

The Iranian EFL Teachers' Perfectionism and Their Professional Identity

Abstract

Research about teachers' perfectionism and professional identity can help policymakers to improve the educational system and the teachers to be more effective in their occupation. This study aimed to observe and evaluate the interrelationship between EFL teachers' professional identity and their perfectionism to know how the two variables are important from teachers' point of view. The present research was a quantitative study using a survey to explore the teachers' attitudes toward perfectionism and professional identity and to investigate the relationship between the two variables. The population of the study comprised of 55 EFL teachers, with an age range of 24 to 47, of both genders whose native language was Persian. The findings showed that the teachers thought they were perfect in their job; consequently, their being perfect helped them improve and grow their professional identity more successfully. In other words, although many further studies with bigger, more varied populations must be conducted to reach a firm conclusion, it can be deduced from the present study results that perfectionist teachers, who are aware of their professional identity, might be more successful in their jobs. Ultimately, there is no doubt that research about teachers' professional identity and utilizing the results can help both the teachers and the educational systems improve.

Keywords: *Perfectionism, Professional Identity, EFL, EFL Teachers*

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Introduction

Due to globalization in recent decades, identity and self in second or foreign language learning research have attracted considerable attention among scholars of SLA (Second language acquisition) (Taylor, 2014; Aliakbari & Amiri, 2018; Chen & Kent, 2020). Identity, which is a multifaceted construct, and its changing profile in external facets demonstrates its dynamism, is a construct of great importance in different fields of study, especially in teacher education. Epstein (1978) argued that identity is an idea of synthesis, integration, and movement that represents the method via which the person seeks to incorporate his copious statuses and roles, and right into a coherent picture of self.

Professional identity is the image with which the individual refers to himself as a professional and is composed of the set of expectations developed by the individual regarding his abilities, based on his experiences and personal backgrounds, as well as on others' expectations - all of which guide one's behavior (Lasky, 2005). Professional identity is therefore defined as the individual's sense of belonging to the profession and identification with it (Tickle, 1999). It develops and is influenced by environmental, economic, cultural, political, and historical forces (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). It is shaped by the interaction of the professional with him or herself and his/her social, cultural, and professional environment (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

Perfectionism is a personality disposition that involves setting extremely demanding performance standards, overly critical evaluation of one's behavior, and attempts to be as flawless as possible in achievement situations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Once conceptualized as a unidimensional construct (Burns, 1980), perfectionism is currently regarded as a

multidimensional personality trait (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) acting as "a double-edged sword that may energize or paralyze people, motivating some perfectionists to engage and others to disengage" (Stoeber, Damian, & Madigan, 2018, p. 19). Madigan et al. (2016) refer to these two higher-order dimensions as perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. The former is indicative of adaptive perfectionism, while the latter is indicative of maladaptive perfectionism. Differentiating between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism is important since these two aspects display different and, at times, contradictory patterns of association with different characteristics, processes, and outcomes (Stoeber et al., 2018). Accordingly, perfectionism can provide a promising venue for shedding more light on individual differences across various domains of functioning because of its multidimensional nature (Hanchon, 2010). This is specifically true in performance situations where individuals are pressured to be perfect, like learning a second/foreign (L2) language, which is quite public and visible to others. According to Flett et al. (2016), perfectionism can exert distal and proximal effects on language performance.

This study aimed to observe and evaluate the interrelationship between EFL teachers' professional identity and their perfectionism to know how the two variables are important from teachers' point of view.

Research Questions

Question 1: How do Iranian EFL teachers feel about perfectionism in their job?

Question 2: How do Iranian EFL teachers feel about their professional identity?

Question 3: Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' perfectionism and professional identity?

Methodology

Participants

The study population comprised 55 EFL teachers working in different Language Institutes in Kerman, a city in southeast Iran (where the researcher resides). The native language of the population of the study was Farsi, with the age range of 24 to 47, for both genders. The questionnaires were sent to 65 teachers via email or handed to them in person. Only 55 teachers returned the questionnaires, which established the study population. The teachers in the institutes worked either part-time or full-time and were paid based on their teaching hours. Some full-time teachers benefitted from employment advantages such as insurance and retirement pension.

Informed Consent

Before the study, there is a need to obtain approval from the research setting and subjects (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Robson, 2002). For this study, once the appropriate settings (based on accessibility) were identified, access to the teacher participants was negotiated. Having worked as a part-time EFL teacher at the chosen institutes, no difficulties were encountered when seeking access to the settings. The researcher's involvement with the centers as a practitioner-researcher was discussed with and approved by the Heads of the institutes.

