

## EXPLORING AGENCY IN TEACHERS' IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH THE LENS CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUES

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### Abstract

A major increase in empirical and theoretical interest in teacher identity has occurred within the last 20 years. This increase is frequently ascribed to changing perceptions of teachers' roles. Critical incidents affect teachers' development and their professional identity. The issues include how teachers deal with challenging situations in their profession and their sense of agency. This problem can be overcome by educating students to be more assertive in the classroom. This study aims to investigate the professional identities of three in-service EFL teachers through the lens of critical incidents. Three in-service EFL teachers from different regions in Indonesia were purposefully selected as the participants. The main instrument for data collection in this study was the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) by utilizing reflections and in depth-interview to gather the data and ensure triangulation. Respondents voluntarily participated in this research. The result of this research demonstrated that there were 17 codes of CI which were classified into 3 major categories possessed by the participants, namely: students' behavior, teachers' reflective practice, and students' reaction. The strategies teachers use to handle challenging situations in their profession consist of how teachers deal with decision-making, integrating technology, and developing suitable materials.

**Keywords:** critical incident technique, professional identity, teacher agency, teacher identity

### Introduction

Understanding the definition of identity is necessary before delving into the professional identity of an EFL/ESL teacher. According to Pillen et al. (2016) and Henry (2016) in Cheng (2021), educational policymakers consider identity to be one of the fundamental pillars of achieving the macro targets of the educational system. Teachers' identity is shaped through ongoing negotiation and interaction that encompasses their personal and professional lives.

Beijaard et al. (2004), as cited in Kuswando (2013) found that professional teacher identities are often defined differently by different authors, and sometimes not at all in some studies. This is due to the unclear distinction between professional and personal identity. However, these classifications provide a useful tool for



identifying gaps in existing studies and identifying factors that influence teacher identity. Beijaard et al. (2004), as cited in Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), argue that teacher identity is an individual's sense of self, shaped by personal perceptions and beliefs, and constantly shaped by social and cultural discourses, rather than external roles determined by institutions.

The functional role of a teacher imposed by others may not necessarily align with the teacher's sense of professional identity, contributing to the dialogic relationship between role and identity in the "lived experience" of a teacher. In addition, Hong et al. (2018) stated that teachers' emotional regulation and management of teaching-related experiences influence their perception of teaching and professional identity. Critical classroom incidents and emotional episodes are central to identity construction, providing feedback for reflection and reconsideration. Emotions can intensify due to accountability demands and managerialism.

Alberto and Castañeda's (2011) perspective emphasizes the continuous process of developing a professional identity, shaped by values, beliefs, and aspirations, to enhance teachers' competence and quality. Teachers' professional identity is influenced by their past experiences, including childhood, education, and dramatic life events (Cheng, 2021). Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004), as cited in Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), found that teacher professional identity is an ongoing, dynamic, and constantly evolving phenomenon. It involves a person and context, with sub-identities that must be balanced to avoid conflict. Professional identity includes agency and the active pursuit of professional development and learning. They highlight the problematic nature of understanding identity, particularly the connection between identity and self and the unclear distinction between personal and professional identity.

Agency in teaching involves a balance between authority and vulnerability, motivational filters, and mediators between the environment and individual teachers' identities (Hong et al., 2018). Hong highlights the crucial role of teacher agency in changing identities, emphasizing the significance of psychological constructs such as self-efficacy and resilience in shaping a teacher's identity. The formation of a teacher identity involves agency and active pursuit of goals and self-efficacy to achieve those goals, as suggested by Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop as cited in (Hong et al., 2018).

