



Assessing and Navigating Personal, Professional, and Contextual Barriers to Teacher Identity: The case of English Language Institutes

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Abstract

This study examined the personal, professional, and contextual barriers to teacher identity (TI) within English language institutes and their strategies to navigate them. The study used a multiple case study approach with semi-structured interviews for data collection. It involved four Iranian English institute teachers aged 22 to 30, with varying degrees of education: two holding a B.A., one an M.A., and one a Ph.D. Data analysis utilizing thematic analysis revealed that insecurity, self-doubt, perfectionism, and challenges in balancing personal and professional lives were personal barriers to TI. Moreover, professional barriers such as excessive workloads, strict adherence to academic norms, and stress from peers and superiors could hinder TI development. Furthermore, contextual barriers, including hierarchical cultures, top-down decision-making, and rigid institutional policies, could restrict TI development. The findings also revealed some patterns among these barriers. The results showed that contextual barriers exacerbate professional barriers. Moreover, professional barriers exacerbate personal barriers. Teachers often try to navigate barriers by seeking feedback, engaging in professional development, advocating for their needs, holding meetings, using dead times, focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses, accepting faults and shortcomings, promoting shared leadership, prioritizing self-care and work-life balance, expanding knowledge through reading more, setting realistic goals, recommending solutions, being more flexible, involving and engaging students, motivating students, taking *assessment as learning* perspective, etc. The study's findings have implications for teachers, teacher training programs, and educational policy.

Keywords: Contextual barriers, EFL teacher identity (TI), Personal barriers, Professional barriers

In recent years, an increasing focus has been on understanding what makes English language teachers effective ([Derakhshan et al., 2020](#); [Bardach et al., 2022](#)). While traditional discussions often centred on teacher cognition, there is a growing recognition of the social aspects of teaching, particularly the role of teacher identity (TI) in shaping teachers' professional growth and classroom effectiveness ([Sadeghi & Bahari, 2022](#); [Zhao, 2022](#)). TI is

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'the views, values, and commitments an individual possesses toward the profession of teaching ([Richards, 2023](#)). TI may encompass aspects of an individual's personal identity, yet it is predominantly characterized by attributes inherent to the teaching profession. TI is neither static nor singular; it is multiple and fluid ([Sherman & Teemant, 2022](#)). As it is socially situated, it is influenced by a complex interaction of personal, professional, and contextual factors, each affecting teachers' roles within the classroom ([Pennington & Richards, 2016](#)). Personal aspects comprise the teacher's distinctive traits, actions, and experiences, shaping their pedagogical style and relationships with students ([Gee, 2001](#); as cited in [Richards, 2023](#)). Professional aspects, conversely, link an individual's attributes to the overarching expectations and standards of the language teaching profession ([Rushton et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, contextual aspects include the social and cultural situations in which teachers function ([Yazan, 2023](#)). In light of these factors, teachers continuously evolve and alter their professional identities in response to the difficulties and opportunities arising from their experiences. In the process of this identity shifting, influenced by various factors, teachers may face some barriers. Assessing these barriers is essential for effectively addressing the difficulties they face.

Within the unique setting of English language institutes, teachers may face specific barriers since they often serve diverse student populations and operate with varying institutional goals, which differ markedly from traditional educational settings. Moreover, short-term contracts and the transient nature of many language programs may further complicate the professional landscape. Although a wealth of research has focused on TI in K-12 and higher education settings (e.g., [Burn, 2007](#); [Webb, 2005](#)), the specific barriers English language institute teachers encounter are still insufficiently examined. This qualitative study explored the personal, professional, and contextual barriers that may hinder TI development in English language institutes. By identifying these barriers, the research aimed to shed light on the complex factors influencing TI and provide insights to help create effective support strategies for their growth.

Despite the critical importance of TI in English Language Teaching (ELT), there is a notable scarcity of studies exploring the interplay among personal, professional, and contextual barriers teachers face. Most existing research (e.g., [Toom, 2019](#); [Trent, 2024](#)) focused on these barriers in isolation, overlooking how they interact and compound one another. This lack of comprehensive analysis limits understanding of the complex dynamics that shape TI, particularly in diverse settings like language institutes. Understanding and addressing the barriers to TI may be essential in ELT, as creating a supportive environment may enable teachers to embrace their identities, improve their teaching practices, and increase student success. Teachers may improve their well-being and job satisfaction by successfully addressing challenges, which may help build resilience in the ever-evolving field of ELT ([Dreer, 2024](#)). This awareness is critical in diverse contexts like language institutes, where teachers must adapt to varying cultural backgrounds.

Literature Review

In the last twenty years, there has been a considerable rise in studies focused on English language teachers' identity—(e.g., [Yuan, 2019](#)). This body of work highlights that while individuals can impact their own lives and surroundings, they are also shaped by the circumstances they find themselves in ([Steiner, 2016](#)). As part of society, teachers' experiences create a variety of chances for personal growth, influenced by the students they teach, the education and training they receive, and the teaching profession at large ([Keay, 2009](#)). Before exploring the TI concept, examining the idea of identity itself is important. A shared understanding among various interpretations is that identity is a relational phenomenon rather than a fixed attribute ([Woodward, 2018](#)). Identity development process entails continuously examining and re-examining one's self-perception and the individual one hopes to become ([Beijaard et al., 2004](#)). This Identity development occurs within a shared social environment and is characterized by a continuous process of self-interpretation and being seen in particular contexts ([Tokoz Goktepe & Kunt, 2023](#)). The exploration of identity reveals its complexity and fluidity, shaped by various social and cultural influences ([O'Sullivan, 2014](#)). Delving deeper into this concept, it becomes essential to consider how these dynamics manifest specifically in educational contexts. This leads us to the important notion of TI, where individual experiences and broader identity constructs converge.