Confidentiality of the Data

It was important to ensure that the institution and participants understood their right to anonymity (Oppenheim, 1992; De Vaus, 2001). During the project implementation, the teachers were asked to write their names on the questionnaires to correlate each questionnaire with the other of the same respondent. However, they were told that this was either for further studies or simply to inform them of their results. In the writing up of the thesis, their names would not be revealed, and any data that would allow individuals to be identified would not be reported unless they consent.

Instrumentation

Two main instruments were used to collect the required data for the study: 1. Perfectionism Questionnaire and 2. professional Identity Questionnaire.

The first instrument was Hewitt and Flett's (1991) perfectionism questionnaire developed for their study. It, originally, was a 45-item self-report measure of three distinct dimensions of perfectionism: (a) self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., holding perfectionist standards for oneself), (b) socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., beliefs that others hold unrealistic standards for one's behavior) and (c) other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., holding perfectionist standards for others). There were 15 items for each dimension of perfectionism.

Respondents rated their agreement with each item of the questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1. Completely disagree 2. Disagree, 3. Neither agree nor disagree, 4. Agree, and 5. Completely agree.

The present study examined only two variables: personal-oriented and socially prescribed types of perfectionism because these two types were most closely related to the inward conceptualization of perfectionism that involves emphasizing oneself's achievements and standards (i.e., demanding perfectionism from oneself). In addition, these two types are consistent with the general definition of perfectionism set forth by Hewitt and Flett (1991); i.e., a personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high standards for performance accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of one's behavior. Also, focusing on personal-oriented and socially prescribed types of perfectionism allowed us to extend previous research, revealing the importance of these particular types of perfectionism (see Brown et al., 1999; Canter, 2009; Enns et al., 2001). Finally, other-oriented perfectionism was excluded due to a lack of relevance to the goal and the research questions of the present study, and only the following were included in the questionnaire to be explored:

1. Self-prescribed perfectionism: items 1 to 8
2. Socially oriented perfectionism: items 9 to 15

Professional Identity Questionnaire

The second tool of data gathering was: the professional Identity Questionnaire, which was used to investigate the participants' professional identity status. This questionnaire was designed by Labbaf et al. (2019) for their study with Iranian Language students at Isfahan University. The questionnaire consists of 19 statements which must be rated based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

Reliability and Validity Index of the Questionnaires

Since these questionnaires were already used for the same purpose and were also used without significant changes, they were valid.

To estimate the reliability of the questionnaires, Chronbach's Alfa was used. Results proved the acceptable reliability range of both questionnaires: Perfectionism (Reliability scale = 0.87) and Professional Identity (Reliability scale = 0.82).

Design of the Study

The study used a survey to explore the teachers' attitudes on the two aspects of perfectionism and professional identity and investigated the relationship between the two variables. To fulfill these objectives, the participants were invited to fill out the two questionnaires sent via mail or handed to them in person.

Data Collection Procedure

Two questionnaires were used to collect the data. The first was *the perfectionism questionnaire* developed by Hewitt and Flett (1991), which included 15 items. It used a 5-point Likert scale to explore the teachers' responses on their level of perfectionism. The other instrument was *the professional identity questionnaire* made up of 12 items, answered using five-point Likert scales.

Data Analysis Procedures

The SPSS software, version 23, was used to analyze the data. The data gathered through the questionnaires were loaded into the software, and some statistical analysis procedures were implemented. The researcher used both descriptive and inferential data analyses. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated for descriptive statistics. For the inferential data analysis, t-test, chi2, and regression were used.

Results

Table 1. Overall Descriptive Statistics for Perfectionism.

Items	N	Mean	Std. Dev
1. I am a perfectionist in setting my goals.	55	3.72	1.000
2. I strive to be the best at everything I do.	55	4.0811	.63584
3. I set very high standards for myself.	55	3.6757	.79568
4. When I am working on something, I cannot relax until it is perfect.	55	4.5541	.52712
5. I do not have to be the best at whatever I am doing.	55	2.1021	.58187
6. I never aim for perfection in my work.	55	3.8784	.82682
7. I must always be successful at school or work.	55	3.2432	1.13247
8. It makes me uneasy to see an error in my work.	55	3.1757	.83351
9. Others think I am okay, even when I do not succeed.	55	4.3514	.62882
10. People around me think I am still competent even if I make a mistake.	55	3.9189	.84004
11. The people around me expect me to succeed at everything I do.	55	4.4054	.61753
12. The better I do, the better I am expected to do.	55	4.2027	.59633
13. Others will like me even if I do not excel at everything.	55	3.1081	1.10500
14. People expect nothing less than perfection from me.	55	3.5135	.83162
15. People expect more from me than I am capable of giving.	55	3.9054	.87849

For instance, the mean for item 2 was calculated to be 4.08, which is high enough to indicate the idea that teachers try to be the best in their job. Moreover, item 4, with a high mean of 4.5, tells us that teachers are determined in their job. Item no. 9, shows a high level of perfectionism with a mean of 4.34 and indicates how confident teachers are in their profession. Overall, and based on the general mean, this study's teachers enjoyed high perfectionism. The high means of most of the items indicated a high level of perfectionism among the study sample.

