

Vol. 13, No. 3  
pp. 227-254  
July &  
August 2022

## EFL Teachers' Use of Coping Strategies in the Face of Identity Tensions

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### Abstract

Early-career language teachers, who are struggling with transitory stages of identity development from students to teachers, can experience an array of negative emotions known as identity tensions. Coping strategies are used by resilient teachers to overcome these tensions. However, the nature and dynamics of such coping strategies employed by EFL teachers are still under-researched in the Iranian context. In order to address this gap, the present exploratory mixed-methods study probed the coping strategies Iranian EFL teachers most frequently use by first interviewing 16 teachers and, subsequently, administering a developed questionnaire to a cohort of 150 participants. Thematic analysis and between-groups analyses of t-tests and ANOVAs were used for the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study respectively. The results of both phases revealed that Iranian EFL teachers tend to use active coping strategies significantly more often than passive ones. Also, it was shown that female teachers as well as more experienced teachers above the average age of 28 use more active strategies than their younger colleagues. However, type of training did not seem to play a significant role in their choices, which implies a need for a more systematic integration of coping strategy instruction in training programs. The findings of this study can help English teacher trainers, supervisors, and novice teachers form a deeper insight of coping strategies to deal with identity tensions.

**Keywords:** language teachers, professional identity, identity tensions, coping strategies, teachers' emotions, EFL context

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## 1. Introduction

Despite public belief, teaching in general, and teaching a second language (L2) in particular, can be a stressful and demanding profession exerting unwarranted pressure on its practitioners and, more frequently than expected, exhorting them to bid farewell to their once beloved occupation. This is especially the case with early-career teachers who often find themselves dealing with unforeseen impositions rarely warned against during training courses (Izadnia, 2015; Nichols et al., 2017). In fact, teaching is among the few professions in which beginners are assigned equal responsibilities as their experienced counterparts (Farrell, 2012; Gordon & Maxey, 2000; McIntyre, 2003). To further complicate the matters, many novice teachers demonstrate poor self-confidence spiced with concerns of being judged by others (Glickman et al., 1998; Gold, 1996; Scherer, 1999) and struggle with a transitory state of their personal and professional identity as the torments of their newly acquired role dawns upon them. This level of stress can affect both teachers' quality of service and health. That is the reason why teacher identity and its corresponding tensions continue to be a shared concern of researchers in the field of not only identity studies but also teacher education (e.g. Pillen, Beijard, & den Brok, 2013a, b; Pillen, den Brok, & Beijard, 2013).

Teacher identity has now been under spotlight for a few decades at the intersection of sociolinguistics, teacher training, and teacher cognition. Social identity studies within linguistics first became popular in the last decades of the twentieth century when scholars' attention started to shift away from structuralist views of language and identity towards post-structuralist perspectives of identity, ideology, subjectivity, agency, power, and positioning (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Zembylas, 2003). These shifts were both marked and plateaued by the emergence of groundbreaking publications such as the special issue of TESOL Quarterly on language and identity edited by Norton (1997).

Teacher identity and Language Teacher Identity (LTI) have followed the footsteps of identity studies since their introduction to the field (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In early years of the new century, Varghese et al. (2005) famously called LTI "an emerging subject of interest in research on language teacher education and teacher development" (p. 21) in need of more attention. Albeit, research on LTI has enormously grown ever since to cover a variety of topics including language teacher identity tensions and coping strategies. Teacher identity, both personal and professional, is now viewed as a determinant factor contributing

to teachers' full accomplishment of their roles and responsibilities as it is closely linked to their motivation, job fulfilment, commitment, and sense of self-efficacy (Clarke, 2018; Day et al., 2007).

However, being a language teacher is not getting any easier as the strains of a globalized world with redefined and constantly updating notions of identity, subjectivity, immigration, media, ownership of English, etc. are posing unprecedented challenges on teachers' career. More attention to teachers' roles is due as a result of "the current educational climate of increasing and persistent teacher attrition, heightened accountability, and demand for quality teaching in challenging school context" (Schutz et al., 2018, p. 3). Both quantitative and qualitative intensification of teachers' careers and responsibilities are imposing more and more physical and emotional burdens on teachers (Clarke, 2013, 2018).