TI has been characterized as 'the beliefs, values, and commitments an individual has regarding being a specific type of teacher' ([Hsieh, 2010](#)). Researchers agree that when individuals develop an emotional attachment to their teaching roles, it becomes integral to their identity and an organizing principle in their lives (e.g., [Akkerman & Meijer, 2011](#)). [Beijaard et al. \(2004\)](#) recognized four shared characteristics of TI: it emerges from an ongoing process, is socially positioned and influenced by relationships and school culture, comprises harmonious sub-identities, and is shaped by the teacher's agency. This dynamic can lead to internal conflicts as teachers navigate their professional identities in relation to their personal beliefs ([Li, 2022](#)). Additionally, the fluid nature of identity means it can evolve over time, influenced by experiences such as professional development, interactions with students, and feedback from peers and administrators ([Puchegger & Bruce, 2020](#)). Moreover, shifts in identity may occur during a teacher's professional journey due to engagements within schools and the broader community ([Richards, 2023](#)). These factors can affect how others perceive teachers and how they view themselves within the educational landscape. Understanding these complexities is vital, as they play a crucial role in shaping teachers' experiences and their effectiveness in the classroom.

Given the complexities surrounding TI, examining the barriers teachers face in their jobs is essential. As [Pennington and Richards \(2016\)](#) highlighted, comprehending this identity involves examining three interconnected personal, professional, and contextual factors. Personal factors encompass the individual beliefs, experiences, and motivations that shape how teachers perceive themselves and their roles in the classroom. Professional factors refer to the

training, development opportunities, and collaborative practices that influence teachers' growth and self-efficacy ([Beijaard & Meijer, 2017](#)). Contextual factors include the broader institutional and cultural environments in which teachers operate, which can either support or impede their identity formation ([Pennington & Richards, 2016](#)). Recognizing these three dimensions is crucial for addressing the barriers teachers face, particularly within the field of ELT.

In [2012](#), [Brownell and Tanner](#) identified key obstacles to faculty identity, including inadequate training, time constraints, and a lack of incentives. Faculty members felt unprepared to alter their teaching practices and desired more structured training. Furthermore, insufficient incentives, such as reduced teaching loads and financial benefits, hindered the improvement of teaching methods. Their research indicated that many universities do not sufficiently reward innovative teaching, leading to hesitance in enacting instructional changes due to fears of negative student evaluations. This prioritization of research, particularly among pretenure faculty, poses a risk to the overall quality of education.

Research by [Mann and Tang \(2012\)](#), as cited in [Karaman, 2013](#)) highlighted the significant impact of school principals on the identity development of novice teachers. Their findings indicated that the presence of a principal in meetings can induce anxiety and feelings of inadequacy among new educators. In contrast, novice teachers express their challenges and uncertainties more freely when the principal is absent. This suggests that administrative presence can hinder new teachers' professional growth, complicating their journey toward establishing a confident professional identity.

Advancing the conversation on identity shifts, [McNaughton and Billot \(2016\)](#) examined the transformations among higher education professionals in response to contextual changes, particularly those brought about by technological advancements. Their study highlighted how academics adapt their identities when implementing large-class videoconferencing, revealing complexities tied to personal and pedagogical practices. They emphasized the need for educational institutions to proactively address these identity transformations to avoid institutional barriers regarding academic identity.

Moreover, [Yuan and Burns \(2017\)](#) explored the changes in the professional identities of two language teachers via action research in China. Directed by university researchers and employing the 'community of practice' theory, they discovered that engaged involvement resulted in notable identity changes. However, the teachers faced numerous contextual challenges, such as a rigid curriculum and power dynamics, which hindered their identity development.

While prior studies predominantly focus on higher education contexts or specific teacher demographics, this research aimed to explore the unique experiences and viewpoints of English language institute teachers and addressed a significant gap in the existing literature regarding personal, professional, and contextual barriers to TI development, specifically within English language institutes. By analyzing the personal factors and the professional and contextual barriers that may influence TI development, the study sought to understand the complexities of

the teaching environment. It also examined whether observable patterns emerge among these barriers and investigated the adaptive strategies teachers employ to navigate these challenges. Ultimately, the study intended to investigate English language teachers' strategies to address these barriers in their TI development. By investigating teachers' adaptive strategies, the study highlighted practical approaches for navigating barriers and fostering a strong sense of TI.

In order to accomplish the aforementioned research objectives, the following research questions were formed:

1. What personal factors pose as barriers to the development of TI among English language teachers in institutes? What strategies do teachers employ to navigate these barriers?
2. What professional factors pose as barriers to the development of TI among English language teachers in institutes? What strategies do teachers employ to navigate these pattern barriers?
3. What contextual factors pose as barriers to TI development in English language institutes? What strategies do teachers employ to navigate these barriers?
4. In what ways are the barriers of different types associated?

Method

Design

The study employed a multiple case study design. The rationale for choosing a qualitative study was to facilitate a thorough exploration of the complexities related to the formation of TI, providing deep and detailed insights into the experiences and viewpoints of participants. According to [Gao and Chugh \(2023\)](#), a qualitative approach empowers individuals to form reality through association with their social environment, empowering researchers to create an in-depth examination of a core phenomenon.

Participants and context

The study involved four English language teachers from various institutes in Isfahan, Iran, chosen through convenience sampling. The participants comprised one male and three female teachers with different experience levels, ranging from three years to ten, aged 22 to 30. All participants were Iranian and held different educational qualifications: two had a B.A., one an M.A., and one a Ph.D., all having studied English language teaching at university. Recruitment was conducted through professional networks and online platforms, ensuring voluntary participation and informed consent.

Instruments

The study employed semi-structured interviews to investigate the diverse barriers affecting the development of TI among English language institute teachers. This approach was selected to gain in-depth insight into the personal, professional, and contextual barriers that influence this procedure. By using open-ended questions, participants could express their experiences, beliefs, and views, emphasizing the challenges and strategies encountered in shaping their TI.

The adaptability of the interviews enabled researchers to explore specific topics in greater depth, resulting in detailed data on the intricacies of TI formation.

