

Research Article

A Frames Perspective to ELT Teachers' Identity Construction on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Participation in social media life entails constructing and displaying a different set of identity roles than the ones traditionally assumed by individuals. Teachers in general and English language teachers in particular have not been hesitant to draw upon the numerous resources and enablements offered by this space in forming identity types aligned with their profession. Along these lines, this study aimed to probe into how five Iranian ELT teachers, active on Instagram platform, displayed identity and what frames those identity types would involve. Having adopted a netnographic method and a frames theoretical perspective, the research employed archival online data, namely Instagram posts and statuses, and open questionnaire textual data to arrive at the patterns of how ELT teacher identity formation takes place. Regarding work-related frames, it was found that the study informants constructed identity in five professional, instructional, vocational, and economic frames, and that the only frame left untouched by them was that of discipline-related one. With respect to context-related frames, the only context they heeded seemed to be that of their local here-and-now setting.

Introduction

Identity, that is, how a person perceives their own unique relationship to the world, how that relationship is established across time and space, and how future possibilities are imagined by them (Norton, 2013), once

considered a monolithic concept remaining fixed throughout or for most of a person's life, is now deemed to be a highly malleable notion undergoing transformation at times even on a moment-by-moment basis. People display a different self or version of themselves at any



given time as a function of being present or operating in various 'fields', to use a Bourdieusian term. Academic work on identity is significant as it drives action and behavior (Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 1).

According to Vignoles et al. (2011), there are at least three ways in which people, and in this particular regard teachers, make sense of or project their identity types: personal, relational, and collective. The personal identity level refers to "aspects of self-definition at the level of individual person" (Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 3) which often highlights the agentic role of the individual in (re)constructing their own identity. The relational level, at which the concept of identity could be defined, refers to how individuals (tend to) perceive themselves in relation to the people around them and what consequences such perception might have for them (Vignoles et al., 2011). The collective level refers to "people's identification with groups and social categories to which they belong, the meanings that they give to these ... and attitudes that result from identifying with them" (Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 3).

Social media giving the users more advantage over traditional channels of communication (e.g., face-to-face real-life situations) have made it possible for people to display a wide range of identities in new and sometimes unforeseen ways. People, without being in the least self-conscious of their age, sex, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc., are apt to become involved in interactions taking place on more equal grounds on social media platforms. Even where the more graphically oriented platforms such as Instagram are involved, they might (re)construct identity types which might render them larger-than-life and, therefore, more impressive to their audience. This is where a new set of self-

branding, or how individuals present themselves and their skills and abilities to their audience occurs (Whitmer, 2019).

Contemporary teachers and especially English teachers have not been hesitant to capitalize on the resources and enablements afforded by social media platforms in their pedagogical and assessment practices. This entails, first and foremost, adoption of newer types of identity than the ones assumed in more traditional spaces. Complications definitely arise when such online presence takes place at a professional level and researchers would do well to tap into the issue at hand. The current research is an attempt at unveiling how Iranian English teachers make sense of and display the various strands of their own identity formation on Instagram.

Literature Review

The literature on teacher identity in general and English Language Teaching (ELT) teacher identity has already come of age with investigations tackling the various aspects of teacher identity construction and display. Since identity exercise does not occur in a vacuum and often involve some form of activism, a considerable amount of research has probed into the interface of agency and identity (Buchanan, 2015; Code, 2013; Tao & Gao, 2017, to name a few). Other studies have examined the meaning and the many facets of situatedness of teacher identity (Kavimandan, 2021; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Toom, 2019), in contexts as diverse as higher education (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021) to schools (Rich & Schachter, 2012) and among a widely diverse population - from faculty (Reybold, 2003) to school teachers and students (Mockler, 2011).

As far as display of language teacher identity on social media is concerned, there clearly is

a dearth of studies in the Iranian context. However, a few notable investigations have taken the issue in their hands and examines ways of identity formation in that space. Nejadghanbar and Fotouhi (2025), for instance, examined Iranian EFL teacher branding on social media and arrived at three brand identity types their research participants sought to project to their followers: role-model, professional, and influencer brands. In another study, Nejadghanbar and Shaahdadi (2025) probed into how English teachers who utilized social media perceived their user preferences and what impact this might have made on their branding selves. In another study, Seraji et al. (2023) looked into the type and nature of content generated by Iranian English language teachers with an active role on social media. Given the exploratory nature of studies tapping into language teachers operating on social media, researchers would do well to take the issue a step further by looking at it through fresh theoretical lenses and analytical toolboxes.

Having adopted a fresh perspective to how Iranian ELT teachers display and exercise identity on social media and in particular on Instagram, namely a frames perspective (Pennington, 2015), the current study has aimed to further contribute to the already scant literature on the issue in the Iranian ELT context. It has set out to address the underexplored area by advancing the following two research questions:

- How do Iranian ELT teachers active on Instagram platform display their identity?
- What frames are involved in displaying those identity types?