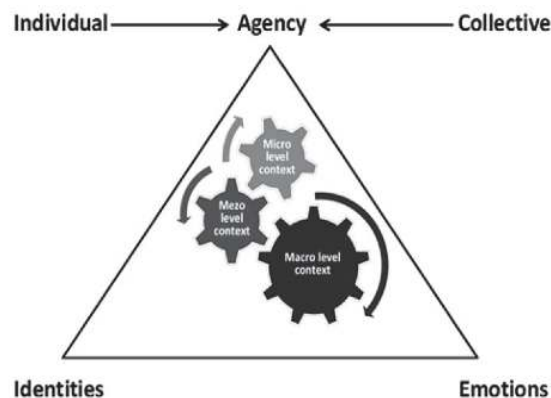


Figure 1. Conceptualization of LTA

From Figure 1, there are two different forms of agency. They are individual and group agencies (Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019). By giving them the autonomy to select educational preferences that suit their interests and the demands of their classrooms, teacher agency enables language teachers to achieve beyond the role of simply educators. The notion of agency is defined as the reference to Bandura's social cognitive theory (Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019). Bandura suggests that self-influence and proactive commitment mediate agentic activities, with decisions based on future expectations, setting goals, and weighing results. According to Bandura, teachers' agency is influenced by local factors such as classroom management, pedagogical practices, and interactions with students at the micro level. Teachers' duties are shaped at the mezzo level by school culture, policies, and interaction between parties. At the macro level, language policies, ideologies, sociopolitical discourses, societal norms, globalization, and external demands form language teacher agency (LTA).

Critical incident techniques (CIT) focus on agency and have impacts on agency practices and support connections as well. They contribute to following teachers' professional knowledge and identity construction. Critical Incident Theory (CIT) can enhance EFL teacher growth by promoting critical reflection, identifying core values, and fostering adaptability, but its effectiveness depends on quality facilitation and analysis. In the 1950s, Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives was used to categorize human behavior into cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains (Byrne, 2001). John C. Flanagan, as cited in Byrne (2001), developed the Critical Incident Technique in 1954. CIT is a scientific approach that identifies and categorizes significant behavior incidents that impact an individual's success or failure. As the research conducted by Byrne (2001), the Critical Incident Technique can be useful in another field, such as in nursing research. Developed in nursing research, CIT analyzes classroom experiences that influence teachers' decision-making and beliefs, offering valuable insights when used consistently and appropriately.

Recent studies highlight the effectiveness of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) in promoting professional reflection by examining significant events, fostering self-awareness, and fostering growth (Madrid Akpovo, 2019). CIT's structured approach is broadly used in education and healthcare due to its effectiveness in identifying incidents affecting teachers' practices and beliefs (Flanagan, 1954). Contrarily, Narrative Inquiry offers a comprehensive approach to understanding personal and professional narratives, focusing on chronology and meaning-making to provide a comprehensive understanding (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Limited research has investigated the comprehensive integration of CIT and Narrative Inquiry in understanding teachers' identity formation, despite both methods contributing to professional development. There is also a lack of research on the application of cultural assumptions in different cultural contexts to understand their impact on professional identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Flanagan, 1954; Madrid Akpovo, 2019).

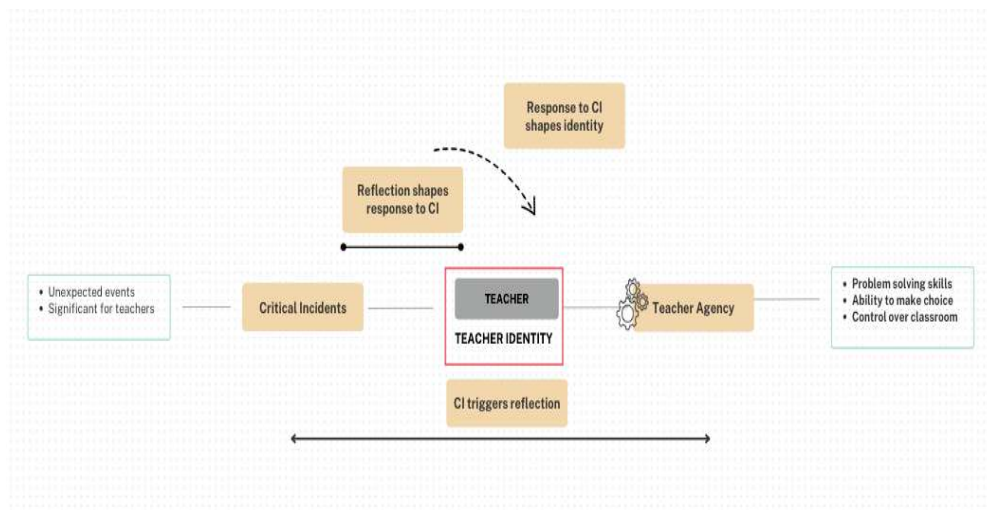


Figure 2. Mindmap of the teacher identity

Flanagan's Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is a systematic method for observing human behavior, improving psychological awareness, and resolving current events through five processes. Figure 2 illustrates the connection between critical incidents and teacher agency, highlighting how these factors shape a teacher's professional identity. The central image features a teacher figure, reflecting on unexpected events, while the left branch highlights their ability to make choices and manage classrooms. The gear icon symbolizes teacher agency, while smaller icons represent key aspects like checkmarks and problem-solving. The response to critical incidents influences a teacher's core values, teaching philosophy, confidence, and resilience.