Data collection procedure

Before data collection, comprehensive details regarding the study, such as its objectives, possible risks and advantages, and confidentiality protocols, were given to guarantee individuals were informed entirely prior to consenting to participate voluntarily. The primary tool for collecting data in this study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with separate participants. A semi-structured interview protocol was created to direct the interviews and maintain uniformity in data gathering. This protocol featured open-ended questions to examine participants' narratives in their language. Interviews, lasting approximately 30 minutes each, were conducted in person with the possibility of taking field notes to document detailed answers and insights. Each interview took place at each institute in one of the classes. The interviews focused on various barriers, including personal factors such as self-perception, confidence, success, and motivation, professional barriers like relationships, support systems, and the work environment, particularly interactions between teachers and students. Additionally, contextual barriers, including cultural and institutional policies, and effective coping strategies for navigating these challenges were discussed.

Before using it in the main phase, the interview guideline was piloted to ensure its effectiveness in getting the desired data. The pilot phase of the interview protocol and questions involved testing the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness of the questions in eliciting comprehensive responses from participants ([Saddour, 2020](#)). Interview questions (which were the research questions) were tested with three English teachers in different institutes. It was done in person, and participants were requested to respond to the questions and offer input on how clear they were. Feedback from the pilot interviews was used to refine the instrument, ensuring it captures the barriers to TI well. Therefore, this pilot testing helped to modify the wording of this study for better clarity ([Rezvani & Miri, 2021](#)).

Data analysis procedure

Following data collection through semi-structured interviews, the data analysis phase involved several key data interpretation steps. Thematic analysis was the primary method used to analyze the interview transcripts. This approach involved recognizing, examining, and documenting patterns or themes in the data, enabling an in-depth investigation of the barriers hindering TI development. Thematic analysis by [Rezvani et al. \(2024\)](#) is advantageous due to its adaptability ([Kiger & Varpio, 2020](#)) and capability to concentrate on the narrators' experiences and their insights by exploring themes within the narrative data ([Barkhuizen, 2015](#)). Moreover, thematic analysis can be conducted in a bottom-up and top-down manner ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). The bottom-up approach, also called analytic induction ([Gilgun, 2005](#)), involves researchers analyzing the data to uncover emerging patterns or themes without depending on any theoretical framework. This study utilized the bottom-up method. The thematic analysis using the six-stage process outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), as cited in [Riazi et al., 2023](#)

was employed, which includes: (1) getting acquainted with the data, (2) developing initial codes, (3) identifying themes, (4) examining and adjusting themes, (5) describing and labeling themes, and (6) generating the report.

The thematic analysis process commenced with familiarization, allowing researchers to engage with the data deeply. This was followed by coding, wherein segments were labelled descriptively to reflect their content and meaning. The codes were subsequently grouped into larger themes that reflected the various viewpoints of the participants. Through iterative coding and categorization, recurring patterns and connections emerged. The subsequent phase involved refining these themes. Finally, themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative that showed the barriers to TI development within the context of the institutes.

Based on [Rezvani and Miri \(2021\)](#), various measures were implemented to enhance the credibility of the findings. Field notes were used during interviews with participants to guarantee coding precision and minimize bias. Additionally, the interviews were taped and used for improved data analysis ([Saldaña, 2011](#)). To maintain consistent data coding and analysis, the second researcher initially coded and analyzed the interview data prior to its review by the first researcher. The reliability of the coding between researchers was evaluated, with discrepancies being resolved through discussion. Following this, the second researcher reviewed the data again to make any needed changes. Following qualitative research standards ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)), the findings and interpretations were reviewed by some English teachers for member checking to confirm they are consistent with their viewpoints. Ultimately, feedback from colleagues or experts in the field was also sought to guarantee the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis. In reporting the study, the findings were articulated clearly and engagingly, using quotes and excerpts from the interviews to support the analysis.

Results

Based on the participants' answers, in terms of the personal barriers to TI, the following sub-themes and themes were extracted and summarized in the table below:

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes of Personal Barriers to TI

Sub themes	Themes
Negative self-perception	Self-doubt and insecurity
Concerns about language ability	
Low self-esteem and self-confidence	
Pressure to maintain high standards	Fear of failure
Performance anxiety	
Concerns about negative perceptions	
Unrealistic standards	Perfectionism
Self-worth tied to performance	
Lack of self-care	Balancing personal and professional life
Blurred boundaries	

Self-doubt and insecurity

Self-doubt and insecurity emerged as a main personal barrier to TI, containing subthemes: negative self-perception, concerns about language ability, and low self-esteem and self-confidence.

Negative self-perception

Teachers often felt inadequate when comparing themselves to peers. This negative self-perception fostered self-doubt, as illustrated by participant 1: *"I am sometimes a little self-critical, and I compare myself to more experienced teachers... Feeling like I don't level up makes me worried."*

Several strategies were suggested to overcome this negative view. Participant 1 noted, *"I think focusing on my strengths, getting feedback from colleagues, and engaging in TTC classes may build my confidence."*

Concerns about language ability

Concerns about language ability were another subtheme of self-doubt, as participant 3 remarked: *"I sometimes feel I'm not good enough to teach a particular class."*

To counter this, teachers tried to accept that making mistakes is natural. Participant 3 shared: *"I used to think making mistakes was embarrassing, but I realized I am human, and making mistakes is a part of life."*

Low self-esteem and self-confidence

Participants 4 and 1 expressed feelings of low self-esteem as a subtheme of self-doubt:

"I sometimes compare myself with other teachers, and I feel they are better than me."
(Participant 4)

"I am sometimes self-critical, and I compare myself to more experienced teachers... feeling like I don't level up makes me worried." (Participant 1)

To overcome this, participants suggested fostering collaboration and support, stating:

"I try to get close to other teachers whom I think are better than me and learn from them."
(Participant 4)

"I think focusing on my strengths, getting feedback from colleagues, and engaging in TTC classes may build my confidence." (Participant 1)

Fear of failure

The theme of fear of failure emerged as another personal barrier to TI, containing subthemes such as pressure to maintain high standards, performance anxiety, and concerns about negative perceptions from observers.