Identity tensions started to attract attention in language teacher studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when researchers realized the indispensable challenges and threats leveled at the permeable identity of teachers. This is defined as "a tension between how sometimes we are assigned identities that may or may not be congruent with how we see ourselves or how we wish to be seen, and our efforts to assert perhaps different, more desirable identities" (Toohey, 2017, p. 13). Particularly, when novice teachers adventurously step foot onto the thorny lands of their career, the processes of constructing and reconstructing their new and yet constantly developing identity can change into sites of resistance, self-transformation, and conflicting emotions (Zembylas, 2003). Early career teachers frequently demonstrate and engage in narrative discourses "related to their conflicting understandings of professional enactments of authority and vulnerability" (Alsup, 2018, p. 13). Therefore, it is of little surprise if teachers are found struggling with these different "poles of subjectivity" (Alsup, p. 13) as they are trying to create a balance between what they can be (possible selves), what they are expected to be (ought selves), and what they always wanted to be (ideal selves) in the transition between being a student and becoming a teacher (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2018; Dörnyei, 2009; Papi & Teimouri, 2012).

Given this brief introduction to the importance of LTI and the disproportionate dearth of research in this area, especially in the local context, it seems appropriate to dedicate more attention to language teachers' constant struggle with shifting identities in the Iranian context and how they are coping with these tensions.

Therefore, the present exploratory mixed-methods study formed the following research questions:

1. What coping strategies do Iranian EFL teachers use most frequently in the face of identity tensions?
2. How do gender, age, experience, and training affect EFL teachers' choice of coping strategies in the face of identity tensions?

## 2. Literature Review

In order to discuss identity tensions and coping strategies of EFL teachers, it seems practical to first agree upon a working definition of identity and, subsequently, offer a review of previous studies focusing on Language Teacher Identity, the associated tensions, and the potential coping strategies. However, identity in general and LTI in particular do not seem to easily lend themselves to definitions. One broad, yet workable, definition of identity was offered by Block (2014) as “socially constructed, self-conscious, ongoing narratives that individuals perform, interpret and project in dress, bodily movements, actions, and language” (p. 32). To shed some light on the topic, this rather brief review will start with an effort to accumulate a definition of LTI and continues to discuss identity tensions, teacher emotions, and coping strategies.

### 2.1. Language Teacher Identity (LTI)

Different theoretical perspectives including “poststructuralism, sociocultural and dialogical theories, communities of practice, social identity theory—some more fashionable than others at different paradigmatic moments in time” have been offering a variety of custom-tailored definitions of LTI so far (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 1). For instance, emphasizing the positioning nature of forming identities, Block (2017) defines LTI as “how individuals, who both self-position and are positioned by others as teachers, affiliate to different aspects of teaching in their lives” (p. 33). Barkhuizen (2017) offers probably one of the most comprehensive definitions of LTI by trying to reconcile the diverging interpretations of the term:

Language teacher identities (LTIs) are cognitive, social, emotional, ideological, and historical—they are both inside the teacher and outside in the social, material and technological world. LTIs are being and doing, feeling and imagining, and

storying. They are struggle and harmony: they are contested and resisted, by self and others, and they are also accepted, acknowledged and valued, by self and others. They are core and peripheral, personal and professional, they are dynamic, multiple, and hybrid, and they are foregrounded and backgrounded. And LTIs change, short-term and over time—discursively in social interaction with teacher educators, learners, teachers, administrators, and the wider community, and in material interaction with spaces, places and objects in classrooms, institutions, and online. (p. 4)

Both the definition of identity in general, and LTI in particular, cited here necessitate a discussion of identity tensions in case of language teachers who are constantly positioning themselves in their new roles as they are moving from their current status of identity towards an imagined identity while simultaneously being confronted with acts of being positioned by external parties including the society, administrators, and even their students. The important role of teacher identity combined with its slippery nature has resulted in the “indispensability” and yet “impossibility” of this notion in Clarke’s (2018) terms.

