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A Case Study of Chinese EFL Teachers' Identity Tensions: A Dialogical Approach

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Abstract

Teacher identity plays a key role in language teaching effectiveness and teachers' professional development, with more and more attention being given to their identity tensions. However, little is known about English language teachers' identity tensions with young learners from a dialogical approach. This study analyzed language teachers' identity tensions from the multiplicity-unity, discontinuity-continuity and social-individual dimensions with a qualitative case study approach. The data were collected from interviews and classroom observations with two primary school EFL teachers in China. Thematic data analysis illustrated that the participants experienced identity tensions from their desired identity, expected identity and imposed identity, influenced by their beliefs, emotions and agency, young learners' characteristics and Chinese sociocultural contexts. Implications are provided for teacher educators, policymakers and school administrators to help EFL teachers better deal with their identity tensions.

Keywords

EFL teachers, young learners; identity tensions; I-position

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1. Introduction

Language teacher identity is complex and multidimensional, playing a key role in teachers' professional development and the success of the educational system (Cheng, 2021; Lee & Jang, 2023). Teacher identity refers to teachers' self-perception and the image they present to others (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), directly determining their pedagogical behaviors and beliefs (Yang et al., 2021). Literature has shown that constructing a solid teacher identity can help them increase work engagement (Xing, 2022) and teaching commitment (Ostad et al., 2019). Therefore, scholars have delved into this topic deeper to understand language teachers' linguistic identities (Zhang & Kim, 2024), legitimate identity in the native/nonnative English-speaking teacher dichotomy (Vega et al., 2021), ethical identities (Hayik, 2023), assessment identity (Mansouri et al., 2021) and emotional identity (Lu, 2024). These identities emphasized the complexity and multiplicity of language teacher identity, influenced by internal and external factors, including value and attitude (Hayik, 2023), emotion and belief (Han et al., 2024; Sang, 2023) and sociocultural contexts (Karimpour et al., 2024). Hence, continued research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of language teachers' identity.

Notably, teachers' identity construction is fluid (Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2024) and full of tensions. These tensions may manifest as conflicts within EFL/ESL teachers' personal beliefs, values and emotions (Hayik, 2023; Lu, 2024). They may also come from external pressures from their enacted identity (Lee, 2013) and expected identity (Bowen et al., 2021). Furthermore, teacher identity construction is contextual (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023), the tensions are also evident in the dynamics of interpersonal relationships with stakeholders (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021) and the influence of sociocultural factors (Karimpour et al., 2024). Such tensions function as a double-edged sword during the process of identity construction. They can be instrumental in the development of one's identity or impede its progress (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023), eliciting teachers' diverse emotional responses (Jiang & Gu, 2022), significantly influencing their self-perceptions and agency in language teaching. Therefore, more research is needed to explore language teachers' identity tensions to provide insights for them to better construct teacher identity.

However, there is limited research exploring language teacher identity using a dialogical approach, which serves as a theoretical framework to understand teachers' identity tensions by analyzing their unitary-multiple, continuous-discontinuous, and individual-social nature (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Such a kind of research is necessary to be conducted in China, where Chinese EFL teachers are facing more challenges from high-stakes examinations (Gao & Xu, 2013), conflicts between a student-centered teaching style and a Confucian parental teaching style (Gao & Ren, 2019) and collective culture to meet the requirements of the education reform (Yang et al., 2021). Chinese primary school EFL teachers, in particular, are facing a potential recruitment and identity crisis due to the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy (Teng et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, this study examines the voices and experiences of Chinese primary school EFL teachers concerning their identity tensions, aiming to address the following research question:

What professional identity tensions do Chinese primary school EFL teachers experience?