Pressure to maintain high standards

The pressure to maintain high standards contributed to the fear of failure. Participant 2 stated: *"Our manager always expects us to perform well and keep students satisfied."*

To address this, Participant 2 suggested: *"I tell myself errors are a natural part of learning, and I talk to mentors and colleagues for support."* Emphasizing the normalcy of mistakes could reduce pressure and improve TI.

Performance anxiety

Performance anxiety was another subtheme. Participant 1 expressed: *"I am scared when my students ask something and I fail to answer correctly."* This fear increased anxiety.

To manage this, teachers employed strategies to maintain confidence. Participant 1 noted: *"I pose the question to the whole class and summarize their key points."* Engaging students this way could help reduce anxiety.

Concerns about negative perceptions from observers

Concerns about negative perceptions from observers also hindered TI. Participant 3 stated: *"I get a lot of stress when observers come, thinking, what if I can't show my talents?"*

To cope, teachers suggested being prepared: *"I try to be ready each session and prepare my syllabus beforehand."* They also sought feedback: *"After the observation, I ask the observer for feedback to improve."*

Perfectionism

The theme of perfectionism was evident as a personal barrier to TI, including subthemes such as unrealistic standards and self-worth tied to performance.

Unrealistic standards

Teachers set unrealistic standards for themselves, which hindered TI. Participant 3 noted: *"I always want to be perfect, and it makes me criticize myself."*

To address this, participants tried to accept their shortcomings. Participant 3 shared: *"I am reading about self-criticism and focusing on continuous improvement."*

Self-worth tied to their performance

When teachers judged their value based on performance, they became more perfectionistic. Participant 2 said: *"When I have classes with the same group of students for some terms, I feel my students do not progress in the way I want... and it gives me the feeling maybe I am not a good teacher."*

To overcome this, teachers engaged in open communication. Participant 2 noted: *"I sought feedback from my students and compared it with my own thoughts."*

Balancing personal and professional life

Another personal barrier was the challenge of balancing personal and professional life. Its subthemes were lack of self-care and blurred boundaries.

Lack of self-care

Being busy with work caused teachers to take care of their personal stuff less, which made it difficult for them to balance their personal and professional lives, ultimately hindering TI. As participant 4 stated, *"Having a balance between personal and professional life is a challenge for me... I often have a lot of personal activities to do, and I cannot do them because of being at work."*

To cope with this barrier, teachers suggested setting boundaries and prioritizing personal work, as participant 4 suggested: *"I try to put some time for myself. I set boundaries... I sometimes prioritize my personal activities..."*

Blurred boundaries

The findings showed that not having clear boundaries between personal and professional lives made balancing these two more difficult and finally hindered TI. As participant 3 noted, *"...because we have to provide the lesson plan beforehand, we have to do it at home. Sometimes, when I look at the time, I see I have been busy writing it and have no time for my personal life..."*

To navigate this barrier, teachers suggested using dead times, as participant 3 stated, *"...using dead times at work was a good strategy. For example, when students have pair work/group work, I can do my work, which is behind schedule."*

In terms of the professional barriers to TI, the following sub-themes and themes were extracted and summarized in the table below:

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes of Professional Barriers to TI

Sub themes	Themes
Extensive rules and responsibilities	High workload and pressure to meet academic standards
Lack of support	Conflict with colleagues or supervisors
Communication breakdowns	
Different pedagogical approaches	
Undermining professionalism	
Curriculum constraints	Limited autonomy and rigid expectations
Instructional constraints	
Cultural and linguistic differences	Engaging with diverse student populations
Special educational needs	
Building meaningful relationships	

High workload and pressure to meet academic standards

A significant professional barrier faced by teachers was the high workload and pressure to meet academic standards. This theme included subthemes such as extensive rules and responsibilities and lack of support.

Extensive rules and responsibilities

The findings indicated that extensive rules and responsibilities imposed a high workload, which hindered TI. Participant 1 expressed frustration with the numerous rules, stating, *"Truly, I am a little bit tired of rules which are repeated so many times... sometimes I feel insulted because of this pressure..."*

In response, participant 1 said: *"We discussed it with the manager and asked him to decrease the rules, and he did it for a while, but again, by employing new teachers, we face pressure again."*

Lack of support

Another issue causing high workload and pressure was the administration's lack of support. Participant 3 remarked, *"One time, I wanted to add a vocabulary book to work with my students, but my boss didn't let us and forced us to follow the chart..."*

To navigate this barrier, participants emphasized open communication and collaboration. Participant 1 stated, *"...I try to discuss this topic and present it as a suggestion in meetings. It seems suggestions are more effective..."*

Conflicts with colleagues or supervisors

Conflicts with colleagues or supervisors emerged as a theme related to professional barriers to TI, including communication breakdowns, different pedagogical approaches, and undermining professionalism.

Communication breakdowns

Lack of proper communication with colleagues and supervisors led to conflicts, hindering TI. Participant 2 stated, *"...conflicts with colleagues or supervisors can prevent teacher identity formation. Making strong professional relationships affects my feelings as a teacher..."*

To address this, teachers fostered open communication. Participant 2 shared: *"I talk with my colleagues even about non-professional subjects, and I try to listen carefully before responding."*

Different pedagogical approaches

Differing pedagogical approaches exacerbated conflicts, hindering TI. Participant 1 noted, *"Our supervisor's ideas often differ from ours... From the time I worked in institutes, supervisors were not open to criticism..."*

To navigate this, teachers suggested discussing issues with higher-ups. Participant 1 stated: *"In these situations, I try to discuss the issue with our boss because he is better at understanding us, and I get advice from him."*

Undermining professionalism

Conflicts often stemmed from undermining professionalism. Participant 4 pointed out, *"The way our supervisor observes us is not standard in my idea because she just gets feedback from students..."*

To overcome this, teachers sought to bridge the gap with supervisors, promoting constructive feedback. Participant 4 noted, *"I suggested she observe the class physically and give us comments about our teaching..."*

Limited autonomy and rigid expectations

Limited autonomy and rigid expectations emerged as another theme of professional barriers to TI, including curriculum constraints and instructional constraints.

