enacted through emotional masking, coexist with his obsession with teaching. His case illuminates how sustained emotional labor may ruin the alignment between the internal and professional identities. Looking through Hochschild’s emotional dissonance, teaching addiction reveals a burnout paradox. The burnout paradox is the cost of experiencing prolonged tension between performed vitality and private despair. Repeated surface acting can be effortful and fatiguing, leading to feelings of inauthenticity and burnout. Indeed, when Hamid described himself as both addicted to teaching and completely exhausted and hopeless, it shows how extensive emotional regulation in teaching can wear teachers down. Therefore, while teachers manage to exercise agency through conscious emotional display (e.g., choosing to wear a smile), they are compelled to balance their own feelings against institutional expectations. In this context, agency refers to teachers’ deliberate ability to exercise control and purposeful

action within the professional setting (Varghese et al., 2005). For instance, Sima reported strategically acting “energetic and smiling” even when feeling unwell or annoyed, which illustrated a conscious choice to regulate emotions for role fulfillment. This reveals intentional emotional masking as a form of agency in response to institutional demands. These examples demonstrate how teachers actively shape their own displays, yet this agency is constrained by the need to align with social expectations, such as student satisfaction and retention.

Hamid showed signs of deep acting or changing his feelings to align with the required emotions. This may suggest that his deep acting evolved into identity fragmentation (Barkhuizen, 2017). Hamid asserted that teaching gives him peace of mind, which demonstrates how deep acting is formed and the expected identity is internalized. The burnout paradox mirrors the fact that more experienced teachers often feel both committed and emotionally depleted.

These concepts warrant further clarification. Hamid’s description of appearing “energetic and happy” in class while feeling “hopeless and pessimistic” outside reveals a separate identity duality as well as the paradox of commitment amid depletion. On the other hand, his deep acting involves internalization of the role for authenticity (e.g., “peace of mind” from teaching and his emphasis on teaching as life-equivalent). This integration reveals how extended emotional labor in teaching can maintain agency in performance while risking psychological tension. However, this can lead to fragmentation when it clashes with backstage realities.

Saying that deep acting evolves into internalization, identity fragmentation, and the burnout paradox may seem to contradict the frontstage/backstage divide, as deep acting involves internalizing the performed role, which possibly erodes the backstage identity. Nonetheless, it should be clarified that these frameworks are complementary. Goffman’s duality provides the structure (public vs. private selves), whereas Hochschild’s

deep acting illuminates a process whereby continual performance over time culminates in internalization and fragmentation.

The observed pattern concurs with earlier research by van der Want et al. (2019) and Zhao and Wang (2024), who demonstrated that teachers grappling with conflicts or mismatches in their professional identity (including being compelled to perform a certain identity or facing identity dilemmas) are predisposed to experience emotional exhaustion and burnout, leading to poor teaching quality. In other words, teachers with weaker or conflicted identities are more susceptible (Li et al., 2022; Szabó & Jagodics, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

Identity Performance as a Proximity-Authority Calibration

Using identity performance to regulate interpersonal distance with students is a tactical strategy teachers use to manage the simultaneous calibration of proximity and authority. Sima stated, "Sometimes I have to look serious or strict in class. This is just a part of my job. The job is quite context-dependent, and effective classroom management sometimes requires maintaining your distance from students." Mina also noted:

It requires expertise to know not only how and when to keep students at your arm's length, but also how to reduce the distance with students in situations where we need to make the atmosphere fun and the students engaged.

Hoda explained that she needs to strike a balance between projecting an image of a teacher who is both strict and intimate to manage the class effectively:

Striking the balance seems so hard to me. Sometimes I just lose my balance by crossing boundaries and getting too warm with students. These are the moments when many of my students take advantage of the intimacy and start playing with their phones or talking with their classmates, and I have to put in extra effort to bring their attention back to the lesson. Looking serious enough is a

strategy we can use to make underperforming students obedient.

Therefore, identity performance is a strategy used by teachers to simultaneously manage the contradictory roles of classroom management and the establishment of a pleasant learning atmosphere. The latter involves making an effort to project warmth, enthusiasm, and a sense of social proximity to engage students and make learning enjoyable, often through emotional labor such as appearing "warm and engaging" (as Hoda described) or reducing interpersonal distance (as Mina noted). However, overusing fun can threaten authority and lead to issues such as student distractions or abuse of intimacy, as illustrated in Hoda's excerpt above. In contrast, classroom management seems to require a stricter persona to enforce obedience or discipline, such as Sima's tactful maintenance of distance. This calibration highlights teachers' agency in shifting among their different roles, aligning with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor, in which, as mentioned above, performers adjust their impressions to balance audience expectations and exert control.

These results reinforce the arguments of Liu et al. (2023) and Misbah et al. (2021), who noted that teachers actively perform aspects of their professional identity to manage the nuanced balance between proximity (closeness, approachability) and authority (influence, control) in their interactions with students. Reliant on classroom needs, such a strategic role shifting is crucial for optimizing classroom management and achieving favorable learning outcomes.

