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Emotions inspire transformation: delving into EFL teachers' emotions and professional identities

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Emotions are increasingly recognized as central to the teaching and learning process, particularly in the context of language education. This study aimed to explore the intricate relationship between emotional experiences of language teachers and their evolving professional identities. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of teacher emotions and identity, the research addresses the shift from cognitive to sociocultural and critical perspectives in studies about language teachers' emotions. Situated in a Turkish university context, the study involved semi-structured interviews and narratives from seven English language teachers. Participants shared insights into their emotional experiences, professional development, and challenges encountered in institutional and cultural settings. Thematic reflexive analysis revealed three main themes: (1) navigating emotional diversity, (2) dealing with emotional diversity and regulation, and (3) emotional alignment. The results revealed the complex and dialogic nature of the relationship between teacher emotions and identity, which points the need for emotionally supportive professional environments. This study contributes to a broader understanding of identity work as an emotional process, offering implications for teacher education and well-being in language teaching contexts.

KEYWORDS

EFL teachers' emotions, professional identity, emotional diversity, emotional regulation, emotional alignment

1 Introduction

Emotions in education have attracted significant attention over the past few years, particularly in language teaching and learning (Leng and Zhang, 2024). Emotions are not just fleeting states but also play a crucial role in classroom dynamics, influencing both student achievements and the quality of teaching. In particular, they are instrumental in influencing teachers' professional identity, image, affective commitment level, and even classroom performance because the emotional experiences of teachers are deep, complex, and intertwined with their very professional identity (Chen, 2019). Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) typically intensifies the emotional complexity. Subsequent research has extended beyond the understanding of emotions as solely psychological phenomena, and emotions are now also understood as sociocultural and political constructs (Her and De Costa, 2022). Viewed this way, teaching can be seen as emotional labor: an ongoing demand to demonstrate and regulate emotions in a way that aligns with professional norms but may lead to burnout and disillusionment if no coping mechanisms are provided (Chang, 2009). The challenges faced by teachers have led to an increased call for support to help them identify, process, and respond to emotions (Hayik and Weiner-Levy, 2019). This notion supports conscious emotional work, and as it is no longer viewed solely as remedial practice, it is a critical first step in developing

coherent and resilient professional identities. The relationship between teacher emotions and identity is not a linear one; they are in constant and dynamic interplay with one another (Gao et al., 2024). As emotional experiences fluctuate, whether through student interactions, collegial relationships, or institutionalized approaches and policies, the teacher's capacity to develop in a sense of professional identity also changes.

Research on teacher emotions in ELT has extensively documented individual regulation techniques and the impact of institutional climates; however, it has yet to develop a unifying concept that links emotions to identity work at the administrative, collegial, and classroom levels. Theorizing emotional alignment as the dynamic fit between a teacher's felt emotions, professional values, and the affordances/constraints of the immediate teaching ecology (students, colleagues, and leadership) helps us close this gap. Emotional alignment is a relational state that arises through continuous interactions and organizational practices, rather than emotion regulation (intra-individual strategies). We offer a succinct, multi-level conceptual model (Figure 1) wherein supportive structures (such as autonomy-supportive leadership, fair workload, and collegial support) serve as alignment mechanisms that mitigate emotional strain and promote identity coherence and agency in ELT for higher education. Our study builds on this model by providing empirical evidence of how alignment (and misalignment) is implemented in regular classroom instruction and how it influences teachers' professional identities.

The present study aims to illustrate the ways in which emotional experiences are constitutive of identity work, both as an ongoing process and a reactive one. It explores how interactions dynamically impact teachers' emotions and their professional identities. Considering the theoretical foundations of teacher emotions and identity theories, as well as the related research in language teaching, the main objective of this study is to explore emotions not only as a consequence of teaching practice but also as an inseparable part of professional identity formation. Given this, the study illustrates these dynamics, providing a backdrop and wider context for broader discussions in teacher education practice, with an abiding awareness of how emotional support can cultivate teacher well-being and professional identity.

In line with this aim, the study is guided by the overarching research question:

1. How do English language teachers' emotional experiences shape their professional identities within the context of a Turkish university?

2. How do teachers experience and describe the role of emotions in their professional practices?
3. In what ways do positive and negative emotional experiences influence teachers' professional identity development?

2 Literature review

2.1 Emotions and teacher professional identity

Emotions are at the heart of the development of professional teacher identities, shaping teachers' views of themselves and their roles in school environments (Lemarchand-Chauvin and Tardieu, 2018). Teachers' positive or negative affective experiences significantly impact the development of professional identity, commitment, and proficiency in their practice. This rich interplay between emotions and professional identity is evident in various contexts and at different points within a teacher's career, from pre-service training to experienced professionals (Zembylas, 2003a).