Curriculum constraints

Following a rigid curriculum limited teachers' practices and served as a barrier to TI. Participant 3 stated, *"Unfair expectations.... and lack of independence at the institute had a negative effect on me. They ask us to follow a certain curriculum and syllabus... and we have no creativity in the classroom."*

To overcome this, teachers emphasized the need for flexibility. Participant 3 noted: *"I think we should have more flexibility. We can design our own curriculum based on the students' needs."*

Instructional constraints

Instructional constraints further limited teachers' practices and hindered TI. Participant 4 remarked, *"Sometimes they expect us to write an outline in a day before starting the new term... this is not logical because unexpected things may happen."*

Teachers suggested setting short-term goals to navigate this. Participant 4 mentioned, *"I try to do it session by session instead of doing the whole session together."*

Engaging with diverse student populations

Engaging with diverse student populations is another professional barrier to TI, with subthemes of cultural and linguistic differences, special educational needs, and building meaningful relationships.

Cultural and linguistic differences

Having students with cultural and linguistic differences made engagement difficult and posed a professional barrier. For instance, participant 4 highlighted: *"Because students are different, engaging with a large number of students can be challenging in shaping my teacher identity, and teachers should have different teaching strategies to meet their needs..."*

To navigate this issue, teachers tried to use some strategies, such as seeking feedback from students or colleagues and using new methodologies. For example, participant 4 suggested, *"I think teachers can ask other colleagues or they can read different books to learn those strategies... I myself try to use some strategies such as using different teaching methods... or getting feedback from students to strengthen my teacher identity."*

Special educational needs

Students from diverse backgrounds had special educational needs, impacting TI. Participant 2 said, *"Keeping students active is hard. Sometimes they prefer to be silent when it is necessary to talk..."*

To overcome this, teachers assigned responsibilities to motivate students. Participant 2 shared: *"I try to make student active by giving him a kind of responsibility."*

Building meaningful relationships

Building meaningful relationships with students was challenging and affected TI. Participant 1 noted, *"Since I teach high levels, I can see my students are very tired of learning English..."*

To navigate this, teachers set goals and responsibilities for students. Participant 1 stated: *"I try to give them hope and motivate them by reminding their goals... Sometimes, I want them to have a project for lower-level students..."*

In terms of the contextual barriers to TI, the following sub-themes and themes were extracted and summarized in the table below:

Table 3
Themes and Subthemes of Contextual Barriers to TI

Sub themes	Themes
Lack of collaborative culture	Hierarchical organizational culture and top-down decision-making
Hierarchical power structures	Institutional policies emphasizing standardized assessments
Narrowing of the curriculum	
Narrow focus on test scores	Rigid teaching methodologies
Limited authentic assessment	
Standardized curriculum constraints	Organizational culture of competition and comparison
Resistance to innovative practices	
Professional relationship effects	
Ranking and reward systems	

Hierarchical organizational culture and top-down decision-making

A significant contextual barrier to TI was the hierarchical organizational culture and top-down decision-making. This theme included subthemes such as lack of collaborative culture and hierarchical power structures.

Lack of collaborative culture

The findings indicated that a lack of collaborative culture contributed to hierarchical organizational dynamics. Participant 1 stated, *"Since the decisions are made by bosses in the institute, I feel my autonomy is limited and I can't show my identity..."* This limitation hinders creativity and personal expression in teaching.

Teachers suggested engaging in dialogue to address this concern. Participant 1 mentioned, *"Sometimes, I ask our manager to hold meetings to discuss our concerns... I also ask my colleagues to see whether they feel the same, and we try to discuss it together."*

Hierarchical power structures

A mismatch between rules and actual teaching practices hindered teachers' TI. For instance, Participant 2 said, *"In our institute, I often see teachers not following the rules our boss decided on. There is always a mismatch between the boss's decisions and the teachers' real practice."*

Teachers navigate this issue by participating in decision-making processes. Participant 2 stated: *"Naturally, to solve this problem, principals should get feedback from teachers who face students directly... teachers know the students and classes better than anyone else."*

Institutional policies emphasizing standardized assessments

The second contextual barrier to TI was institutional policies emphasizing standardized assessments, with subthemes of narrowing of the curriculum, narrow focus on test scores, and limited authentic assessment.

Narrowing of the curriculum

The findings indicated that narrowing the curriculum to standardized tests restricted teachers' practices and hindered TI. Participant 2 highlighted, *"In some English institutes where I work, they give importance to standardized tests like TOEFL... and they want us to prepare students for those exams."*

In response, teachers tried to integrate testing into their teaching practices. Participant 2 stated: *"I try to use some strategies to overcome this challenge, like having more formative tests... I also do my best to make the test similar to real-life activities."*

Narrow focus on test scores

Teachers felt forced to align their practices with testing requirements, limiting their TI. Participant 1 noted, *"From the time big tests like TOEFL or IELTS became important, institutes compete with each other... we should teach students in a way they can be successful in those tests."*

To address this, teachers suggested using authentic tasks. Participant 1 said: *"...using natural tasks can be helpful, like focusing on daily news or conversations."*

Limited authentic assessment

Focusing on specific language skills while ignoring others limits teachers' practices. Participant 3 said, *"...Sometimes there is too much emphasis on grammar and vocabulary for tests, and they ignore other skills..."*

To navigate this, teachers employed integrated tasks that included a variety of skills. Participant 3 suggested, *"I try to work on grammar and vocabulary through other skills, not separately."*

Rigid teaching methodologies

The third significant contextual barrier to TI was rigid teaching methodologies, with subthemes of standardized curriculum constraints and resistance to innovative practices.