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory, as attributed to Goffman (Scheff, 2005), “aims to identify schemes in

which individuals perceive the world” (Volkmer, 2009, p. 407). It refers to the ways individuals define and define social interactions, in order to participate and maintain involvement in them. The concept of frame, as exploited in many fields such as communication studies, linguistics, and business, is an “interpretive design” and part of our belief system that “we use in our day-to-day experience to make sense of the world” (Volkmer, 2009, p. 407). This helpful heuristic can be used for perceiving and analyzing a personal or professional situation. Frames serve a dual function: not only can they, as already alluded to, assist us to interpret the complex world around us, but also they might help with reconstructing the social reality (Volkmer, 2009).

In the field of language teaching, in numerous publications, Pennington (e.g., 2015) has rendered in the form of an inventory the diverse ways TESOL teachers make sense of their multiple and dynamic identity types. Her inventory of TESOL teacher identity frames, which has guided the two phases of the current study (See the Methodology section for a delineation of the two stages), is originally rooted in Pennington and Hoekje’s (2014) frame components of ELT programs (Table 1):

Table 1*Frames model of ELT (Pennington & Hoekje, 2014)*

Frames of ELT work	
<i>Instruction</i>	teaching content, methods, materials, and technologies; teacher roles, teacher-student relationship
<i>Disciplinary field</i>	academic affiliation; academic qualifications; areas of teacher knowledge; research and scholarship
<i>Profession</i>	ethics and standards, teacher education and development; working conditions; political influence and power; collegial relations
<i>Business</i>	income; accountability and efficiency; cost-effectiveness; customer satisfaction; recruitment and promotion
<i>Service</i>	client care; helper role; meeting student needs; voluntary labor; support of department, institution, and field
ELT context frames	
<i>Global</i>	international orientation; practices related to global flows of people, money, technology, information, ideologies, languages
<i>Local</i>	situatedness of practice in department, institution, community, nation; specific teacher and student groups in a particular locale
<i>Sociocultural</i>	linguistic and ethnic backgrounds of teachers and students; demographics of administrators, teachers, students

According to Pennington (2015), teacher identity types are to be viewed through two major frames that is practice-related and context-related frames, and their subtypes as shown in Table 2. Whereas the latter deal with

the type of micro- or macro-level approach help by practitioners in language education, the former deals mostly with the way they form and display their identities:

Table 2*Frames of TESOL Teacher Identity (adapted from Pennington, 2015)*

Frames of Teacher Identity	Subframes (scripts)
Practice-centered frames	Instructional Disciplinary Professional Vocational
Contextual frames	Economic Global Local Sociocultural

Methodology

Design

A qualitative research design was adopted to guide this study and help the investigator arrive at the answers, though tentative ones, the study had originally advanced. Such a design “involves studying the meaning of people’s lives, under real-world conditions” (Yin, 2011, p. 8). It seeks to probe into the lived experiences of the participants operating in a given area of activity. Research based on this

design tries to understand, among other things, “the *meaning* [italic in the original], for participants in the study, of the events, situations, experiences, and actions they are involved in or engage in” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 23).

From among the range of qualitative research methods, a more recent development into the field, that is netnography, was chosen as it allows delving into the professional lives of research participants in the digital world.

Netnography as a research method is “participant-observational research based in online fieldwork. It uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon” (Kornizets, 2010, p. 60). The research is conducted in six distinct stages: “research planning, entrée, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 61)

Sampling and Research Participants

The sampling procedures employed in this investigation are availability and snowball ones. The author of this paper, being himself an active member of social media and in particular Instagram, chose three freelance English language teacher followers from among a total of 257 ones. Legally and ethically, the fact that they followed (back)

each other warranted a look at the data they kept sharing on a constant basis. A description of the research participants is given in Table 1 below. Needless to say, to help maintain anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout the research to render the way they self-present thereby positioning themselves vis-à-vis their personal and professional lives. The participants were then able to mention two other teachers active on Instagram promoting themselves as ELT teachers. The investigator reached out to them and followed them and they, in turn, consented to follow him back. In this way, the researcher was able to access the kind of statuses and posts they shared with their followers. Having collected archival data, he subsequently reached out to the five EFL teachers and inquired whether they would consent to fill out an open-ended questionnaire. Having agreed to participate in the project, they then filled it out.