Positive emotions, such as appreciation from peers and students' achievements, have been shown to boost the self-esteem of teachers and solidify their professionalism, thereby aiding identity development (Rowe et al., 2013). Conversely, Neupane (2024) highlights how negative circumstances, particularly exclusion from decision-making and lack of appreciation, can compromise professional identity and even prompt consideration of leaving the profession. Together, the studies indicate the dual nature of emotions. Although they can be fantastic resources for building identity, they are also sites of potential vulnerability that destroy teachers' sense of continuity and belonging within the profession.

Another influential perspective is the Emotional Labor Theory (Hochschild, 1983), which theorizes the mechanisms by which professionals manage and regulate their emotional presentations to meet institutional and societal demands. Teachers and other professional workers are likely to engage in surface acting (altering outward appearance but not the internal feelings) and deep acting (attempting to align internal feelings with expected emotional displays). Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) draw attention to how these strategies impact well-being and professional identity. While surface acting leads to dissonance and burnout, deep acting can strengthen teachers' feelings of authenticity and professional purpose.

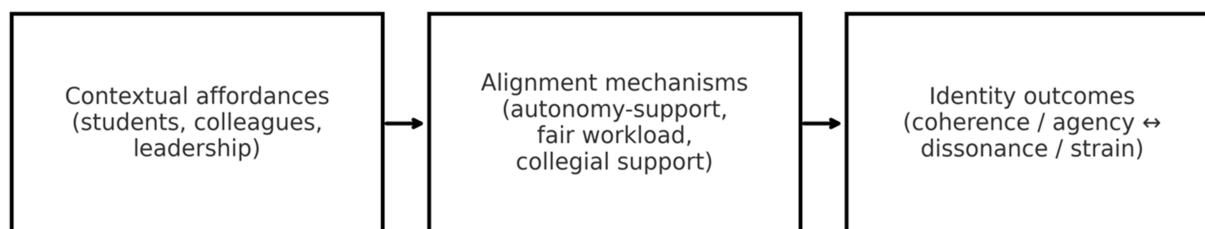


FIGURE 1

Conceptual model of emotional alignment in higher-education ELT. Contextual affordances (student relations, collegial support, leadership practices) operate through alignment mechanisms to shape identity outcomes (coherence/agency vs. dissonance/strain), with emotion regulation strategies mediating moment-to-moment adaptation.

Emotional labor in teaching is thus both a burden and a resource, having a direct impact on teachers' evolving professional identities.

These complexities exist firmly within the cultural and institutional context of teachers, where their emotional climates are shaped by contextual expectations, professional norms, and interpersonal dynamics. Cheng (2021) suggested that these elements not only impact emotional well-being but also play a significant role in the development of a professional identity. Therefore, it is essential that teacher education programs include these elements, enabling teachers to acquire the skills necessary for classroom dynamics. Residing in a supportive emotional context enables teachers to be more engaged in reflection and provides stability to their belief in their identity as a teacher (Lemarchand-Chauvin and Tardieu, 2018).

2.2 Teacher identity

Within the field of ELT, teacher identity is a multifaceted and dynamic concept that encompasses teachers' self-construction, roles, and experiences within the setting of their profession (Truong et al., 2025). It became clear that to comprehend language teaching and learning, we must understand teachers; a deeper understanding of teachers requires a better understanding of their identities, including their professional, cultural, political, and personal identities (Varghese et al., 2005). This identity is shaped by a broad array of personal, contextual, and psychological factors that significantly affect their professional performance and development, as it is a dynamic and ever-changing concept formed by a host of influences, including individual agency, contextual tensions, and effective experiences. Teachers' professional identities are collectively constructed and negotiated through their engagement with the world, which comprises a myriad of outside pressures and expectations (Mulu et al., 2022). Moreover, related research shows that identity has a significant impact on teachers' effectiveness and decision-making in the classroom context (Groenewald and Arnold, 2024).

Barkhuizen and Mendieta (2020) highlight that teacher identity is not merely an individual construct but a central and evolving component of both teaching practice and professional development. They argue that identity processes directly shape teachers' pedagogical decisions, classroom interactions, and professional commitment. This perspective aligns with the findings of the present study, which show that teachers' emotional experiences are deeply intertwined with their identity development, suggesting that identity is constantly reconstructed through emotional investment in teaching. Teacher identity formation has been defined as a continuous process of movement between individual and professional perspectives, resulting in greater knowledge about oneself and insight (Kalali et al., 2022). The professional identities of teachers are considerably responsible for their pedagogical practices, intrinsic motivation, and resilience towards challenges, which in turn impacts students' academic performance as well as the efficiency of school systems.