2. Literature Review

2.1 A dialogical approach to identity tensions

Identity tensions can be analyzed from multiplicity-unity, discontinuity-continuity and social-individual dimensions with a dialogical approach, the definition of the key elements can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 The definition of the key elements

Elements	Definition
Multiplicity of identity	It means an individual can have multiple I-positions, which are considered as the individual's voiced position.
Unity of identity	It means one's motivation to maintain a consistent sense of self by creating a dialogical space between different I-positions.
Discontinuity of identity	It refers to the dynamic nature of identity, which is evident not only in how identity evolves over time but also in how individuals draw upon specific facets of the self in response to different situations.

Continuity of identity	It means an individual's identity continuity through narratives to present one's intentions and actions consistently, maintained by routinized personal behaviors as well as cultural and historical mediation.
Social dimension of identity	It means the social nature of identity, indicating the motivating role of interaction with others (individuals and communities) on one's actions and development.
Individual dimension of identity	It means the individual nature of identity. The individual has the autonomy to develop new I-positions by appropriating the communities' discourse as their own and introducing new voices into the communities.

As shown in Table 1, these three dimensions facilitate understanding teachers' identity tensions from teachers' self-dialogue in striving to maintain a coherent and consistent self when they are struggling to pursue identity unity in diverse I-positions, including conflicting beliefs and perceptions. The tensions also come from teachers' identity change to keep identity continuity, and identity autonomy to overcome constraints from social contexts. From a dialogical perspective, we reviewed the literature on identity tensions of EFL/ESL teachers as follows.

2.2 Identity tensions from challenged beliefs

Teachers' belief systems and identities are intertwined, influencing their decision-making and action-taking (Sang, 2023). The evolving or conflicting beliefs and perceptions in their I-positions may cause teachers' identity tensions. For example, Chinese EFL preservice teachers experienced identity tensions caused by cognitive discrepancy due to their shifting educational belief from teacher-centredness to student-centredness before and after student teaching (Zhu et al., 2022). Similarly, an Irish primary school teacher's evolving belief of commitment to creating a student-centered learning environment reflected her ethical identity tensions in her apprenticeship of observation (Carswell & Conway, 2024). Both studies reflect that teacher identity is not static but may include negotiation and tensions because of the changing beliefs. Notably, teachers' emotions can be regarded as the signals of their identity tensions from challenged beliefs. For instance, ESL teachers' beliefs of teacher authority were challenged by the returnee students' advanced English skills. Their open vulnerability in adjusting their initial beliefs that teachers must be all-knowing facilitated to deal with such identity tensions (Song, 2016). This is similar to an EFL teacher, Summer's dissatisfaction with her limited professional knowledge in her belief of the future role identity as an expert teacher, providing a direction for her efforts (Yang et al., 2021). It suggests that language teachers' evolving or conflicting beliefs, intertwined with their emotions and cognition, on one hand, reflect their identity tensions, and on the other hand provide room for their I-position negotiation and development.

2.3 Identity tensions from changing identity

Teacher identity is multiple and dynamic, changing identity or preferring one identity over others may result in identity tensions (Barkhuizen, 2017). For example, university EFL teachers experienced identity tensions from changing identity as teacher-researchers within a research-driven policy context. This study highlighted teachers' self-agency in taking actions to advance their sustainable career development, influenced by their motivations, values, beliefs and socio-institutional contexts (Lu & Zhang, 2023). Similarly, university EFL teachers experienced tensions resulting from the identity shift from EGP (English for general purposes) to ESP (English for specific purposes) during the education reform (Jiang, 2022). They took proactive strategies, including overcoming stabilized language knowledge, teaching expertise and identity commitment, to establish their new teacher identity. Except for the influence of policy, teachers may experience identity tensions from the innovation in educational technology. An experienced university EFL teacher, Lily, experienced self-doubt about her traditional teaching role because of students' convenient access to artificial intelligent technology and tools. The new technology diminished the personal connection between her and her students, promoting her reflection on her new position as a teacher (Ren & Pan, 2024). In sum, the literature highlights how teaching contexts shape teacher identity and the role of agency and reflection in managing identity tensions to support professional growth.