Table 3

Characteristics of Research Participants

Name	Age	Degree	Teaching Experience
Maryam	31	M.A. in TEFL	8 yrs
Helia	29	M.A. in TEFL	6 yrs
Shima	27	B.A. in TEFL	5 yrs
Sara	32	M.A. in TEFL	9 yrs
Negin	32	B.A. in TEFL	5 yrs

Initially, the statuses and posts the above participants shared online were closely scrutinized on a regular basis and field notes were culled of the type of identity positions they assumed, particularly as language teachers, and the kind of ELT frame (2015) they were bound to fit in. This procedure kept on for roughly two months until no new themes were yielded from the field notes. In other words, it continued until data saturation (Bowen, 2008) had been achieved; that is, the point at which data cease to yield any further

new codes or themes. The subsequent sporadic observation was prolonged for one year (spanning April 2024-April 2025) so that the researcher would immerse himself in the study to gain time to develop notes into themes.

Data Collection/Analytic Procedures

The data of this netnographic case study consists of online archival data (Kozinets, 2019), namely, the frequent statuses and sporadic posts the aforementioned English

language teachers shared on a continuous basis on the Instagram platform, as well as questionnaire data. Each participating teacher in the study filled out an open questionnaire administered online and returned it within an allotted two-week period.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted to help convert raw data (i.e., field notes developed based on the observation of and immersion into the archival data as well as questionnaire textual data) into themes. It is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” the emphasis of which is “on producing rigorous and high-quality analysis” (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 297). The five stages of Braun and Clarke’s TA model (2006) that is familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the report, was applied to achieve this aim. The method was chosen as it is a highly flexible one applicable in many situations where qualitative textual data are involved and as it has been intensively applied to illustrative data by its developers (See e.g., Clarke & Braun, 2014). Since the research is based on Pennington’s (2015) ELT teacher work and context frames, it adopted a deductive TA (Clarke & Braun, 2014), that is, a template of ELT teacher frames (See Table 1 above) guided the data analytic procedure.

Findings

Work-related Identity Frames Displayed by Teachers

Close observation of the online products of the ELT participating teachers (i.e., their posts and statuses shared on the Instagram platform) showed that their identity positioning was mirrored by how they were connected with or

wished to be viewed by others, including their colleagues, former cohorts, students, professors, teachers, and the like. This clearly attested to the existence, in their professional life, of a script, or sub-frame, of professionalism. This strand of identity, referred to the pertinent literature as the ‘relational identity’ (Vignoles et al., 2011), manifested itself mostly through issues such as teacher development, ethos of collegiality, and working conditions. Relational identity type refers to

One’s roles vis-à-vis other people, encompassing identity contents such as child, spouse, parent, co-worker, supervisor, customer, etc. relational identity refers not only to these roles, but also to how they are defined and interpreted by the individuals who assume them. (Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 2)

Three (i.e., Maryam, Helia, and Shima) out of five English teachers were observed as sharing especially statuses promoting their colleagues or mentors and their pedagogical activities online. Maryam and Helia, for instance, would constantly share the in-person workshops or webinars which were to be run by the university professors or teacher influencers they knew and followed on Instagram. Shima, in addition to doing this, promoted the private language institutions her colleagues were teaching in. Here, the teachers were keen to show their sharpened networking skills via which they had made acquaintances in their own community of practice. Such skills enabled them to give an impression of professionalism for the purpose of having new student clients or maintaining the already existing ones.

Likewise, Negin and Maryam seemed particularly sensitive about how they were (being) 'rated' by the language learners and they widely publicized their students' positive comments on or reactions about them or their pedagogical practices. Negin shared

I get great pleasure from how my students rate me. When they post a status about me and praise me for my teaching or behavior, I very quickly repost it. It gives me so much energy and motivation. I feel happy for many days after that.

With regard to collegiality ethos, Helia was quick to point to the fact that she and her female colleagues spent so much time together after getting introduced to each other as colleagues that they had taken to new types of activities. Reminding her induction into her teaching context, she contended

At first when I joined the language institute as a new teacher, I faced many problems and challenges. Kids were noisy and I was not experienced very much. The money we got was very low, but soon I became friends with my colleagues. We became like sisters. We started activities that I never knew before. For example, for the first time I ride a horse belonging to one of my friends. ... we also have meetings in the institute and discuss work issues and matters. We take photos of them and post them. Posting them makes us repost them or comment about them.

It's so much fun.

The professional sub-frame would at times in the course of data collection/analysis take a business turn meaning that, for all the joy the ELT teachers experienced together and were

not hesitant to display it in the public's eye, they were conscious of the fact that they were underpaid and that they needed to be recognized as a useful sector of the society. Such sentiments are evident in Shima's account

I make more money now because I also have private students but when I started my job in the institute it was not enough for my taxi's money. ... Sometimes I post statuses and posts about my financial future. It's more like a wish. Many working girls do this on Instagram.