A well-defined and well-established professional identity is essential to guaranteeing an effective and nurturing learning environment. Teachers with a strong professional identity are more likely to employ best practices in pedagogy that have a positive influence on student performance by raising interest and understanding (Vedder-Weiss, 2022). It is a lengthy and complex process to achieve such an identity that is shaped by ongoing

challenges. Teachers are often torn between internal values and external pressures, such as curriculum reform or institutional demands. Long-term professional support, reflection, and discussion are necessary to overcome such dilemmas. Professional identity, however, is not fixed but is continuously reconstituted through individual lives, institutional contexts, and wider social interactions. Establishing a culture that promotes discovery and identity formation is thus crucial for teachers' long-term development.

2.3 Processes and challenges of teacher identity formation

The emotional processes that teachers experience, whether positive or negative, have a significant impact on their professional identity development, commitment, and overall performance in their given roles on a broad scale. This multifaceted interplay between emotional state and professional identity is articulated in a range of contexts and stages of a teacher's career, from novice through seasoned practitioner. Affective experiences, such as vulnerability, happiness, and frustration, form the basis for professional identity development among teachers. Positive emotions such as appreciation from others and students' achievements contribute to the buildup of self-esteem and commitment, thereby positively affecting identity development. Conversely, negative emotions, such as exclusion from the decision-making process and not being recognized, are likely to cause identity crisis and instill consideration of quitting the profession (Neupane, 2024). To comprehend teachers' identities and how these identities are thoughtfully shaped and expressed, it is essential to consider their experiences and perceptions of the multiple, intersecting communities they belong to and share knowledge with (Yim and Mercer, 2025). Various factors, such as social structures, community belief systems, and prevailing ideologies, significantly influence the affective experiences of language teachers and the identities they shape (Benesch, 2017). The professional identities of educators are also shaped by the difficulties that they encounter, such as instances of student misbehavior and lack of engagement in participatory decision-making, which may result in identity crises as well as emotional pressure (Mulu et al., 2022). Within language teaching specifically, Agudo (2018) has highlighted the complex and interwoven ways in which emotions permeate second language teaching, asserting that teachers' emotional experiences significantly influence their well-being, pedagogical choices, and student learning. More recently still, Morris and King (2024) systematically reviewed 54 papers on language teacher emotions, considering 5 thematic domains: teachers' general emotional experiences, anxiety, emotional intelligence, emotion regulation, and emotional labor. When seen as a whole, the review pool indicates that there has been a dearth of training-focused interventions, despite the fact that interest in the emotional aspect of teaching has grown.

Studies in other settings show how institutional conditions and emotions affect the construction of professional identity in various ways. In Türkiye, Kimsesiz (2023) found that teachers perceive themselves as inspirers, problem solvers, and caretakers, all of which are most closely associated with positive feelings. This emphasis on affectively supportive identities is seconded in Lu and Zhang's (2024) account of an EFL researcher whose shift from researcher to teaching-focused professional was influenced by

socioinstitutional forces. Compared to the optimistic tone of Kimsesiz's book, Lu and Zhang demonstrate how aversive emotions triggered by institutional bias and lack of recognition eroded motivation and prompted an identity shift. These apparently contrasting findings demonstrate that although emotions can solidify teachers' sense of self, they also disrupt that identity under less-than-conducive institutional circumstances. Such tensions are not limited to experienced academics but also afflict novice teachers who struggle with similar issues when their ideal positions are not juxtaposed with the realities of practice (Gibbons, 2020). In these cases, effective emotion regulation skills become essential to sustaining an integrated and resilient professional self (Lu and Zhang, 2024).

The exertion of emotional labor, particularly within challenging educational environments, has the potential to undermine a teacher's sense of agency and result in disillusionment regarding their professional identity. This phenomenon is exemplified in the experiences of a novice Iranian EFL educator who transformed her professional identity as a consequence of emotional labor (Aminifard et al., 2025).

Previous studies describe identity as socially negotiated (Varghese et al., 2005) and emotionally mediated (Benesch, 2017), and they provide rich documentation of the emotions teachers report and their antecedents/consequences (Zembylas, 2003a; Hargreaves, 1998, 2000; Day and Leitch, 2001; van Veen and Slegers, 2006; Chen, 2021). Less frequently, though, they describe how emotions function as constitutive elements of identity work through mechanisms that operate within particular institutional ecologies, especially in higher education in Türkiye (Kimsesiz, 2023; Lu and Zhang, 2024; Gao et al., 2024). To bridge this gap, we propose and empirically investigate an emotional alignment model that connects identity outcomes (coherence/agency vs. dissonance/strain) and alignment mechanisms (autonomy support, fair workload, and collegial solidarity) with contextual affordances (student relations, collegial support, and leadership practices). This multi-level, mechanism-focused account offers context-sensitive implications for teacher education in Türkiye and goes beyond description to explanation.