Professional growth involves various methods such as training, collaborative learning, and personal transformation resulting from professional action. Durrant (2020) explored the concept of growth and identity in schools to enhance their community capabilities by integrating epistemological and ontological elements with individual agency.

The study conducted by Sudtho and Singhasiri (2017) highlights events influencing teachers' professional identities, including classroom management, mentorship, and student responses, but lacks interpersonal dynamics and structural elements. Therefore, this study delves into how crucial incidents influence teachers' identities by examining their views and growth. This research seeks to discover and study the methods educators employ to handle and address situations effectively and how these methods impact their sense of empowerment in their profession. Additionally, the study aims to explore the connection, between these approaches and their capacity to maintain responsibility for their professional development.

CIT, revealed by Flanagan, is the concept of assessing critical incidents or significant events in an individual's life described in research conducted by Butterfield et al. (2005). Studies using CIT have examined teachers' identities (Putri & Kuswando, 2020), emotional aspects (Anselma & Mbato, 2023), teaching strategies, and professional development needs (Korthagen, 2009). The problems are stated as follows considering the research background:

1. How do critical incidents influence the development of teachers' professional identities?
2. What are the strategies teachers use to handle challenging situations in their profession, focusing on how these tactics enhance their sense of agency?

## Method

### *Research design*

This study employed qualitative research since the researchers' primary objective with qualitative research was to comprehend people's behaviors, interactions, and the meanings they assign to their experiences (Hammersley, 2012). According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research employs purposeful sampling to select participants and sites based on their ability to provide insights into the central phenomenon. Qualitative inquiry recruitment involves identifying and inviting participants to join a study, aiming to include those who meet study criteria and provide relevant data (Given, 2008). The research design was chosen based on specific research questions to address study objectives. This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to explore agency in EFL teacher's professional identity. Thus, in this research, the researchers employed purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a research method used in qualitative research to select participants and sites based on their ability to provide insights into a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Researchers chose 3 participants and sites based on their information richness. This method applies to both individuals and sites in this study. To use purposeful sampling, researchers identified their sampling strategy and defended its use. The researchers considered multiple sampling techniques, such as selecting teachers in a school and incorporating different schools into the sample.

### *Participants of the study*

Three participants in this study came from different schools and grade levels of teaching (Table 1). The participants were selected based on their willingness to share critical incidents from their teaching experiences and their diverse range of teaching contexts (e.g., teaching level, school location). At the beginning of the research, the teachers signed the informed consent stated that they agreed to contribute to this research. This study was conducted from June to July 2024 by distributing the template of CIT using Google form and asking the participants to do an in-depth interview section directly after doing the reflection.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

No	Pseudonyms	Places	Ages	Teaching School	Teaching Level	Teaching Area
1	Teacher 1	Tempel, Sleman	34	Public School	JHS	Rural Area
2	Teacher 2	Special Region of Yogyakarta	34	Public School	Vocational School	Urban Area
3	Teacher 3	Dumai, Riau	32	Private School	JHS	Urban Area



According to Creswell (2014), questionnaires can be used to ask both closed-ended and open-ended questions, providing useful information to support theories and concepts in literature. Open-ended responses allow for the exploration of reasons for closed-ended responses and identifying additional comments. The researchers analyzed open-ended responses by identifying overlapping themes and counting the number of themes or times participants mentioned them.

This research employed the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) proposed by Flanagan. As a qualitative research approach, CIT has been utilized for more than 50 years. Flanagan (1954) as cited in Butterfield et al. (2005) outlined the five main steps of the CIT as follows: (1) determining the overall objectives of the activity under study; (2) formulating plans and specifications; (3) gathering data; (4) analyzing data; and (5) interpreting data and summarizing the findings.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with each participant. The interview protocol focused on critical incidents that they perceived as having a significant impact on their teaching practices and sense of agency. Participants were prompted to describe the incident in detail, their thoughts, and feelings at the time, and how it influenced their subsequent teaching decisions. The interview also explored how these critical incidents challenged their existing beliefs about teaching and ultimately contributed to their professional development. The interview was conducted directly with EFL teachers to ensure clarity and gather feedback before full-scale data collection begins. Researchers asked participants to discuss incidents when they believed their practice was highly ineffective, problematic, or negative. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The research examined interview information through three phases; sorting out topics; explaining them; and revisiting them in a light. In this phase of the process, it identified themes and trends in significant occurrences, such as students' responses to the curriculum method or struggles faced when teaching a particular idea. The following stage explored how these incidents influenced teachers' capability to act and empowered them to make decisions.