## **2.2. Teachers' Identity Tensions**

As the post-structuralist views of identity assert, identity formation is a rather complex process of constant construction, co-construction, and reconstruction of one’s image of self and its relation to the social world through positioning, agency, and subjectivity (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). This definition of identity as an intricate, fluid, dynamic, and multifaceted phenomenon implies how delicate and fragile it could be at the same time as being very determining. Therefore, it is quite natural that pre-service teachers experience difficult times when going through the transition from a student to a teacher and undergoing a change in the sense of who they are (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Novice teachers might experience confusions regarding their role as well as challenges against their agency by feeling the urge to adopt new ones (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011). These identity tensions can, in turn, provoke several negative emotions including feelings of insecurity, personal and professional inadequacy, powerlessness, vulnerability, anger, frustration, uncertainty, and anxiety (Lindqvist et al., 2017; Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013a; Song, 2016; Zembylas, 2003). As

Chen (2020) has indicated by reviewing 812 articles on teacher emotions published between 1985 and 2019, any model of teacher emotion essentially points at “a dynamic, interrelated relation among different elements with one-way, reciprocal and correlative relations between antecedents, teacher emotions and consequences” (p. 1). Therefore, these negative emotions are seen as threats against a teacher’s feelings, values, beliefs, or perceptions and, consequently, their efficacy as a teacher (Pillen, den Brok, & Beijard, 2013).

Recent empirical studies addressing teachers’ identity tensions have significantly contributed to our understanding of the topic. For instance, Pillen, Beijard, and den Brok (2013a, b) focused on the identity tensions experienced by novice teachers in a series of studies. They concluded that while female teachers displayed more tensions, first-year beginner teachers suffered from a similar amount of tensions as the final-year student teachers, who were getting ready to start their careers. It was also concluded that identity tensions fell in three major categories: teachers’ changing roles, failure to receive the support they anticipated, and contradictory views of learning to teach. In another study, Pillen, den Brok, & Beijard (2013) identified six profiles of teachers in regard with their identity tensions: “teachers struggling with (views of) significant others, teachers with care-related tensions, teachers with responsibility-related tensions, moderately tense teachers, tension-free teachers, and troubled teachers” (p. 96). They also indicated that these profiles are subject to change and proper support and mentoring could help teachers develop coping strategies to reduce or alter tensions.

In a longitudinal study, Hong et al. (2017) interestingly construed the path five early career teachers treaded in terms of their evolving identities and the associated conflicts and negotiations. Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013) also adopted a longitudinal approach to track the changes in two early-career teachers and indicated how the experience could possibly be painful or rather easy based on the teachers’ initial identities. Nichols et al. (2017) concluded that while pleasant emotional experiences corroborated the burgeoning identities of early career teachers, unpleasant experiences caused identity tensions leading to confrontations or adjustments. Similarly, Izadinia (2015) concluded that positive mentoring relationships and fulfilled expectations of student-teachers could lead to better coping experiences during the first year of a teacher’s practice.



### 2.3. Coping Strategies

Similar to any other fight-or-flight situation, teachers form certain defensive mechanisms to deal with the tensions they encounter and the corresponding negative feelings; these are generally referred to as coping strategies. As Pillen, Beijard, and den Brok (2013b) put it, “coping is making an effort to manage a troubled person-environment relationship and implies that teachers appraise their tensions” (p. 246). Different teachers might take on various approaches when it comes to dealing with tensions and not all of them are immediately successful in managing them. Failure to apply proper coping strategies might lead to severe consequences as negative feelings of frustration and inadequacy silently build up within a teacher. Given the gravity of the situation, it is surprising how slender the body of research focusing on teachers' coping strategies is with few exceptions (e.g., Admiraal et al., 2000; Lindqvist et al., 2017; Pillen, Beijard, & den Brok, 2013b), especially when it comes to language teachers' identity tensions. Furthermore, feelings of frustration and challenges to a teacher's identity seem to be highly context-specific as they make sense exclusively within the cultural, social, and psychological surroundings of the individual. For example, while studies such as Benesch (2012) as well as Wolff and De Costa (2017) have highlighted teacher identity tensions arising from cultural politics of race, gender, and sexuality in multilingual and multicultural Western contexts, it can be argued that those are probably not the primary sources of tension in EFL contexts such as Iran where learners, teachers, and administrators usually share the same national identity and local ideologies.

As discussed earlier, the suppressed feelings of frustration and helplessness can easily accumulate in teachers' emotional repertoire if proper coping strategies do not help teachers deal with these tensions from the very early stages of their career. For instance, Zhu et al. (2020) have indicated how novice teachers demotivated by unforeseen identity and emotional challenges may be forced to leave their jobs and contribute to the surprising rates of beginning teacher attrition.