3 Methodology

This qualitative study employed an interpretive framework to examine the emotional experiences of language educators and the intricate relationship between these experiences and their professional identities. The research employed a thematic reflexive analysis

methodology to gain comprehensive insights into participants' perspectives within their sociocultural teaching environments.

3.1 Setting and participants

The research was carried out with seven English language teachers working at a university in the southern part of Türkiye. Participants were selected via purposive sampling to ensure they possessed a sufficient level of teaching experience and engagement with the emotional complexities inherent in language instruction. Each participant had diverse years of teaching experience and originated from varied academic and personal backgrounds, thereby enriching the qualitative data obtained (see Table 1).

3.2 Data collection

Reflective narratives and semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. Reflective narratives, in terms of effectiveness and merit, have proved to be a valuable source of qualitative data (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004). This data source is particularly valued because it offers unique insights into individuals' experiences, meaning-making, and professional practices and development (Attard, 2012; Muchnik-Rozanov and Tsybulsky, 2021). Reflective narratives are a qualitative method for exploring individual experiences, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, learning processes, and the meaning-making that accompanies them. Hence, they offer rich, first-person insights into a specific phenomenon (Alam et al., 2025). In the present study, reflective narratives provided insight into how teachers regulate their emotions and build their professional identities. They allow close examination of individual and group experiences, yielding rich insights into the lived experience of language learners and teachers. It enables the understanding of identity construction and negotiation of meaning in language learning contexts (Martell and Antrop-González, 2008; Vitanova, 2013). The participant teachers were asked to write their stories that they think are emotionally important and have had an influence on their professional identity. Teachers were provided with the following questions to help them write their narratives: Can you describe a significant teaching experience that had a strong emotional impact on you (e.g., joy, frustration, pride, or stress)? How did this experience affect you emotionally, both at the time and afterwards? What role do emotions play in your practice as a teacher? In this way, the teachers

TABLE 1 Participant information.

S. N.	Participants	Teaching experience	Gender	Degree
1	P1	10 years	Female	MA
2	P2	8 years	Female	MA
3	P3	5 years	Male	MA
4	P4	12 years	Male	PhD
5	P5	16 years	Female	BA
6	P6	8 years	Female	MA
7	P7	15 years	Male	MA

TABLE 2 Data analysis procedure.

Data excerpt	Initial codes	Category	Final theme
"When my students engage in the activities, I feel motivated. At those times, I remember how much I love my job."	Motivation Satisfaction	Positive emotional responses to student engagement	Navigating emotional diversity
"There are times when I feel helpless... I get nervous if they do not do their assignments or tasks. I try to find ways to control myself at those times."	Helplessness, frustration	Negative emotions in relation to student disengagement	Dealing with emotional diversity and regulation
"I feel that my ideas are being heard, and when I see the school values what I have, I feel empowered..."	Empowerment, belonging	Institutional recognition and alignment	Emotional alignment

shared their challenges and pivotal moments in transforming their identities.

Following the reflective narratives, the semi-structured interviews investigated four primary domains: participants' background information, pedagogical practices, emotional experiences during English language instruction, and elements of their professional development. Each interview spanned approximately 45 to 60 min and was conducted in an environment conducive to open and reflective dialogue. As this study aimed to explore the complex relationship between ELT teachers' emotions and their professional identities, the interview questions also encompassed contextual factors at local and national levels. With the participants' consent, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

3.3 Data analysis

Thematic reflexive analysis, as outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2021\)](#), was utilized the collected data. Both first-cycle and second-cycle coding processes were employed to analyze the narratives and interviews ([Saldana, 2016](#)). The analysis was conducted in several steps. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and carefully read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. In the first cycle, open coding was applied to meaningful segments of text, allowing initial codes to emerge inductively. Each participant's data were coded independently, and then relevant anecdotes from the narratives were identified and noted.

The coding process was informed by three overarching sensitizing categories: sociocultural context, educator emotions, and professional identity. In the second cycle, the codes were organized, compared across participants, and iteratively refined into broader categories. Through constant comparison, these categories were then clustered into themes that captured recurring patterns across the dataset. The final analysis produced three principal themes: (1) navigating emotional diversity, (2) dealing with emotional diversity and regulation, and (3) emotional alignment.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the process, two researchers independently coded two of the seven transcripts and then discussed their coding to reach consensus. Differences in interpretation were resolved through dialogue until agreement was achieved. In addition, an audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions, and thick descriptions were used to ensure transparency. Selected participants were also invited to provide feedback on the interpretations (member checking), which helped validate the themes. To ensure greater transparency

in the analytical process, [Table 2](#) provides an example of how raw data extracts were coded in the first round, grouped into categories for the second round, and subsequently refined into the final themes.