Standardized curriculum constraints

As the findings showed, teachers had to follow a specific and fixed curriculum, which did not allow them to act based on students' needs. Thus, it hindered their TI, as stated by two participants:

"I had a class with a mix of beginners and advanced learners. I saw some of them have some grammatical difficulties. I wanted to help those, but because of finishing the textbook, I had no time" (Participant 3)

"Our boss told us we should stick to the book and ... even we cannot change the order of parts. I think it limits us to use our own ideas." (Participant 2)

To overcome this issue, teachers suggested ignoring the rules or seeking feedback from students and sharing it with managers.

Participant 3 said, *"Once I decided to get feedback from my students and share it with our boss to let us use more flexible teaching methods."*

Participant 2 stated, *"If I want to be honest, sometimes I don't follow the rules and I may change the order..."*

Resistance to innovative practices

Resistance to innovative practices within the institutional framework posed challenges. Participant 1 shared, *"One time I wanted to use movie projects, but the manager didn't let us because he thought it was a waste of time."*

Teachers suggested involving students in discussions with managers. Participant 1 mentioned, *"...since students love movie projects, I want them to talk to the manager and convince him."*

Organizational culture of competition and comparison

The fourth significant contextual barrier to TI was the organizational culture of competition and comparison, reflected in subthemes of professional relationship effects and ranking and reward systems.

Professional relationship effects

Competitive relationships with colleagues hindered TI. Participant 4 said, *"In some institutes, I feel a competition... teachers are competing to be perfect and get our manager's attention."*

To navigate this challenge, participant 4 emphasized positive relationships: *"I try to have a friendly relationship with all my colleagues and stay away from minor issues."*

Ranking and reward systems

Ranking and reward systems fostered a competitive culture, hindering TI. Participant 2 noted, *"In our institute, our manager tells us that those teachers who help students get the best scores are the best teachers, and they give some credits to those teachers."*

To address this issue, teachers raised their concerns with management. Participant 2 mentioned, *"We sometimes complain and tell him this is not fair because we are all working here."*

Regarding the strategies used by teachers to navigate TI barriers, they were summarized in the table below:

Table 4

Strategies to Navigate Personal, Professional, and Contextual Barriers to TI

Types of barriers	Strategies Employed by Teachers
Personal barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seeking feedback from students, mentors, supervisors, and colleagues - Engaging in professional development opportunities - Accepting faults and shortcomings - Focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses - Using dead times - Promoting shared leadership - Expanding knowledge through reading more - Prioritizing self-care and work-life balance
Professional barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engaging in professional development opportunities - Setting realistic goals - Recommending solutions - Communicating with colleagues and advocating for autonomy, collaboration, and innovation - Discussing the issue with those who are in charge - Being more flexible - Being organized and ready - Seeking feedback from students, mentors, supervisors, and colleagues - Involving and engaging students - Motivating students

ASSESSING AND NAVIGATING PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL

Types of barriers	Strategies Employed by Teachers
Contextual barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Holding meetings - Seeking feedback from students, mentors, supervisors, and colleagues - Taking <i>assessment as learning</i> perspective (integrating teaching and testing) - Focusing on natural learning and real-life tasks - Using inductive approaches in teaching - Not following the rules of the institutes - Developing friendly relationships with all staff

The analysis of personal, professional, and contextual barriers to TI among English language teachers revealed some patterns. The findings showed some patterns between personal and professional barriers. Professional pressures often exacerbated personal insecurities, such as self-doubt and fear of failure. Teachers frequently reported that the stress of high-performance expectations from management contributed to feelings of inadequacy. For instance, participant 2 noted, *"Our manager always expects us to perform well continuously,"* highlighting how external demands intensified internal struggles. Moreover, professional experiences, including conflicts with supervisors and rigid institutional expectations, impacted teachers' self-perceptions of competence. For instance, participant 3 shared, *"I get a lot of stress when they come and I think, what if I can't show my talents?"*. Furthermore, the demands of the teaching profession often interfered with personal well-being. Teachers indicated that the overwhelming nature of their responsibilities contributed to personal barriers. Participant 1 mentioned, *"I am a little bit tired of rules which are repeated so many times,"* suggesting professional constraints negatively impacted personal health and led to personal barriers.

The results also showed some patterns between contextual and professional barriers. Contextual barriers, such as institutional expectations and high-stakes testing, further restricted teachers' professional experiences. For example, participant 3 noted, *"My boss did not let us implement new teaching strategies"*. Furthermore, emphasizing standardized assessments often pressured teachers to conform to specific methodologies, restricting teaching practices. Participant 2 said, *".... they give importance to standardized tests like TOEFL....and using personal teaching methods with these rules is difficult...."*. Additionally, the competitive nature of the educational environment undermined collaborative practices, which are important for professional growth (Zhao, 2024), as said by participant 4, *"In some institutes, I have the feeling of a competition. I mean I think teachers are competing with each other to be perfect...."*

In addressing these interconnected barriers, teachers utilized adaptive strategies that addressed various barriers at once. For example, seeking feedback from colleagues and supervisors served not only to promote professional growth but also to reduce personal insecurities. Similarly, professional development opportunities helped teachers improve their abilities and self-assurance while nurturing cooperative connections. Furthermore, collaborative practices were crucial in countering the negative impacts of competition and hierarchical structures within the workplace. Teachers emphasized the importance of building supportive professional relationships, which could help reduce stress and promote a sense of

belonging. Teachers created an environment that supported their identity development by seeking autonomy and open communication with management.

Discussion

The current qualitative study reveals personal, professional, and contextual barriers to English language institute teachers' TI and their strategies to navigate these barriers. Personal barriers include self-doubt, fear of failure, perfectionism, and challenges in balancing personal and professional life. Self-doubt and insecurity emerged, characterized by negative self-perception and low self-esteem. Many teachers reported inadequacy when comparing their capabilities to peers, leading to self-criticism and hindering TI. This finding aligns with [Luszczynska et al. \(2011\)](#), linking self-doubt with diminished teacher efficacy. Teachers noted that comparing themselves to more competent peers could lower self-esteem, affecting TI, consistent with [Motallebzadeh and Kazemi \(2018\)](#). Teachers manage these barriers by focusing on strengths, seeking feedback, and developing a positive self-view, which is essential for their TI. This is in line with [Ghiasvand et al. \(2023\)](#), who stated that seeking support from others is a strategy to improve TI.