2.4 Identity tensions from constrained autonomy

Teachers' development of their autonomy indicates the self-identification of their professional identity (Teng, 2019). Teachers may experience identity tensions when their autonomy is constrained. For example, Muslim English language teachers experienced identity tensions from the normative ideology which restricted their autonomy in choosing teaching materials and instructional decisions (Karimpour et al., 2024). The participants resisted the

dominant ideology by exercising agency to adhere to their internal religious ideologies in teaching. Additionally, language teachers may encounter constrained autonomy due to significant others in teaching. For example, a native speaker English teacher's limited local language competence hindered her from building harmonious relationships with colleagues and students, which constrained her autonomy in identity investment and led to emotional labor (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021). Similarly, Iranian English language teachers with young learners (YL) experienced emotional and identity tensions due to parents' intrusion in institutional decision-making, constraining teachers' pedagogical autonomy in teaching (Nazari et al., 2023). It reflects the special issue for teachers with YL, as Chinese preschool teachers also encountered such negative emotions from parents' intrusion and undervalued opinions towards them (Zhang & Jiang, 2023). The literature above highlighted the contextual and interpersonal factors on language teachers' identity tensions through their constrained autonomy in agency and identity investment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context and Participants

Since this study aims to understand the Chinese primary school EFL teachers' identity tensions, we begin with a description of EFL teaching in primary schools in China. English is a compulsory subject in China, which usually begins at the primary school level in Grade Three (Peng & Zheng, 2016). EFL teachers are the subject teachers to teaching English according to the national curriculum guidelines and standardized textbooks. The Chinese government has exerted serious policies to alleviate students' academic burden, including imposing restrictions on both homework load and testing frequency. However, English as a subject in entrance examinations was emphasized by local education administrations and parents. Our research site was two public urban primary schools in the same district in northern China. The two schools (BH primary school and RM primary school) were chosen for this study based on their accessibility, their designation as National Quality Demonstration Schools as well as their similarities in educational management and school models. They are under the unified management of Fu Xing District Education and Sports Bureau in terms of curriculum design, teaching objectives, resource allocation and other aspects. The purposive sampling method was employed to capture rich opinions of the targeted populations for the study in depth (Patton, 2014). After getting permission from the headmasters, two EFL teachers who met the criteria were willing to participate in this research, the criteria and demographic information of the participants are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Sample selection criteria and participants' demographic information

Name	School	Gender	Age	Degree	Working Experience	Sample selection Criteria
Na	RM	female	36	postgraduate	six years as a primary school EFL teacher	(1) Obtaining education qualification certificates, and (2) Working as a full-time EFL teacher with over three years of experience.
Sheng	BH	male	52	undergraduate	twelve years as a middle school EFL teacher, five years in high school, and ten years in primary school	

3.2 Positionality Statement and Ethical Matters

Researchers' positionality is vital for qualitative research as it presents researchers' empirical engagement in the interpretation of the study (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Author 1 used to be a primary school EFL teacher, who is familiar with EFL teaching contexts. In this sense, Author 1 designed the study and collected the data to understand participants' experiences of their identity tensions in-depth and context-specific (Yang et al., 2021). The second and third authors' different social and professional backgrounds facilitate to minimization of bias during the data analysis process (Trent, 2017). Author 1 obtained the permission of the school and participants and ensured their names would remain confidential. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time. To guarantee trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), interviews and observations were triangulated to check the congruence of findings. Member checking with the research team and participants was applied to ensure the credibility of the findings.

3.3 Design and data collection

The qualitative case study design was applied as it can offer in-depth insights into the essence of participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2015). This study is a single case study with the unit of analysis focusing on the experiences of two EFL teachers' identity tensions, bounded by the specific geographical and educational context of a district in Northern China during the first semester of 2024. Semi-structured interviews were the major data resources with classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews serving as supplementary data. Seidman's (2006) interview model was used to structure the protocol (Appendix A), focusing on participants' backgrounds, experiential details, and reflections. Author 1 conducted the face-to-face interviews (two interviews, each for 50 min on average) with participants in their L1. Non-participant observations were conducted with the participants (six observations, each for 40 min), focusing on teachers' in-class educational experiences during the instructional activities with observation field notes taken. The classroom observations provided stimulus resources for Author 1 to conduct the face-to-face stimulated recall interviews (six interviews, each for 25 min on average). The stimulated recall interviews can be used to understand the reason behind participants' pedagogical decisions and actions as well as their self-perceptions of their I-positions at that time.