Coding was viewed as an interpretive, researcher-generated process, in line with reflexive thematic analysis. Rather than establishing inter-coder reliability, the authors' analytical dialogues were employed to enhance reflexivity. Reflections from participants were encouraged to enhance interpretations rather than "validate" themes.

3.4 Ethical considerations

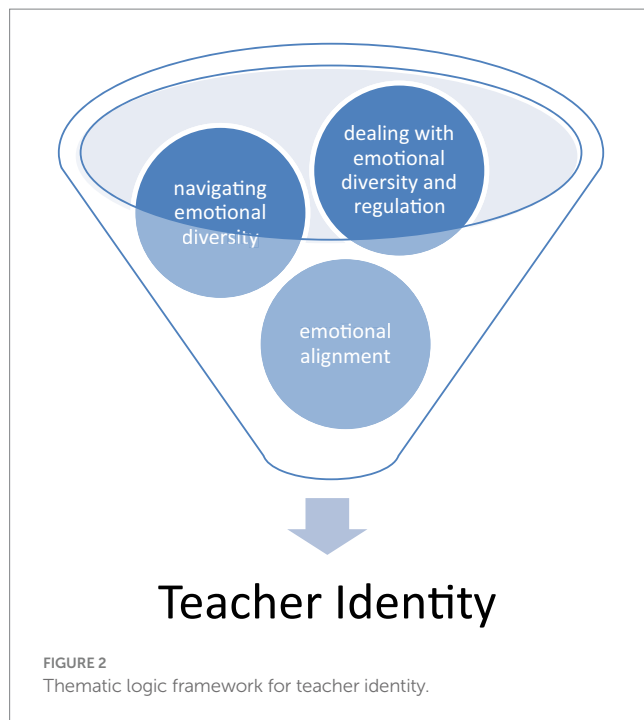
Ethical approval was secured from the pertinent institutional review board. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any moment.

4 Findings

The analysis of the data resulted in three interrelated themes that capture how teachers experience and negotiate their emotions in connection with their professional identities: (1) navigating emotional diversity, (2) dealing with emotional diversity and regulation, and (3) emotional alignment. These themes are not isolated but rather form a dynamic and dialogic process in which teachers' emotions shape, and are shaped by, their professional selves and institutional contexts. To better illustrate the conceptual relationships among the themes, a thematic logic framework diagram ([Figure 2](#)) is provided below. This framework illustrates how teachers' emotional experiences are interrelated and collectively contribute to the construction of their professional identity.

4.1 Navigating emotional diversity

Instructors frequently characterized their classrooms as emotionally charged environments where both positive and negative emotions coexisted in intricate ways. For example, P2 highlighted how happy times and relationships with students infused her instruction with energy, but she also recognized how fleeting these feelings can be when faced with institutional



demands. She described how a single encounter, a student expressing gratitude to her after class, boosted her spirits for days and made her feel proud of her profession.

I love my students. We have a good relationship, and I love teaching them. I enjoy the moments in the classroom. Also I have a good relationship with my colleagues; the atmosphere at school is so supportive. Despite the heavy workload, I do my best to be an efficient teacher. (P2, interview).

By recounting how pride in student accomplishments was frequently accompanied by anxiety about meeting institutional expectations, P5 also showed this dichotomy.

I think each emotion serves a purpose. We were preparing a presentation project with my students, and I was very anxious that things may not work out. I realized that my anxiety reflected on my students, and I made them feel worried. Actually, as a teacher, I must have helped them stay calm. That was my role as a teacher. From the moment I realized this, I tried to manage my feelings and encouraged my students to complete their project. (P5, reflective narrative).

These anecdotes demonstrate that negotiating emotional diversity is a continuous process in which educators reinterpret their emotions as part of identity work rather than a straightforward progression from negative to positive. Teachers reported that even negative feelings such as disappointment and frustration could act as catalysts for professional reflection, leading them to reevaluate their roles and modify their teaching methods. In this way, emotional diversity was seen as a tool that allowed educators to reinvent their professional identities while still adhering to the limitations of their educational environments, rather than as a threat to stability.

4.2 Dealing with emotional diversity and regulation

The analysis revealed that teachers experience a diverse range of emotions throughout their professional lives with respect to classroom dynamics, student engagement, and institutional expectations. The emotional landscape of teachers demonstrated a dynamic characteristic that requires regulation strategies.