Conclusions

This study delved into the lived experiences of English language teachers in Iranian private language institutes to illuminate the intricate ways in which they perform identities in the classroom vis-à-vis their personal lives. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor of frontstage and backstage roles

and Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, the results revealed a multifaceted landscape in which identity performance emerges as not only a source of challenges for teachers but also an adaptive mechanism and a pedagogical necessity. In this landscape, identity performance is an integral part of how teaching is being defined.

Central to the teachers' remarks was the pervasive challenge of identity multiplicity, in which teachers consciously struggle to adapt their personas to meet classroom demands, often at odds with their personal identities. Teachers displayed emotions or characteristics that differed from their real selves (e.g., strict versus warm, unhappy versus energetic) to conform to role expectations (e.g., classroom management or creating a fun atmosphere). This strategic impression management and identity performance, tailored to students' demographics and expectations, highlights both the shifting, multiple nature of identity shaped by discourse and power and the very performative nature of teaching in a market-driven context.

Teachers constantly perform in the classroom in line with their positioning as ideal teachers, which, more broadly, is driven by the expectations of schools, students, and society. As a survival strategy, such performances are compelled by economic precarity, including fears of student retention and income instability. This forces teachers to prioritize entertainment and likeability over pedagogical rigor. Penetrating the deep layers of teacher identity performance is emotional labor, which manifests as surface acting (feigning enthusiasm and warmth despite internal disharmony) and, sometimes, deep acting, which internalizes these emotions in teachers.

While acting serves as a pedagogical necessity for effective classroom management and efficient teaching, it can lead to a burnout paradox among experienced educators, where prolonged adaptation to identity performance coexists with psychological exhaustion and emotional depletion. Furthermore, identity perfor-

mance functions as a tool for calibrating proximity and authority, enabling teachers to navigate interpersonal boundaries and maintain an entertaining atmosphere and class engagement without compromising control. This study also showed that teachers are active agents who choose among a variety of identities and can intentionally perform certain ones. However, they do so within a constrained context that ultimately determines their economic survival. This context is shaped by the market-driven realities of private language institutes, where student retention directly determines job security and income. Thus, teachers' agentive identity choices are constrained by the need to prioritize student satisfaction and entertainment over pedagogical authenticity.

These insights contribute to the broader research on teacher identity in ELT, extending prior works (e.g., Varghese et al., 2005) by highlighting the unique pressures of private-sector teaching in Iran. Teachers in this sector have to reconcile their own authenticity and teaching-style preferences with materialistic realities. The consequence is a multiple, contradictory identity performance constructed under market pressures. By listening to the voices of English-language teachers in Iran's private sector, this study reframes identity not as static "being" but as contextual "performing" or "acting." To meet teaching demands, teachers sometimes need to act energetically, patiently, enthusiastically, or happily, regardless of how they feel internally.

The institutional constraints intensify the emotional and psychological expense of identity performance, potentially eroding teacher well-being. In other words, coping with the labor is a strategy for adapting to power-laden discourses that may sometimes belittle or exploit teachers if endured over a long period. In practice, this calls for policy reforms in private language institutes in Iran, such as professional teacher development programs focused on emotional resilience and on shifting among multiple identities.

The present study offers valuable insights into the multiplicity of English language teacher identities in Iranian private language institutes. However, a number of limitations must be acknowledged, which also point toward avenues for future studies. The multiple case study design, relying on only five teachers from a small city (Arak, Iran), limits transferability to other contexts and, accordingly, may not extend to different settings or more stable educational environments. In addition, the interviews may introduce memory biases, social desirability effects, or bias towards more reflective participants, while the absence of triangulation with other methods (such as classroom observations or reflective journals) constrains the depth of the results. Finally, the snapshot approach taken in this study overlooks the evolutionary nature of teacher identities over time. Future studies could address these issues by employing diverse samples and mixed methods for triangulation to improve robustness and broader applicability.

Future research could also expand this line of inquiry through longitudinal studies that track the long-term effects of emotional labor on teacher burnout. In addition, comparative analyses across public and private sectors in diverse cultural contexts around the globe could also add insights to this line of research. Even studies conducted in other cities in Iran could provide different findings. Quantitative studies, such as surveys on emotional labor or burnout, might complement these qualitative findings. Ultimately, recognizing the dramaturgical demands of teaching not only supports teachers' agency in developing their professional identities but also requires stakeholders to create institutional environments that encourage teacher authenticity and performance to coexist harmoniously, ensuring sustainable passion in the teaching profession.

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Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

- Are you your true self in the classroom?
- How do you describe yourself in the classroom? Use at least five adjectives to characterize yourself. What makes you shift from one characteristic to another?
- How different are you when you are in the classroom compared to outside of it?
- What is the most challenging aspect of your job?
- Are there aspects of your personality you feel you must amplify or suppress to be effective as a teacher? Can you give a specific example?
- Can you describe a specific moment in your experience as a teacher when you felt you had to “shift” into your teacher persona? What triggered that shift?
- What constraints most impact how you show up in the classroom?
- How do you navigate the tension between who you feel you are as a person and who others expect you to be?