Table 2. Overall Descriptive Statistics for professional Identity questionnaire.

Items	N	Mean	Std. Dev
1. Interest in the teaching profession	55	3.7432	.99397
2. High teaching ability	55	4.4189	.60121
3. Colleagues' perception of teachers' personality	55	3.8784	1.03305

Normality Data of the Questionnaires

Using Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistical procedures, the normality of both questionnaires was examined. Based on the result, the responses to the questionnaire items were spread normally because, in all cases, the calculated significance level was more than 0.05.

According to the significance level of both questionnaires, it can be concluded that both questionnaires benefitted from the normality of the responses. Normality for the Perfectionism questionnaire was estimated to be 0.471 and 0.510 for the professional identity questionnaire.

Question 1: How do Iranian EFL teachers feel about perfectionism in their job?

Table 1 presents the data on teachers' views on perfectionism. As the mean increases, the higher level of teachers' perfectionism.

Question 2: How do Iranian EFL teachers feel about their professional identity?

To answer this question, the data of the professional identity questionnaire were analyzed in terms of mean and standard deviation.

Professional Identity Questionnaire

The data in Table 2 has represented the data of the questionnaire on the professional identity of the 55 EFL teachers.

4. Colleagues' perception of teachers' academic expertise	55	4.135	.95551
5. Students' perception of the teacher	55	3.5270	.72571
6. Scientific proficiency in the field	55	3.2838	.89932
7. High level of self-confidence	55	4.4189	.64121
8. Using the correct pronunciation	55	3.8784	.68151
9. High level of general information	55	4.4054	.61753
10. Familiarity with English language culture	55	3.7973	1.07244
11. Knowledge of history	55	2.1351	.83296
12. Class discussion beyond course content	55	2.4189	.92168
13. Respectful relationship with students	55	3.2311	1.83296
14. Respectful relationship with colleagues	55	3.1270	.72171
16. Involving students in class discussions	55	3.451	.93197
17. Active role in the related research	55	2.3784	.93197
18. Proper assessment of the students	55	3.3784	1.62151
18. Observing ethical principles	55	4.5412	.90168
19. Good appearance	55	3.7973	1.81296

The descriptive data of Table 2 gave the mean for each item separately. The mean for each item increased, indicating that the professional identity improved. In other words, the higher the mean of each item, the higher the level of professional identity among teachers. For instance, the high mean of 4.41 for item 2 indicated that the participants tried to achieve high teaching abilities because of their perfectionist attitudes, which demanded high-performance standards in achievement situations. On the other hand, based on their professional identity, they could achieve an enjoyable experience of success.

Table 3. Comparison of both questionnaires.

Questionnaires	Means	Std. Dev.
Perfectionism	3.825	.9451
professional Identity	2.9321	.8994

The data in Table 3 has elaborated the general means for both questionnaires. According to these data, the mean of 3.82 for perfectionism told us that the level was almost high, and teachers had positive attitudes toward their perfectionism. In other words, they considered themselves perfect teachers in their job position tended to be perfect as a teacher. The other trait, professional identity, among the teachers with a general mean of 2.93 was not as high as their perfectionism due to

Table 4. Paired Samples T-Test for the two Questionnaires.

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Perfectionism and Identity	-.89171	1.8078	.6671	-2.2411	.3912	-2.026	54	.001

On the other side, the low means of 2.41 and 2.37 for items 12 and 16 in the sequence, indicated the fact that the participants were afraid of taking risks and involving the students in discussions and research beyond the course content, both of which were the result of their perfectionism and professional identity. In other words, they were under plenty of pressure to excel and be perfect to avoid the fear of failure and criticism. Another high mean of 4.4 belonging to item 7 indicated that the subjects paid attention to what others felt about them. It meant they had some self-confidence since they thought others' viewpoint toward them was positive.

some factors. However, the correlational data could clarify the point better to know the degree of the relationship.

Question 3: Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' perfectionism and professional identity?

The data in Table 4 are presented to answer this question.