P7 provided one of the most striking illustrations of emotional control when she detailed a particularly challenging semester. She remembered a class where several students consistently arrived late, showed little interest, and did not finish their assignments. She clarified, “I initially felt a surge of anger within me.” One day, I recall feeling my voice rise as I stood in front of the class, holding their unsubmitted homework. I wanted to yell at them to express my disappointment. But she also caught sight of the faces of a few hardworking students who had finished their assignments and were eagerly awaiting her arrival. She reflected, “I understood that I would be punishing those who had tried if I lost control of my emotions.” She stopped, took a deep breath, and altered her strategy rather than making things worse. She changed the task, encouraging the more driven pupils to converse while subtly urging the others to catch up. P7 subsequently acknowledged that this experience marked a turning point in her life: “I realized that I cannot allow my feelings to control how I behave in the classroom.” Instead of repressing them, I must control them and redirect them toward more beneficial endeavors. She maintained her relationship with students and strengthened her own sense of professional identity by turning her initial frustration into a more composed response. This story illustrates how emotion regulation involves more than just managing emotions; it also entails making pedagogical decisions that are consistent with professional values, enabling educators to maintain their identity even under pressure.

Similarly, participant teachers reflected on using various strategies to regulate their emotions to shape a sustainable and resilient professional identity. They stated:

I accept the things as they are. As teachers our workload is so heavy. All these take a toll on my emotions. I try not to get emotionally involved. (P3, reflective interview).

As seen in the excerpts of the participant teachers, emotional regulation and conscious alignment with professional roles are crucial in sustaining teacher identity. Teachers need to negotiate complex emotional landscapes and typically suppress, reframe, or reinterpret their own emotional responses to remain effective and balanced in their work. These coping mechanisms not only maintain emotional well-being but also enable teachers to take up a consistent and professional stance.

4.3 Emotional alignment

Emotional alignment involves conceptualizing emotions as guidelines that shape our interactions with others. Teachers mostly interact with their students, colleagues, and administrators, and they also have emotions. Teacher identity is shaped by the reaction that they receive from their stakeholders. Emotional alignment helps

teachers connect with their students and colleagues and make themselves part of the institutional culture. This encompasses understanding, empathizing, and responding appropriately to the emotional dynamics present in the teaching environment, which in turn helps build a dynamic professional identity. For example, P6 highlighted how students' positive attitudes and emotions affect her in the classroom:

Students' engagement and appreciation trigger my sense of happiness and pride. Then, when I think about it the other way around, my positive emotions could also boost their motivation. I realize now, as I'm explaining it, that emotions have the power to influence each other. (P6, reflective narrative).

When teachers' emotions align with those of the school administration, teachers may develop a sense of belonging and professional purpose. This affective congruence makes teachers feel valued and supported in their work, thereby enhancing their commitment and consolidating their professional identity. P3 reflected on this sense of fit:

I feel that my ideas are being heard, and when I see the school value what I have, I feel empowered by default. I feel like I am not just an employee but a team member who works for one purpose. (P3, interview).

However, incongruence of emotions may lead to tension, alienation, and even burnout. When teachers are not empathized with or understood at the administrative level, emotional exhaustion ensues. P4 articulated frustration:

Sometimes I would feel like I'm being asked to do the work but not questioned on how we feel about the work. The policies change, the expectations rise, but no one checks in on how we're handling things emotionally. That makes me feel disconnected from the system. (P4, reflective narrative).

Emotional identification with peers was also a key feature in constituting identity. Perceived understanding and support from peers facilitated participants to reflect, grow, and cope with emotional pressures. P2 emphasized the importance of peer emotional support:

Having a sense that my peers are going through the same thing and that we can actually talk openly makes a huge difference. It makes me process my feelings and stay centered on why I'm here teaching. (P2, interview).

In some accounts, emotional alignment was not presented as an achieved state, but rather as a dynamic process constructed through experience, self-reflection, and social interchange. Teachers who reflectively pursue this emotional awareness are more likely to cultivate resilient and adaptable professional identities.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the central contribution of emotions to shaping the professional identity of ELT teachers.

Furthermore, to explore the reproduction of earlier research, they shed light on the processes as they work in the specific context of a Turkish university. Emotions are not merely personal responses here but are constructed within cultural and institutional systems that socialize teachers to negotiate, regulate, and coordinate their affective states.

5.1 Emotions as transformative forces

While positive emotions, such as joy, pride, and satisfaction, enhanced teachers' sense of belonging and commitment, negative emotions, such as anxiety, frustration, and disappointment, were also present. They were not only harmful but also motivating forces for change. Interestingly, in this Turkish university setting, subjects framed these negative emotions in terms of heightened professional responsibility toward students. For instance, disengaged learners prompted educators to think about their pedagogic strategies, suggesting that negative emotions acted as prompts for professional changes. This is consistent with Zembylas (2005) argument that emotion can be transformed; however, our findings suggest that it is mediated through cultural values committed to responsibility and perseverance.

The findings of this study reveal the central role emotions play in the development of professional identity among ELT teachers, which is consistent with related literature (Hayik and Weiner-Levy, 2019; Rodrigues and Mogarro, 2019). However, beyond confirming that emotions are integral, the results of this study illustrate how emotions function not only as responses to classroom events but also as internal resources that guide decision-making, sustain interpersonal relationships, and construct professional self-perception. This shows that emotions are dialogic, emerging through constant interaction with students, colleagues, and institutional structures (Zembylas, 2003b; Hargreaves, 1998).