3.4 Data Analysis

All interviews and relevant classroom observation excerpts were transcribed and imported into ATLAS.ti for the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Author 1 read and coded the data to identify repeating segments that may reflect participants' I-positions (e.g., beliefs, emotions, autonomy, agency) and influencing factors (e.g., young learners' characteristics, Chinese collective culture); and then grouped these repeating codes to clusters (e.g., caring teacher, fair teacher). It must be mentioned that we had discussions every week over the four months to negotiate and decide on the initial codes and code clusters, and then collectively reached the themes to ensure the trustworthiness of interpretations. Below, we present the findings based on this coding process, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Data analysis process

Themes	Clusters	Codes (frequency)
Tensions from the desired identity	Caring teacher	Beliefs (13); Emotions (4); agency (8); Young learners' characteristics (5); reflection and cognition development (8); Chinese Confucian parental teaching style (2)
	Fair teacher	
Tensions from the expected identity	Pedagogical expert	Beliefs (6); Emotions (5); agency (7); Young learners' characteristics (3); social expectations in the learning and teaching community (6); Chinese collective culture (3)
	Home-school communicator	
Tensions from the imposed identity	Social volunteer	Beliefs (2); Emotions (3); Autonomy and agency (3); Young learners' characteristics (2); Top-down education system and administrative model (5)
	Server	

4. Findings

Three themes emerged when participants' identity tensions were talked and observed, as shown in Table 3. The three themes shared some similar codes (e.g., belief, emotions, agency, YL's characteristics, Chinese special sociocultural contexts) with some special codes respectively. The detailed explanation is illustrated next.

4.1 Tensions from the desired identity

The first tension came from participants' beliefs, emotions and agency in constructing their desired identity as caring and fair teachers, reflecting the factors of cognition development through reflection, YL's characteristics and Chinese Confucian heritage culture. For example, when asked to recall their negative emotional experiences, both participants mentioned their negative emotions from challenged authority due to students' misbehaviors in class, including Na's "heartbroken" towards students' "disdainful" attitude towards her instruction and Sheng's "angry" towards students' "verbal abuse". This may be influenced by the Chinese Confucian parental teaching style, emphasizing teachers' authority and students' moral education in teaching. Meanwhile, YL's developing cognition and emotions, such as their logical thinking ability and self-awareness exacerbated this problem (Dade, 2011). Both

of them expressed different I-positions in teacher-student relationships and exerted agency to care for students more when they reflected on their behaviors, for example:

Na: Caring about students' lives and helping them resolve difficulties help build a harmonious teacher-student relationship, which is vital for classroom management...I can tell a student is emotional from their attitude when answering questions in class. Then I will talk to them privately after class to help them.

Sheng: You should not be truly angry with students. You must learn to quickly digest your emotions and swiftly return to a teaching mindset....If I find a student with a low mood, such as just being criticized by other teachers, I will be careful with my words and avoid further criticizing or upsetting them.

As shown in the excerpts, Na's and Sheng's beliefs evolved from teacher-centered to student-centered to care more about students' lives and moods in building teacher-student relationships and providing feedback. This process reflected their emotional competence to identify students' emotions and regulate their own emotions with their cognition development through reflection. It suggests that their desired identity as caring teachers provides them the direction for their pedagogical decisions and actions. This is also related to YL's sensitivity to teachers' feedback. Similarly, both expressed their negative emotions from not being able to be a fair teacher when they reflect on their teaching, for example:

Na: Teachers should treat all students fairly, but in reality, most of my energy is spent on students with poor self-discipline. I often feel guilty about this.