### ***Validity and reliability***

Since qualitative research places a strong emphasis on the role of the researchers and the transferability of findings, methods such as member checking have been developed as quantitative statistical analogs for contemporary, predictive, and construct validity analyses (Creswell, 2013). The validity and reliability of the Critical Incident Theory (CIT) approach have been examined in two studies. According to Butterfield et al. (2005), the first study, carried out by Andersson and Nilsson (1964), found that the data gathered using the CIT approach was valid and reliable. The second, by Ronan and Latham (1974), which was referenced by Butterfield et al. (2005), concluded that the CIT methodology's content validity and reliability were good. Nevertheless, the terminology and methods employed to validate the validity of results in CIT studies frequently take a more positivistic approach, depending more on the history of quantitative research than that of qualitative research.

The qualitative study employs triangulation, employing various data sources, questionnaires, and interviews, to provide a complete understanding of the phenomena (Patton, 1999). The researchers confirmed the validity of the qualitative

study by conducting member checks, where participants carefully examined the transcript and interview responses' codes and themes.

### ***Data analysis***

The coding process using Atlas. It involved three stages: open coding, which involves assigning codes to significant information; in-vivo coding, which uses participants' words as codes; axial coding, which organizes related codes into categories or themes; and selective coding, which identifies central themes and refines them to accurately represent the data (Smit, 2002). In this research, the researchers utilized software for analyzing qualitative data using Atlas.ti ([www.atlasti.com](http://www.atlasti.com)). As qualitative software, it offered counts of coded instances by code, which could be displayed in codebook displays, and could export code distribution tables to spreadsheets for further analysis. Codes are used in qualitative data analysis to organize text into key topics, aiding in pattern diagnosis (Given, 2008). These codes could be deductive or inductive and could be renamed, deleted, combined, or broken into smaller subcategories. In addition, qualitative software offered search facilities, auto code functions, and computerized text highlighting for visual aids and data profiles.

To employ Atlas. Ti, the researchers installed the software and initiated a new project. Then, the researchers imported and systematically organized the data and then developed and applied coding schemes to identify significant themes. The researchers used Atlas. Ti's features generate counts of coded instances, create codebook displays, and export data for further analysis. The researchers made use of search functions and auto-coding capabilities to enhance efficiency. Finally, the data could be concluded by interpreting the results, ensuring accuracy, and considering additional validation methods as required.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Critical incidents significantly influenced teachers' professional identities by challenging and reinforcing their self-concept and practices, thereby influencing their strategies to handle challenging situations. Critical incidents prompted teachers to reflect on their practices, values, and beliefs, leading to personal and professional growth. They could reinforce existing beliefs, receive feedback from students or colleagues, and adapt to different contexts, enhancing their professional identity.

#### ***Different critical incidents happened inside/outside the classroom.***

Critical incidents play a role in shaping teachers' identities by influencing how they perceive themselves and their impact in the classroom as noted by Alberto and Castañeda (2011). These critical incidents prompted teachers to reflect on their changing sense of self as they encountered both difficulties and successes, in their teaching journey. In their research, Anselma and Mbato (2023) emphasize the importance of experiences such as burnout and resilience encounters in forming the identities of EFL teachers and affecting their sense of competence and professional growth.

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) emphasize that understanding teacher identity involves exploring how such critical incidents contribute to the formation

and reformation of professional self-concepts. They argue that teachers' responses to these incidents are integral to their identity development and sense of agency.

After coding the significant information, the researchers organized them into categories or themes. The researchers, then, summarized the teachers' Critical Incidents in the following tables.

#### *Students' behavior*

Some teachers found it challenging to deal with students who easily get bored. They need to be more creative in the classroom. As Schutz et al. (2018) state, classrooms are challenging spaces that require teachers to manage a complex array of social, cognitive, academic, and emotional demands.

Table 2. Dealing with students' behavior

No.	Pseudonyms	Stories	Quotation
1	Teacher 1	Unmotivated students	"They sometimes get bored when the teacher gives a material because they think that English is a difficult subject."
2	Teacher 2	Unmotivated students	"The English lesson wasn't lively, and the students felt unmotivated when learning English."
3	Teacher 3	English learning environment	"There was a time when I started to speak English and I also asked students to speak English actively as well, even when they were permitted to go to the toilet."