Teachers' experiences of anxiety, disappointment, and frustration led to introspection and alterations in conduct. For example, feelings of helplessness in front of unmotivated students evoked deeper questioning of pedagogic responsibility and classroom practice. This is a testament to the faith that tensions between emotions, as acknowledged, can build stronger and more adaptable professional identities (Hargreaves, 2000).

The findings highlight that the emotions of teachers act as a catalyst and can either favorably or unfavorably impact the formation of their professional identities. Unpleasant emotions brought on by outside influences may erode teachers' self-confidence, preventing them from developing their professional identities and lowering their desire to teach (Chen et al., 2020). However, the participant teachers stated that they acknowledge their negative emotions, and those negative emotions also help in transforming their professional identities. It can be concluded from teachers' reports that as teachers recognize the impact of their emotions on their teaching context and their professional development, by employing emotion regulation strategies, they become more reflective practitioners who are better equipped to foster supportive learning environments. By becoming aware of their emotional responses and by utilizing emotions as a foundation for individual and social resistance, teachers can discover how to make use of their feelings in empowering ways (Zembylas, 2003a).

Our data indicate that the change-making function of negative emotions in this context is propelled by two interrelated mechanisms:

professional duty (a strongly internalized responsibility to protect student learning) and care norms that are culturally upheld in collegial relations. These mechanisms began to explain why many participants quickly transitioned between initial frustration and reflective reframing (e.g., restructuring activities, reevaluating expectations), instead of disengagement. When interpreting through an emotional labor lens, surface acting was predominantly a short-term classroom strategy, while deep acting resonated with felt and displayed expressions that aligned with role values and thus contributed to identity coherence over time; importantly, this seemingly deep acting was an accepted practice in the local context. This culturally situated mechanism expands orthodox emotional labor accounts by elaborating identity work in Turkish higher education, which comprises alignment processes, along with regulation strategies.

5.2 Emotion regulation

Emotion regulation was not only a technique of adaptation but also of maintaining professionalism and representing institutional expectations. Teachers with higher emotion-regulation skills are less emotionally drained and are more occupationally committed (Han et al., 2020). Furthermore, emotion regulation generally meant that teachers distanced themselves from personalized behavior to adhere to professional norms, which fit their institutional role (Kelchtermans, 2005).

At the same time, participants described how recognizing and working with their emotions, rather than suppressing them, supported reflective practice. This shows that emotions can be mobilized as resources for professional resistance and empowerment (Zembylas, 2003a). Therefore, the findings suggest that teacher education should not only promote regulation strategies but also create opportunities for teachers to critically interrogate how regulation aligns or conflicts with their professional values.

Emotional labor theory (Hochschild, 1983) provides a valuable framework for understanding how participants manage their emotional experiences. Teachers in this study reported both surface acting, which involves manipulating outer displays of emotion to meet institutional demands, and deep acting, attempting to align inner feelings with professional demands. While surface acting was more engaged in administrator-teacher interactions, where compliance and professionalism were emphasized, deep acting was more engaged in teacher-student relationships, where empathy and care were paramount. This renders the identification pertinent because while surface acting was successful in maintaining institutional harmony, it threatened long-term emotional exhaustion and burnout (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002). On the other hand, deep acting, although more emotionally demanding, was reported by the participants to promote a sense of authenticity and certify their professional identity. These findings suggest that the surface/deep acting trade-off is not only an adaptive strategy but also a dynamic practice of identity conditional on cultural norms of respect, institutional expectations of conformity, and the moral responsibility teachers feel towards students. In the Turkish higher education setting, where hierarchical structures and collectivist values prevail, emotional labor involves not only managing at the individual level but also preserving collegial harmony and doing

the right thing, thereby reinforcing the multifaceted relationship between professional identity and emotions.

5.3 Emotional alignment

Finally, emotional alignment with colleagues, students, and administrators proved to be a decisive factor in teachers' sense of belonging and motivation. Teachers reported that where their feelings were congruent with those of the individuals surrounding them, they experienced a stronger sense of belonging, motivation, and value. Affective congruence strengthened their professional commitment as well as membership within the institutional culture. As noted in the literature (Chen, 2021; van Veen and Slegers, 2006), perceived emotional appreciation and support are crucial to the development of positive professional identity. Conversely, emotional misfit, specifically with school administrations, resulted in alienation and burnout.