Sheng: I pay attention to the students with poor learning abilities. However, parents of students who perform well often thank me, I felt sorry that I have not invested much effort in those good students.

The experts showed that participants' negative emotions came from the conflicts between their desired identity to treat every student fairly and their actual identity to focus on students with poor self-discipline or learning abilities. It suggests that their challenged beliefs in the actual pedagogical practice led to their negative emotions. Their reflection on negative emotions also revealed their evolving belief in recognizing students' differences in teaching. Indeed, it reflected the real-world problem for participants with large-size classes and students of different academic abilities. Facing such tensions, Sheng's and Na's reflections motivated them to set higher homework requirements for high-achieving students, revealing their cognition development to maintain a coherent sense of self. However, it seemed that their strategies were rather superficial, such as an extra test paper compared to other students. Their classroom activities and evaluation criteria still followed a uniform pattern in the classroom observations. This may be due to their heavy workload of teaching three parallel classes and other non-teaching tasks, as Sheng and Na complained several times that they had limited energy to devote more to teaching.

4.2 Tensions from expected identity

This tension includes participants' expected identities as the pedagogical expert and the home-school communicator to fulfill the social expectations in the learning and teaching community. When asked about the challenges they faced as EFL teachers, Na's and Sheng's confusion reflected their identity tensions from the comparison with other EFL teachers' performance in the demonstration lessons, for example:

Na: I was not taught entirely in English when I was in middle and high school. I first experienced full English instruction in graduate school, but I found it difficult to follow. This makes me question the necessity of full English instruction. Does it significantly improve primary school students' English-speaking ability?

Sheng: Enabling students to autonomously and efficiently complete learning tasks through cooperation within their groups is challenging for me. Is the group activity suitable for every teaching objective?

Participants' confusion reflected their identity tensions from the expected identity in the learning community to be the pedagogical expert in full English instruction and group activities organization. This process reflected their challenged beliefs of English-only and interaction learning in the groups from the influence of the learning community. Indeed, they said that their daily teaching and demonstration teaching in the teaching contest were different. They were observed to use both L1 and L2 to facilitate students' better understanding. The group activities were not observed for every lesson. Their confusion and submission to the rules in the teaching contests reflected their limited pedagogical knowledge to teach YL and the constraints of the learning community organized by the local education authority. Blind worship of some teaching models without consideration of YL's limited L1 literacy and L2 learning contexts as well as the professional input from front-line teachers in the learning community may

cause EFL teachers' identity tensions. Furthermore, participants also experienced tensions from their identity as home-school communicators to fulfill parents' expectations, for example:

Na: I felt stressed when a parent often discussed her child's English learning with me. This child's Chinese and math scores were better than his English scores, so I often reflected on why his English was not outstanding.

Sheng: I always communicate with parents about their children's EFL learning situation. However, some parents made me scared that they expected me to report every detail about their children at school.

Na's "stressed" and Sheng's "scared" emotions reflected the tensions and emotional labor from the expected identity to communicate with parents. It reflected frequent home-school communication on primary school students' EFL learning. It seemed that Na had no effective strategy but to pay more attention to such students. Sheng with more teaching experiences, "created a profile for each student to keep track of their grades, homework completion status, and classroom performance in EFL learning" to maintain a good home-school relationship. He emphasized the necessity of this relationship: "An English teacher, who teaches three classes and over 150 students, has limited energy. Parents are the best support." Sheng's belief reflected the necessity of home-school communication in EFL teaching for YL. This may be explained by YL's dependence on adults' help and the lower status of primary school teachers compared with junior or higher-level teachers. Primary school teachers, like Na and Sheng, were expected to follow the collective culture to fulfill the social expectations.