Fear of failure was another personal barrier, including pressure to maintain high standards and concerns about negative perceptions from observers. The pressure to meet organizational expectations can lead to heightened anxiety, hindering TI. This aligns with [Yazan \(2018\)](#), who noted that institutional expectations affect TI. Participants shared strategies like actively engaging students to maintain confidence, emphasizing interactive teaching methods to enhance engagement, and reducing pressure. Concerns about observer perceptions added stress during evaluations, which could hinder TI. This corresponds to [Mann and Tang \(2012\)](#), who highlighted the presence of a principal that creates anxiety. Preparation and seeking constructive feedback post-observation were suggested as practical strategies to improve practice.

Perfectionism emerged as another personal barrier, characterized by unrealistic self-standards. The teachers acknowledged that setting unattainable goals led to perfectionism, hindering their TI. This corresponds to [Childs and Stoeber \(2012\)](#), who stated that perfectionism increases stress and inefficacy over time. Accepting imperfections and focusing on continuous improvement were suggested to navigate this barrier, which allows teachers to view their professional journey as continuous learning rather than a series of evaluations. Moreover, teachers noted linking self-worth to performance can lead to perfectionism, resulting in feelings of inadequacy when perceived worth is dependent on students' progress, which theoretically corresponds to [Flett and Hewitt \(2006\)](#), stating perfectionists are individuals who derive their self-worth from meeting high performance standards, and their relentless work ethic. Open communication and reflection were identified as strategies to counteract this barrier, allowing teachers to measure effectiveness more realistically and aligning theoretically with [Nevgi and Löfström \(2015\)](#), who showed that teaching practice reflection shapes TI.

Balancing personal and professional responsibilities also emerged as a personal barrier. Teachers shared that demanding work schedules limit their ability to prioritize self-care, affecting TI. This finding corresponds to [Abou Assali and Al Abdouli \(2024\)](#), stating that teaching demands cause teachers to put self-care last. Participants suggested setting clear boundaries and prioritizing personal time, demonstrating a desire to integrate professional and personal lives more effectively. This is similar to the study by [Sobral et al. \(2025\)](#), saying that setting boundaries is essential for teacher well-being.

The findings also revealed significant professional barriers to TI, including high workload, conflicts with colleagues or supervisors, limited autonomy, and challenges in engaging with diverse student populations. The high workload encompasses subthemes like extensive rules and lack of support. Teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by institutional rules. This aligns with studies suggesting occupational stress contributes to teacher burnout ([Owusu, 2021](#)). Participants emphasized the importance of open communication with administration, which provided temporary relief from pressures, highlighting the need for ongoing dialogue between teachers and administrators, in line with [Ghiasvand et al. \(2023\)](#).

Conflicts with colleagues or supervisors emerged as another professionally significant barrier. Subthemes include communication breakdowns and differing pedagogical approaches. Poor communication can lead to misunderstandings, emphasizing the need for strong professional relationships. Teachers described conflicts with supervisors and limited freedom in teaching methods, creating an environment where they feel undervalued and isolated, ultimately undermining TI. This aligns with [Olsen \(2011\)](#), stating that teachers' professional contexts influence professional identity. Creating a collaborative environment for sharing perspectives was suggested for developing TI.

Conflicts arising from differing pedagogical views among teachers highlight the need for professional development. It is similar to [Ghiasvand et al. \(2023\)](#), who indicated that such conflicts can occur when teachers' beliefs are at odds with their assigned roles. Additionally, superficial supervisor feedback complicates professionalism and contributes to conflicts that limit TI. To address these issues, implementing constructive feedback practices may help bridge the gap between teachers and supervisors.

Limited autonomy and rigid expectations also emerged as professional barriers. Teachers expressed frustration about strictly adhering to predefined curricula, negatively impacting TI. Educational institutions should provide greater flexibility to adapt curricula to meet students' needs, enhancing professional identity, as supported by [Fairley \(2020\)](#).

Engaging with diverse student populations, including cultural differences and special educational needs, was identified as another professional barrier. Participants noted that these diverse needs necessitate tailored teaching strategies and underscore the importance of professional development in culturally responsive practices. Addressing special educational needs is challenging, making training in differentiated instruction crucial. Findings echo [van Rijswijk \(2016\)](#), emphasizing the complexities of individual student differences. Building

strong relationships with students was also emphasized as a vital strategy for enhancing engagement and fostering a supportive environment.

The findings also revealed significant contextual barriers to TI, including hierarchical organizational culture and top-down decision-making, institutional policies emphasizing standardized assessments, and rigid methodologies. Participants expressed frustration with limited autonomy due to management decisions. Teachers advocated for increased dialogue to share perspectives. This aligns with [Ghiasvand et al. \(2023\)](#), suggesting that seeking common ground to solve conflicts is a strategy to improve TI. Furthermore, the disconnect between institutional rules and actual teaching practices was also noted. This agrees with [Ghiasvand et al. \(2023\)](#), who mentioned that teaching ideology mismatch is challenging. Including teachers in decision-making can enhance their sense of agency and TI.

The second contextual barrier was the emphasis on institutional policies prioritizing standardized assessments. This includes subthemes like the narrowing of curriculum and limited authentic assessment practices. Teachers expressed concern that pressure to prepare students for standardized tests limits their teaching methods. This echoes findings from [Stevens \(2023\)](#), revealing that standardized testing restricts teachers' strategies. Teachers proposed incorporating formative assessments to overcome this challenge, balancing assessment with meaningful learning. The focus on test scores limits classroom skills, forcing teachers to prioritize test preparation over authentic learning experiences. Teachers noted that overemphasizing grammar and vocabulary often excludes crucial competencies like speaking and listening. Teachers have shown adaptability by integrating authentic tasks into their curricula, aligning with [Colthorpe et al. \(2021\)](#), who suggested using authentic tasks to enhance success.