From Table 2, two teachers from different schools encountered a similar situation with unmotivated students. In line with this, Tajeddin and Yazan (2024) emphasize the importance of teachers in fostering student motivation, expressing their opinions about the duty and role of teachers in inspiring their students. In an interview with Teacher 2, she stated:

*When I had a chance to teach them, I used many games with technology in my classroom. (Interview with Teacher 2, 11/6/2024)*

In this case, Teacher 2 used technology-based games in her classroom. These games could be educational software, digital tools, or traditional games with a technological twist. The teacher might use technology to make learning more fun and engaging, using these games to enhance student participation, motivation, and knowledge retention. Thus, it could improve student engagement.

In addition, Teacher 1 explained why students might get bored in English class. It could be due to two factors: the material was boring and the student's perception of English as a difficult subject. The difficulty could be discouraging, leading to a lack of engagement, and the teaching style might not be stimulating enough, further contributing to boredom. This led to an interview response with Teacher 1. She utters that:

*Presenting interactive and current media such as movies, quizzes, YouTube, Instagram, and games is very useful to make the students interested in learning English. The use of interesting techniques in teaching by using various media can create enjoyable situations in the learning process and*



*make the students motivated to learn English.* (Interview with Teacher 1, 16/6/2024)

Hence, the tools that educators use to teach, including textbooks, instructional technologies, curriculum, and activities, are known as affordances (Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024). It is crucial to remember that affordances both support and limit agency: instructional resources help teachers behave and engage in predetermined ways. In turn, the activities and interactions between teachers and students create the identities of the classrooms. The classroom's atmosphere and learning style are shaped by the resources and curriculum, with activities promoting collaboration creating a different identity than those focusing on individual work.

Additional students' behavior was stated by Teacher 3.

*Teacher 3: There was a time when I started to speak English and I also asked students to speak English actively as well. Even when they are permitted to go to the toilet. And, when I invited the students to go around the school, ask them to look deeply at what happened there. But unfortunately, it had made my students or even the parents complain about it. They complained that I didn't give them a chance to speak in Bahasa.* (Interview with Teacher 1, 16/6/2024)

English is the primary language for communication in specific settings, such as classrooms or workplaces (Sudtho & Singhasiri, 2017). Anxiety can negatively impact performance, leading to stumbling or hesitation. This feeling often happens in students. However, English as a Lingua Franca refers to situations where non-native speakers use English. The teacher tries to make the students practice English classroom, although the students and parents often complain about it. Cheng (2021) shows that teachers' emotional experiences in response to critical incidents affect their professional identity development, influencing their agency and approach to teaching.

### *Reflective practice*

Critical events triggered teachers' emergent identities, influencing their professional growth and evolution. Reflective journals, peer discussions, and professional development activities helped teachers track their development, gain insights, and make informed decisions, promoting continuous learning and improved teaching practices. Critical events initiate teachers' emergent identities, which develop gradually in the first few years of classroom teaching, often through identity-based reflection and exploration (Hong et al., 2018). The following is how the teachers feel by reflecting on practice on critical incidents.

Table 3. Reflecting on practice after critical incidents

No.	Pseudonyms	Stories	Quotation
1	Teacher 1	Learning Difficulties	"Learning English at Junior High School is considered difficult because the material is quite difficult."

No.	Pseudonyms	Stories	Quotation
2	Teacher 2	Changing Teaching Method	“What I learned from this incident about my teaching practice was I must reduce using teacher-centered methods.”
3	Teacher 3	Developing suitable materials	“Yap. It helped me develop more suitable materials and techniques.”

As Teacher 1 stated learning English in Junior High School was not solely due to the material itself, but also due to other factors such as grammar complexity, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Traditional teaching styles might not be engaging for all students, while interactive and student-centered approaches could make learning more enjoyable. Limited practice opportunities outside of class could hinder progress, and anxiety could hold students back from participating. Teacher 2 recognized that relying too heavily on a teacher-centered approach might not be the most effective strategy. She emerged the happiness of her students during the teaching-learning process. Related to this, research conducted by Luo (2007), as cited in Kayi-Aydar et al. (2019), highlights that in large Chinese cities, teachers often combine CLT with traditional methods, while in rural areas, traditional methods dominate mainstream English classrooms. To address these challenges, effective teachers should use engaging methods, promote practice opportunities, and create a supportive learning environment that reduces anxiety. Thus, the difficulty of learning English in Junior High School was likely a combination of factors.