Table 4 presents the t-test data on the two questionnaires, showing that the relevant significance was calculated to be $0.001 < 0.05$. Therefore, it could be concluded that the difference between the means of the two questionnaires was meaningful and chance played little role in this equation. Thus,

Table 5. The Correlation between perfectionism and professional identity.

Variables	Correlation	P-Value	N
Perfectionism and Professional Identity	.889	.004	55

On the other hand, Table 5 offers the correlational analysis of perfectionism and professional identity questionnaires. As it can be understood from the data, a positive correlation was present between the two variables of perfectionism and professional identity. Based on this kind of relationship, it can be concluded that the two constructs affected each other positively. In other words, as teachers' professional identity developed, their perfectionism also improved. As a claim, it can be said that the two constructs were interrelated and affected each other meaningfully, i.e., the two variables potentially impacted each other.

Discussion

The present study attempted to shed light on the possible interrelationship between the Iranian EFL teachers' perfectionism and professional identity. It was noticed that perfectionism was correlated with the professional identity of the study participants ($r = 0.889$). The positive relationship indicated that teachers' perfectionism is an effective construct that could increase their professional identity and vice versa.

The results of this study also indicated that perfectionism was a significant positive predictor of professional identity. Based on the findings, perfectionist teachers reported a more developed vocational identity. Therefore, it could be concluded that a meaningful relationship was present between teachers' professional identity and perfectionism. Accordingly, the more adaptive perfectionist the teachers were the higher their levels of professional identity.

Furthermore, as pointed out by Stoeber and Rennert (2008), individuals' perfectionistic strivings could help them to vigorously pass through the challenges of their professional development. Besides, as Stoeber, Uphill, and Hotham (2009) maintained, there an association is between positive perfectionism or striving and outcome. In the present study also, individuals with a high level of perfectionism had better performance in general. Accordingly, the findings of this study furthermore indicated that both perfectionism and teachers' professional identity played important roles in effective teaching, which suggested a need to investigate the links between the two to equip the policymakers with a more

it could be postulated that a meaningful relationship existed between the two questionnaires. In other words, the two variables of perfectionism and professional identity impacted each other.

comprehensive approach toward the professional development of language teaching.

In effect, it could be discussed that successful teachers think about their profession and thus know how to improve it. They have some important features which might affect their reflectivity as well. According to the available literature, teachers can be better managers, organizers, and reflectors by knowing their professional identity. Also, those teachers who are perfectionists think more about improving their teaching and classrooms. Thus, the present study's findings showed that the teachers thought they were perfectionists in their job and consequently helped them improve and grow their professional identity more successfully. In other words, based on their achievements, teachers must be perfectionists and be aware of their professional identity to become successful teachers.

In addition to providing empirical evidence in its field, the present study results could sharpen EFL teachers' knowledge about the value of teaching and awareness of their professional identities. Also, this study implied that being a perfectionist helps to improve one's professional identity.

Finally, this study could be good evidence to support that: the teachers who set high standards for their career and are perfectionists can better understand their professional identity and the ways to value it plus helping its growth.

Implications of the Study

The conclusions derived from this study can have important implications in the teacher education domain. They notify teachers of their professional identity and the factors that may influence it. It is essential to promote awareness of the critical role of teachers' professional identity in their profession and the factors that would shape it. Informing teachers about these issues may help them to have a better understanding of themselves and their job.

Teacher educators and authorities are also recommended to provide favorable environments and help teachers build realistic professional identities. Institutes must also consider and improve the work-related factors that enhance job satisfaction.

Research about teachers' professional identity can help teachers to improve the educational system and become more effective in their occupation. Besides, the obtained findings and results of this study can provide some implications for language teaching and learn in the context of Iran. Zeichner and Liston (1987) highlighted the importance of teachers' self-awareness, such as knowing their professional identities, as a significant element of successful teaching. So, this study may also help teachers to become successful through the development of their perfectionism and their professional identity.

To sum up, the following findings were drawn from the present research:

1. The correlational analysis revealed that a significant relationship could be detected between aspects of perfectionism and professional identity.
2. The independent t-test showed that the difference between the means of the two questionnaires was meaningful and chance played little role in it.
3. The correlational analysis presented a positive relationship between the two variables of professional identity and perfectionism among Iranian EFL teachers who comprised the study sample.
4. The teachers' feeling of being perfect helped them improve and grow their professional identity more successfully.
5. Perfectionist teachers, who are aware of their professional identity, might be more successful in their jobs.
6. Ultimately, there is no doubt that research about teachers' professional identity and utilizing the results can help both the teachers and the educational systems improve.

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Conflict of interest

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Ethics statement

None

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