Empirical studies have also emphasized the role of coping strategies in teachers' ability to overcome the negative emotions of distress experienced during their transitory stages of identity. Pillen, Beijard, and den Brok (2013b) found out that while these tensions provoked “feelings of helplessness, anger or an awareness of shortcomings” (p. 240), many teachers chose to share their problems with more

experienced colleagues and supervisors or to personally search for solutions. Henry (2016) adopted a complex dynamic system approach to teachers' developmental identities and showed how this mentoring stance can help teachers develop efficient coping strategies. Studying the impact of identity tensions early in teachers' career, van der Wal et al. (2019) concluded that teachers might display a range of behavioral responses including reflections, help seeking, and directive actions depending on the level of affective appraisal received by the teachers.

Given the significance of coping strategies in dealing with identity tensions, this study set out to investigate the strategies Iranian EFL teachers employ in case of identity tensions and the role of some demographic information, including gender, age, type of training, and experience in their choices. Understanding these links is hoped to help beginning teachers and teacher trainers better prepare for the situation and direct their energies where they are needed most.

### 3. Methodology

The present study utilized an exploratory mixed-methods design to first, elicit the coping strategies resorted to by Iranian EFL teachers in case of identity tensions and, second, to investigate the probable demographic variables affecting their choices of these strategies. This section elaborates on the methodological steps taken to fulfil the purpose of the study.

#### 3.1. Participants

For the qualitative phase of the study, 16 Iranian EFL teachers, including three male and 13 female instructors from various educational backgrounds, and different levels of proficiency, employed at different private language institutes and non-profit schools in Tehran, were recruited based on purposive sampling. These teachers, with an average age of 26, enjoyed noticeable variety in experience, from two months to 27 years, and were selected among those who were willing to partake in interview sessions and appeared to fit the purpose of the study as rather rich informants. The criterion for this purposive sampling was to target teachers who were either at the early stages of their career or the experienced ones who had reported struggling with their roles as teachers throughout their career.

For the quantitative phase of the study, apart from 36 teachers who contributed



to the piloting of the questionnaire, 150 individuals, including 24 male (16%) and 126 female (84%) EFL teachers with ages ranging between 19 and 50 and average age of 28 were targeted based on convenience sampling. The participants were categorized into four experience groups including *more than five years* (N = 58), *three to five years* (N = 32), *one to three years* (N = 39), and *below one year* (N = 21) based on self-reports. These participants also came from a variety of educational backgrounds including *extensive training* through university programs and long-term training (N = 71), *intensive training* with short-term teacher training courses (N = 55), periodical *on-job training* only (N = 7), and *no training* with irrelevant university majors and no specific training courses passed (N = 17).

### 3.2. Instruments

A semi-structured interview with seven questions, inspired by reviewing the previous literature including Pillen, Beijard, and den Brok (2013a, b) as well as Volkmann and Anderson (1998), was designed and implemented for the qualitative phase of the study (see Appendix A). While the early questions of the interview focused on the concept of identity tensions, they gradually moved towards the coping strategies used by teachers under such circumstances. In order to establish the content validity of the interview, three university instructors familiar with the topic were asked to comment on the questions and their feedback was used to revise the items. Each interview session lasted for approximately 15 to 20 minutes and was audio-recorded with the prior consent of the interviewees.

For the quantitative phase of the study, the list of 13 coping strategies extracted through the qualitative phase were utilized to design a questionnaire with six-point Likert scales ranging from *never* to *always* to elicit the frequency with which EFL teachers employed each strategy (See Appendix B). The final list of these strategies, achieved through hybrid thematic analysis, was an aggregate of theories available in the literature (e.g., Admiraal et al., 2000; Lindqvist et al., 2017; Pillen, Beijard, & den Brok, 2013a, b), as well as the themes emerging in participants' interviews. As will be fully reported in the results section, the 13 micro-strategies were further categorized into *Active* and *Passive* coping strategies. Therefore, one statement was written to represent each micro-strategy resulting in a total of 13 items including six for Active strategies (items 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9) and seven for Passive ones (items 1,

2, 4, 10, 11, 12, 13). The responses were scored based on the selected frequency of *never* (0), *rarely* (1), *sometimes* (2), *often* (3), *usually* (4), and *always* (5).