The findings further demonstrate that professional identity construction is inherently a social process. Shared validation and understanding allowed reflective practice and emotional support during professional adversity. In line with this, Kelchtermans (2005) and Nias (1996) described teacher resilience as being contingent on collegial solidarity. In addition, teachers conceptualized emotional development as an ongoing, socially guided process. Teachers who constantly reflected on and negotiated their emotions were better able to construct dynamic, context-fitting identities. By using this method, emotions not only reacted to teachers' inner state but also became tools for managing relationships and making sense within their working life. Importantly, this study shows that such solidarity is not a peripheral resource but a constitutive element of identity formation.

This study extends existing scholarship on teacher emotions by situating emotional experiences explicitly within the sociocultural and institutional realities of Turkish higher education, a context that remains underexplored in the literature. While much prior work has examined teacher emotions from generalized or global perspectives (Zembylas, 2003a; Chen, 2021), our findings reveal how structural factors such as administrative policies, collegial networks, and student expectations directly shape emotional regulation and alignment processes. In doing so, the study goes beyond merely affirming that emotions matter; it demonstrates the mechanisms through which emotions become constitutive of identity work in specific institutional ecologies. This critical focus highlights that professional identity is not only individually negotiated but also collectively constrained and enabled by organizational cultures. By emphasizing both the empowering and the destabilizing functions of emotions, the study offers a nuanced contribution that challenges overly individualistic framings of teacher identity and underscores the importance of emotional support systems in teacher education and professional development.

To sum up, this study advances beyond descriptive validation to reveal the manner in which emotions are simultaneously resources and constraints for the construction of professional identity. By situating teacher emotion in the cultural and organizational context of Turkish higher education, we provide insights into the processes of professional responsibility, cultural norms, and organizational alignment through which emotions shape professional identity. These conclusions suggest that emotions must not only be analyzed as isolated psychological states but also as socially located forces that reproduce and challenge teachers' professional identities.

6 Conclusion

This research has illustrated how emotions are not peripheral to ELT practice; rather, emotions are constitutive of teachers' professional identity work. In a Turkish university, the teachers' narratives evidenced how context affordances (student engagement, collegiality, and leadership actions) intersected with alignment mechanisms (autonomy-support, fair workload, and reliance on collegiality) that produced various consequences for identity, including coherence, agency, dissonance, and affective strain. These findings emphasized that in Turkey, where cultural values of respect, duty, and community concern are deeply ingrained in educational practice, emotional labor is given priority in shaping teacher identity. Furthermore, to confirm descriptions of professional identity work, our analysis employed mechanisms and norms of occupational duty and care in relation to the well-being of teachers and students to specify the processes through which negative emotions may instigate reflective recalibration and clarify how deep acting is more effective than surface acting to sustain the teacher's professional identity over time. The present study also emphasizes that in Türkiye, where education is deeply rooted in cultural expectations of respect, responsibility, and solidarity care, teachers' feelings are not merely individual experiences but are shaped by broader institutional and societal norms as well.

The findings imply some practical applications. First, emotional regulation and awareness have to be incorporated into teacher professional development and teacher preparation programs in Türkiye, with sensitivity to the cultural expectations of professionalism and care. By equipping teachers with self-management strategies for managing emotional demands, schools can support long-term and resilient professional identities. Second, policymakers and school administrators must recognize the emotional labor that teachers perform. Policies that honor teacher voice, acknowledge emotional pressure, and foster emotional care are particularly pertinent in Türkiye, where ongoing structural reforms and institutional demands are constant pressure. Third, peer systems of support, such as mentoring, reflective discussion groups, or emotional literacy workshops, can enable teachers to work through emotions collectively, thereby developing professional identity through collective confirmation.

Despite its contribution, this research was not without limitations. The sample size was small, and the participants were a subsample from a single specific educational setting. While the sample size is acceptable for qualitative research, the fact that all participants were recruited from one institutional context significantly limits the transferability of the findings. The results should therefore be interpreted as reflective of this specific context rather than representative of EFL teachers in general.

Future research should expand its scope by including participants from diverse institutional types (e.g., public and private universities and secondary schools), geographical regions, and with varying levels of teaching experience. Such comparative and multi-site studies would enable a deeper understanding of how institutional and cultural factors shape teachers' emotions and professional identities. They would also test the applicability of the themes identified in this study across broader contexts. Furthermore, the data were based on self-reported history and interviews, which, while rich and qualitative, may be susceptible

to recall bias or selective reporting. The study also did not employ longitudinal approaches, something that would have allowed more exploration of how identity formation and emotional experiences vary longitudinally. Furthermore, cross-national comparative studies can also reveal the contextual factors that affect emotional experiences and the construction of identity. Longitudinal research will be especially needed in order to become familiar with the temporal development of emotion and identity, as well as how teachers' emotional environment changes during different stages of their careers. Triangulation approaches, which employ quantitative ratings of emotion in combination with qualitative data, would give a richer account of this complex phenomenon.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Çağ University Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

AD: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SZ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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