Rigid methodologies emerged as a significant contextual barrier, characterized by standardized curriculum constraints and resistance to innovative practices. Participants expressed frustration with fixed curricula that restrict flexibility and limit TI. This finding corresponds to [Yuan and Burns \(2017\)](#), who said power dynamics and rigid curriculum hinder TI. They suggested collecting student feedback and advocating for more adaptable teaching methods. It was suggested that breaking rules to serve students better, highlighting a willingness to exercise autonomy, though institutional support is needed. Resistance to new practices was observed, limiting the creativity necessary for growth. This aligns with [Yuan \(2018\)](#), noting institutional tensions when trying to innovate. Engaging students in discussions was recommended to overcome these challenges.

The fourth contextual barrier identified was the competitive culture among teachers, highlighted by professional relationship dynamics and ranking systems. Ranking systems linked to student performance exacerbate competition, hindering collaboration essential for growth. This observation aligns with [van Lankveld et al. \(2016\)](#), arguing that such environments restrict TI. It is also similar to the study by [Brownell and Tanner \(2012\)](#), who stated that there is no sufficient reward for innovative teaching. To mitigate these barriers, teachers recommend

fostering friendly relationships with colleagues and staying away from minor issues, echoing [Phiri's \(2022\)](#) advocacy for collaboration and [Ghiasvand et al.'s \(2023\)](#) avoiding conflicts strategy to overcome identity challenges.

This study highlighted the complex interplay of personal, professional, and contextual barriers English language teachers face in developing their TI. A key finding was that professional barriers intensify personal barriers. Many teachers expressed that high expectations from management lead to self-doubt and anxiety. This finding corresponds to [Nickel and Crosby \(2022\)](#), who posited that overwork exacerbates tensions like self-criticism. Conflicts with supervisors and rigid rules further exacerbate personal barriers like low confidence. The findings also indicated that contextual factors exacerbate professional barriers. Contextual barriers, such as high-stakes testing, significantly impact teachers' ability to innovate, which is in line with [Gonzalez et al. \(2017\)](#), stating that high-stakes testing lessens a teacher's ability. Additionally, a competitive atmosphere limits collaboration, which is crucial for professional growth.

In response to these challenges, teachers seek feedback from colleagues to enhance professional development and confidence. Engaging in professional development opportunities boosts skills and self-efficacy. Collaboration emerges as a key strategy to combat competition's negative effects. Teachers who built supportive relationships found that these connections fostered belonging and reduced stress. A collaborative culture can enhance well-being and effectiveness, benefiting both teachers and students. In summary, addressing the interconnected barriers to TI requires a supportive environment promoting collaboration and professional growth. Educational institutions must prioritize teacher well-being to help teachers fully develop their identities. Future research should explore these dynamics to identify effective strategies for enhancing the teaching experience.

Conclusion

The study has provided valuable insights into the personal, professional, and contextual barriers English language institute teachers face as they work to shape their TI. The personal barriers were self-doubt and insecurity, fear of failure, perfectionism, and challenges in balancing personal and professional life. The professional barriers were high workload and pressure to meet academic standards, conflicts with colleagues or supervisors, limited autonomy and rigid expectations, and challenges in engaging with diverse student populations. The contextual barriers included hierarchical organizational culture and top-down decision-making, institutional policies emphasizing standardized assessments, rigid teaching methodologies, and an organizational culture of competition and comparison. Despite these challenges, teachers used strategies like actively seeking feedback, pursuing professional development, and advocating for their needs to foster a more supportive environment for growth.

Analyzing barriers to TI revealed that personal, professional, and contextual factors are interconnected. A key finding is that professional pressures often amplify personal insecurities like self-doubt and fear of failure. Conflicts with supervisors and strict institutional demands also affect teachers' self-perception and well-being. The overwhelming responsibilities in teaching contribute to personal barriers, while contextual factors like high-stakes testing create additional professional restrictions. The focus on standardized assessments pressures teachers to adhere to specific methods, which limits their teaching practices and innovation. Furthermore, the competitive educational environment hinders collaboration, which is vital for professional development ([Zhao, 2024](#)).

To cope, teachers utilized adaptive strategies that addressed various barriers at once. For example, seeking feedback from colleagues and supervisors served not only to promote professional growth but also to reduce personal insecurities. Similarly, engaging in professional development opportunities helped teachers improve their abilities and self-assurance while also nurturing cooperative connections. Furthermore, collaborative practices were crucial in countering the negative impacts of competition and hierarchical structures within the workplace. Teachers emphasized the importance of building supportive professional relationships, which could help reduce stress and promote a sense of belonging. Teachers created a more inclusive environment and supported their identity development by advocating for autonomy and open communication with management.

The study's findings have some implications for teachers, teacher training programs, and educational policy. By identifying these barriers, teachers can improve their teaching identity and classroom effectiveness and enhance student engagement. Educational institutions must tackle existing barriers by promoting collaboration, supporting teacher well-being, and introducing flexible policies to encourage innovative teaching practices. Investing in these areas supports the growth of teachers' professional identities and improves students' educational results. As the education landscape evolves, emphasizing teachers' TI is essential for promoting a more effective and adaptive learning atmosphere. The insights can inform targeted professional development initiatives in training programs and guide policy recommendations to create supportive environments in English language institutes focusing on TI.

This study recognizes that various limitations need to be taken into account. Initially, the somewhat limited sample size, focused on a specific group of participants, may restrict the applicability of the findings to a broader population of English language teachers, as their perspectives may not fully reflect the diverse challenges faced in various institutional contexts. Additionally, conducting longitudinal or follow-up research could enhance understanding of how obstacles to TI change over time and impact professional growth. Future studies can enhance validity and relevance by employing diverse sampling methods and undertaking a more in-depth exploration of the broader educational context.

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