### 3.3. Procedure

The initial qualitative phase of the study set out to explore the most common coping strategies utilized by Iranian EFL teachers to deal with the identity tensions they faced. In order to do so, they were encouraged to retrospect on identity tensions they had encountered throughout their career, especially in their early days, through some warm-up questions in the semi-structured interview. The interviews began by asking the participants to brainstorm on general tensions in their career and the interviewer gradually channeled their attention towards identity tensions in particular. Whenever necessary, they were provided by supplementary hints and descriptions from a list of identity tensions adapted from Basiri (2020) as well as Pillen, Beijard, and den Brok (2013a, b). Once the definition of identity tensions was mutually established, the questions moved on to elicit the strategies and tactics they most often employed to maneuver out of the predicament. At this stage, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews were used to the full advantage of the research as it allowed in-depth exploration of coping options and alternatives possibly used in the face of identity tensions. The participants were occasionally reminded of the most frequently reported identity tensions in all five categories of *Self-image*, *Conflicting Roles*, *Conflicting Realities*, *Imposed Frustrations*, and *Professional Conflicts* (Basiri, 2020) in order to elicit their choices in case of more tangible situations. The respondents were also asked to speculate upon the factors that probably determined their choices and the circumstances under which their coping strategies were likely to be more efficient. All interview sessions were audio-recorded with prior consent from participants and later transcribed for further analysis.

The extracted themes from the previous stage, summing up to 13 strategies in total, were then utilized to develop a questionnaire featuring a six-level Likert scale from Never (0) to Always (5) to be used in the quantitative phase of the study. To ensure the reliability of the scale and run item analysis, the questionnaire was first piloted with 36 EFL teachers similar to the target sample of the study. The questionnaire was found to be quite reliable with an internal consistency of Cronbach alpha equal to .71. It was also given to three TEFL professors with

relevant experience for the purpose of establishing its content validity by asking them to mark their judgments of its clarity, accuracy, completeness, relevance, compressive strength, and length of items across a researcher-made checklist and offer their detailed insights in written form. Building on the analyses and feedback from this stage, the researchers made minor revisions to the wording of the items to fortify their clarity and enhance the reliability and validity of the scale. The items were randomly distributed along the questionnaire.

In the quantitative stage of the study, the identity tensions coping strategies questionnaire resulting from the previous stage was uploaded to Google Forms and the link was sent out to accessible Iranian EFL teachers mostly through online forums and social networks. Finally, 150 questionnaires were returned to the researchers, which were used for the quantitative analysis of the study. The questionnaires had also collected the demographic information of the participants. Data analyses and their findings will be reported in the next section.

#### **4. Results**

As explained earlier, the initial qualitative stage sought out the coping strategies most commonly employed by English teachers when they encounter identity tensions. To achieve that goal, the transcribed data from 16 semi-structured interviews were subjected to hybrid thematic analysis, as a combination of inductive and deductive coding. This approach was adopted in order to simultaneously benefit from the findings of previous literature as well as the local informants' insights and experiences. Therefore, a list of coping strategies inspired by Pillen, Beijard, and den Brok (2013a, b), Lindqvist et al. (2017), and Admiraal et al. (2000) formed the foundation of the coding while it was adapted to account for the peculiarities of the research context. The researchers served as the two coders of the qualitative data. The first coder went through transcriptions and marked the emerging patterns and themes in the data. To ensure inter-coder consistency, 20% of the data was independently checked by the second coder and a briefing session was held between the two coders at this stage in order to negotiate their themes and reach a consensus. The thematic analysis ultimately resulted in 13 detailed themes representing 13 coping strategies utilized by Iranian EFL teachers in case of identity tensions. The coders also decided that the themes conveniently fitted into two broader categories

for enhanced presentation and discussion of the data. All extracted themes are summarized in Table 1 below in order of frequency in their respective categories.