In addition to professional and economic sub-frames of the participating ELT teachers, one could spot some traces of two other scripts, too, namely vocational and instructional. There was almost no reference to the disciplinary frame having to do with areas such as teacher expertise and research. The vocational sub-frame was mostly realized in the form of client care in the behavior of the research participants. Maryam and Sara, particularly, shared photos and videos of the private classes held in their own home where they constantly bothered to take better account of the facilities their 'clients' needed. This mostly took the form of installing air-conditioners in the room they were using as a class, fixing drawings of natural scenery, and having multi-media equipment installed. In the words of Maryam,

My students are like my clients, my customers, I care about them and try to satisfy their needs. I know that if they are comfortable, they will learn better. They also preach my classes so that I can have more and new students.

The instructional side of the ELT teachers' frames showed itself in the main in the form of displaying up-to-date instructional materials (e.g., textbook packages), the tasks and assignments their learners had successfully done or were in the process of doing as well as the use of realia in teaching different points. All the participating teachers displayed more or less some aspect of their instructional identity frame. Their intent was to come across to their online audience as professionals knowing the rules of the game. This is how Shima, the youngest of all the teachers active on social media, echoes it:

We are living in a world of great competition. Students go to the classes of teachers who are more knowledgeable and who are up-to-date regarding their methods and materials they use. I always show the picture of the new books I am going to teach or their recent editions to show I am an up-to-date teacher ... I get positive comments from my Instagram followers. It gives me a good feeling and makes me go to the market and look for the new English books in the market.

All taken together, analysis of the archived data and questionnaire responses pointed to a multi-perspectival approach of the ELT teachers toward their hybrid identity formation. In sum, the frames they positioned themselves in showed that they sought to render an image of themselves as professional practitioners who, though driven by market needs, were not oblivious to their 'client' learners' needs and wants. A somewhat odd finding in the data was the fact that although most of them had passed a graduate degree (even Negin was an M.A. student at the time of data collection phase), they did not show an

awareness of their identity roles as teacher researchers who, one way or another, could benefit from the investigations conducted in the academia.

Context-related Identity Frames Displayed by Teachers

The Analysis of themes developed from the online filed notes and questionnaire responses showed that the study informants were almost exclusively focused on their immediate local context and did not take heed of more global issues such as the kind of trends developed internationally in the field of ELT, the type of research findings produced and consumed, and the impact of AI technologies on language teaching and learning. Along these planes, Maryam shared

In doing assignments I ask my students to relate it to their own local context. For example, if I ask them to make a list of flowers, fruits, or jobs, they should search their environment and make the list based on that feature ...

Discussion and Conclusion

The examination of how the study informants displayed their identity roles pointed to the existence, in varying degrees, of professional, instructional, economic, and vocational (but not disciplinary) frames, or states of mind of those teachers acting as micro-celebrity English teachers on social media and, in particular, on Instagram. This, together with the fact that one frame dissolves into and is closely related to another, attests to the oft-cited observation that identity is emergent, multiple, and context-embedded (Miller, 2009; Yazan, 2023).

The mixing together of various ELT teacher frames within the same individual in this study

is illustrative of the online phenomenon referred to as teacherpreneurship (Carpenter, Morrison, Craft & Lee, 2020), that is, teacher influencers who wish to achieve impact beyond the four walls of the traditional classroom and formal schooling setting (Berry et al., 2013). Teacherpreneurs draw upon the resources of the online world and its variegated platforms such as Instagram to promote themselves and their teaching services.

The affordances of Instagram such as interactivity and access allowed the said ELT teachers to display a more conspicuous type of identity, vis-à-vis relational one. Their audience formed a mirror into which they could look and trim their actions and behavior types. The relational identity seemed to give them more security as professionals (Vignoles et al., 2011).

The fact that the only work-related ELT frame missing in the data gleaned from the professional lives of the research informants was the disciplinary one could be accounted for by the observation that still some research conducted in the academia does not bear any affinity with real-world problems and situations. This has been echoed especially by scholars working within the English as a foreign language context of Iran as well as abroad (Flessner, 2012; Mehrani, 2014; Nazazadeh Zare & Parvin, 2024; Sadeghi & Abutorabi, 2017).

The research participants also showed a keen awareness of the local context and its relevance in content delivery as far as the contextual side of their frame identity was concerned. They did not display or react to, for instance, what was taking place in the global educational arena and, instead, were focused on their here-and-now educative context. This together with a negligence of the disciplinary

work-related frame could highlight a micro-level approach to the workings of the business and economy of the field of English Language Teaching. They also appeared not to be heedful of the AI technologies currently operative in the teaching profession machinery across the world (Ji et al., 2023).

Given the small sample size of the present study as well as its exploratory nature, future investigations could recruit larger sample sizes to arrive at more nuances of ELT teacher identity construction and display. The 'new normal' of social media is bound to leave much space for educators to practice and theorize in.

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