4.3 Tensions from imposed identity

Participants also experienced tensions from their imposed identities as social volunteers to deal with non-teaching tasks and servers to prevent complaints from students, reflecting their constrained autonomy and agency. Both Sheng and Na expressed their negative emotions towards their responsibilities to deal with non-teaching tasks, for example:

Na: Engaging in tasks unrelated to English teaching causes me frustration, such as taking care of students' lunch and lunch breaks. Waste my energy!

Sheng: Non-teaching tasks occupy the time that should be allocated to teaching. Initially, I had a substantial block of time to design exams for my students. However, the non-teaching tasks disrupted my cognitive flow. Irritating!

Na's and Sheng's autonomy and agency in preparing for EFL teaching were constrained by non-teaching tasks. This is related to the top-down education system, where teachers need to take some social responsibilities, such as their new responsibilities to take care of students' lunch and extend working time to provide after-school service with the enactment of the "Double Reduction" Policy. Furthermore, both shared their sad stories of students' complaints, for example:

Na: A student wrote a letter to the principal complaining that I only criticized the other students but not the good student when all said something unrelated to teaching. Indeed, that so-called good student is autistic, has unstable emotions and cannot be provoked. Therefore, I habitually ignore some of the comments made by this autistic student during teaching...The principal asked me to explain and say sorry to the complaining student, I am still looking for the student who wrote the anonymous letter. No one understands me.

Sheng: I was complained by students for assigning too much homework. School administrators reminded me of this issue. I felt quite uncomfortable. My homework assignments are reasonable.

The excerpts showed that participants' autonomy and agency in pedagogical practice, such as classroom feedback and homework assignments, were constrained by students' complaints. Especially they could not get community support from the administrators, reflecting the top-down administrative model. When asked about their strategies, both expressed their sense of powerlessness. Participants' tensions from imposed identity seemed to suggest that teaching EFL for YL is full of emotional labor, as participants had no choice but to suppress their negative emotions to follow the policy and the institutional rules.

5. Discussion

Two participants experienced identity tensions from their desired identity, expected identity and imposed identity, as shown in Figure 1. Three identity tensions shared the same elements, such as teachers' beliefs, emotions and

agency, YL's characteristics and the specific sociocultural context in China in the central part, with highlighted factors respectively.

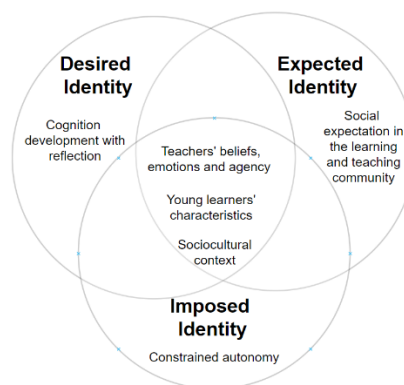


Figure 1. Chinese EFL teachers' identity tensions

Firstly, we found that participants' identity tensions came from their desired identity. This identity provides them with direction for their pedagogical practice through their cognition development. This process reflects their evolving beliefs in the dialogical space to maintain a coherent sense of self. The findings align with previous studies on the evolving beliefs from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness with Chinese EFL teachers' identity tensions before and after student teaching (Zhu et al., 2022). Furthermore, our study is similar to the signal role of emotions of challenged beliefs with ESL teachers teaching returnee students (Song, 2016). Notably, our findings expand previous studies highlighting participants' emotional competence to identify students' emotions and regulate their own emotions to be caring teachers as well as their awareness of designing different homework to be fair teachers through their cognition development. These two desired identities were related to YL's emotional dependence on teachers' feedback (Butler, 2019) and the Chinese Confucian parental teaching style that emphasizes teachers' authority (Gao & Ren, 2019). This process also emphasized participants' desired identity as the direction for their agency, which supports an EFL teacher, Summer's future role identity (an expert teacher) as the direction for her efforts (Yang et al., 2021).