#### *Students reaction*

Critical incidents in a teacher's career could lead to reflection and potential changes in teaching practices, shaping their identity as educators. Teacher agency, which involves making choices and managing classroom environments, is crucial in responding to these incidents. Students might indirectly influence this internal process by presenting challenges or opportunities for the teacher. Teachers might use these incidents to improve their teaching style or classroom management techniques, leading students to believe they were adapting their methods.

Table 4. Students' reaction

No	Pseudonyms	Stories	Quotation
1	Teacher 1	Motivating students	“They're motivated and engage in learning English.”
2	Teacher 2	Applying interesting method	“Yes, I got some feedback from my students. They said that they liked learning English because they felt happy using interesting methods. They also said that they got higher English scores.”
3	Teacher 3	Getting confidence	“The students become more confident in speaking in English and they also improve their vocabulary.”

The highlighting story was from Teacher 3. She said that:

*Things might seem impossible until you experience it yourself.* (Interview with Teacher 1, 16/6/2024)

Teacher 3 faced the problem of making the students speak English at the beginning of the story. Then, she got many complaints from parents and students. However, she believed that there was nothing impossible if the students did not try. Thus, it is recommended that teachers adapt teaching strategies to students' characteristics and proficiency levels, using various media for active participation (Anjaniputra, 2013).

### ***Teachers' strategies for critical events***

Teachers' strategies from critical events involve navigating and learning from situations that challenge their teaching practices, such as crises, major changes, or momentous experiences. Critical events triggered teachers' emergent identities, which develop incrementally in the first few years of classroom teaching, often through identity-based reflection and exploration (Schutz et al., 2018).

Table 5. Teachers' strategies for critical events

No	Pseudonyms	Stories	Quotation
1	Teacher 1	Integrating technology	"After analyzing the Assessment, the students spent on social media about many hours in a day, so I decided to use media in my teaching strategies to engage their motivation."
2	Teacher 2	Decision-making	"The English teaching and learning process was found to be boring, prompting me to take initiative or make a significant decision."
3	Teacher 3	Combining with other techniques	"I might combine with other techniques because there are lots of teaching techniques and methods that we could apply."

Both teachers, Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 encountered similar stories. English-challenging explanations or presentations could overwhelm students, leading to boredom. Teacher 2 uttered:

*What I did was change the method from teacher-centered to students-centered. I tried to make the students more active. I like to use some interesting games/applications such as Quizziz, Kahoot, live worksheets, and others to engage them in learning English.* (Interview with Teacher 2, 11/6/2024)

Traditional teaching style teaching might not be stimulating enough, so interactive activities, games, multimedia resources, or real-world examples could be used to make the material more interesting. Breaking down complex concepts, providing clear explanations, and offering practice and feedback could help build confidence and overcome students' perception of English as difficult. These events can lead teachers to refine their teaching philosophy, develop coping mechanisms, and improve their instructional skills (Tripp, 1994).

### **Conclusion**

Identity is a complex concept that involves questioning self or the others. It can be a personal self-concept or a response to external inquiries from others. The

personal dimension evolves from the concept of the individual as a self-sufficient subject, known as "the self." However, understanding the meaning of "who we are" is complex as it changes with interactants and settings. The concept of identity is also influenced by globalized society, which is increasingly ruled by consumerism and access to complex information systems. The role of others in the construction of identity is crucial, as identity evolves as individuals participate in social life or act as members of a group. The concept of identity is constructed, shaped, or transformed through various processes. Personal identity involves psychological, affective, and cognitive notions, while the sociological dimension includes labels like gender, race, age, or nationality, as well as social, historical, and cultural factors.

Teacher agency is seen as critical to identity and professional development about school improvement. By encouraging individual agency, involvement, self-efficacy, and participation among teachers and their students, the aim is to enhance human well-being and mutual gain. Individual agency is the key to finding a better balance in education. Teachers who embrace an agentic approach are more likely to have self-efficacy in leadership and learning, which leads to improvement even in the face of accountability demands. With the help of this strategy, teachers can concentrate on key issues and promote wide-ranging, innovative, and communicative pedagogies. Thus, teacher agency needs to reconsider professional development and community-based change, prioritizing empowering teachers to lead, take risks, and promote collaboration and critical thinking for enhanced educational outcomes.

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