Secondly, participants' identity tension also came from their expected identity in the learning and teaching community to fulfill the social expectation, reflecting the evoked specific aspects of the self in particular situations. Specifically, participants were expected to evoke their I-positions as pedagogical experts and home-school communicators. This social expectation was similar to university EFL teachers' expected identity transformation to teacher-researchers within a research-driven policy context (Lu & Zhang, 2023) and Iran EFL teachers' expected identity to fulfill parents' expectations (Nazari et al., 2023). During this process, participants' attitudes and negative emotions reflected their struggling I-positions in the interaction with the social community. Notably, different from teachers with other subjects or adult learners, our study highlighted EFL teachers' identity tensions with YL. It included code-switching and interaction learning in EFL teaching as well as emotional labor during home-school communication. It can be explained that YL's limited L1 literacy, dependence on adults and need for social interaction in language learning (McKay, 2011), evoked participants' special identities. Attention is needed regarding the evaluation of the scientific validity of certain teaching models and the boundaries of teachers' responsibilities in home-school relationships. This problem may be exacerbated by Chinese collective culture to meet the social requirements and expectations (Yang et al., 2021).

Thirdly, we found that participants encountered identity tensions from their imposed identities. Participants' agency in investment in EFL teaching and autonomy in their pedagogical practice were constrained in dealing with non-teaching tasks and avoiding students' complaints. This profile supports Muslim English language teachers' identity tensions from the restricted autonomy to choose teaching materials and instructional decisions by the normative ideology (Karimpour et al., 2024). The findings also align with a native-speaker English teacher's constrained identity investment and emotional labor due to a lack of community support (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021). Notably, our findings highlighted the influence of the top-down education system and administrative model in teaching YL. This may be because Chinese teachers are taking on some social responsibilities which are not directly

related to their teaching. Although the government has been taking measures to reduce the burden on teachers, teachers' instructional work is still often disrupted by some administrative tasks.

6. Conclusion and implication

This study examined identity tensions of two Chinese EFL teachers by employing a dialogical approach to analyze their I-positions in the interviews and classroom observations. The findings highlight that the teachers' identity tensions were shaped by the dynamic interaction between their desired, expected, and imposed identities. These tensions were further influenced by individual beliefs, emotions, and agency, as well as the characteristics of young learners and the broader sociocultural context in China. Our findings strongly suggest that teacher educators, policymakers and school administrators should pay more attention to primary school EFL teachers' identity tensions. Specifically, teacher educators should provide specific courses about pedagogical and psycholinguistic knowledge related to YL to help teachers better organize their teaching. They also should organize activities to improve teachers' emotional competence, helping them better understand students' needs and deal with their emotional labor. Particularly for local teacher educators, it is important to provide pedagogical guidance within the learning community that is evidence-based and aligned with the local context. Furthermore, the policymakers should absorb teachers' professional suggestions in policy formulation. They also should make efforts to reduce teachers' non-teaching tasks and set clear boundaries of teachers' rights and responsibilities in the home-school communication, ensuring teachers' investment and autonomy in teaching. School administrators should construct friendly teaching environments through community support, including respecting teachers and helping students establish a proper learning attitude. This study is not without limitations; as a case study involving only two participants in a specific context, its findings should be applied to other settings with caution. Future studies could explore EFL teachers' identity tensions with YL in different contexts to better understand this topic. Furthermore, more attention should be paid to the influence of teachers' emotional competence on their identity construction to better understand the cognitive-affective construction process of identity.

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Appendix: Semi-structured interview protocol

1. Could you please tell me about how you became an EFL teacher?
2. What were the best experiences you had as an EFL teacher? Why?
3. Describe a really bad experience as an EFL teacher you had. Why was it a bad teaching experience?
4. What provides you with the most satisfaction now as an EFL teacher?
5. What challenges do you have as an EFL teacher?
6. What do you imagine in the future as an EFL teacher?
7. What is your goal as an EFL teacher?
8. What are the factors that have an influence on you as an EFL teacher?
9. Have you received any feedback on your teaching from students, colleagues, or others? What do you think of the feedback?

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