**Table 1**  
*Coping Strategies Reported by Iranian EFL Teachers*

Type	No.	Coping Strategy	Freq.	Aggregate freq.
Active Strategies	CS1	Improving personal competencies	6	20
	CS2	Seeking professional support	4	
	CS3	Organizing and planning more efficiently	3	
	CS4	Experimenting through trial and error	3	
	CS5	Getting to know the environment	2	
	CS6	Surfing the internet for solutions	2	
Passive Strategies	CS7	Writing/posting about their emotions/problems	3	15
	CS8	Waiting for time to intervene	3	
	CS9	Seeking a comforting companion	3	
	CS10	Using relaxation techniques	2	
	CS11	Denying the problem	2	
	CS12	Postponing the problem	1	
	CS13	Reducing the workload	1	
Total			35	

As evident in table 1, Iranian EFL teachers employed a variety of strategies when experiencing identity tensions. These can be generally seen as falling into two broad categories of *Active* and *Passive* strategies. Active category comprised those strategies in which the teachers actively sought out solutions by trying to bring about positive changes and improvements in either themselves or their social-occupational environment. Passive strategies, on the other hand, included the ones in which the teacher either tried to ignore the problem, procrastinate, or alleviate its negative consequences by burdening off their shoulders, for example through self-expression and seeking emotional support.

The most frequently employed strategies, as evident in table 1, proved to be *Improving personal competencies* (N = 6) and *Seeking professional support* (N = 4), both among active strategies. Furthermore, the descriptives indicated that Iranian EFL teachers resorted to *Postponing the problem* and *Reducing the work load*, both among passive strategies, less often when compared to other themes with each one emerging only once in the data. However, the researchers decided to keep these themes despite their low frequency, as they were likely to appear in the quantitative data more often. Similarly, it was decided to preserve all the emerging themes even when they were closely related expecting richer data with more nuanced

distinctions in the quantitative phase of the study. All in all, the qualitative analysis showed that active strategies with an aggregate frequency of 20 were more popular with Iranian teachers than their passive counterparts with a total frequency of 15. Elaborate discussion of these findings will be presented in the next section.

In the quantitative phase of the study, the results from the questionnaire, developed based on the 13 extracted themes, validated through expert check, piloted with a similar sample, and finally administered to 150 Iranian EFL teachers, were collected in order to statistically study the distribution of the themes and the impact of demographic factors. First, in order to compare the use of active versus passive coping strategies by EFL teachers, a repeated-measures t-test was run on the collected data after checking the assumptions of parametric tests in the data. The normality of the data was confirmed since all kurtosis and skewness values fell between -1.96 and +1.96. The results of the t-test are presented in table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*Paired Samples Test Between Active and Passive Strategies*

		Paired Differences			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper		
Pair 1	Active Str Passive Str	-21.94	18.46	1.50	18.96	24.92	149	.000

The paired-samples t-test showed a significant difference between the use of active ( $M = 64.42$ ,  $SD = 15.73$ ) and passive strategies ( $M = 42.47$ ,  $SD = 15.07$ ),  $t(149) = 14.55$  with a rather large effect size ( $\eta^2 = .58$ ) based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines. Therefore, it was indicated that Iranian EFL teachers did actually use active coping strategies significantly more than the passive options.

Next, several between-group analyses were run to compare different groups of the participants in their use of active and passive strategies. The researchers decided to run the analyses separately on active and passive strategies arguing that the heterogeneous nature of these two types of strategies and teachers' significantly differential application of them would make any canonical analyses theoretically

and statistically futile. Table 3 below presents the descriptive statistics of strategy use by male and female participants, while table 4 summarizes the results of two independent samples t-tests in this regard. For ease of reference in the t-test table only relevant data based on Levene's test for equality of variances is displayed (in both cases equal variances were assumed).

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Statistics of Male and Female Teachers' Use of Active and Passive Strategies*

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Active Str	female	126	65.97	15.56	1.38
	male	24	56.25	14.28	2.91
Passive Str	female	126	42.99	15.15	1.34
	male	24	39.76	14.63	2.98

**Table 4**

*Independent samples t-test between strategy use of male and female EFL teachers*

	t	df	Sig. tailed)	(2-Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
Active Str	2.84	148	.005	9.72	3.42	2.96 16.49
Passive Str	.963	148	.337	3.23	3.35	-3.40 9.86

As evident in table 4 above, there was a significant difference in terms of using active strategies between male ( $M = 56.25$ ,  $SD = 14.28$ ) and female ( $M = 65.97$ ,  $SD = 15.56$ ) EFL teachers indicating that female teachers used active strategies significantly more than men [ $t(148) = 2.84$ ,  $p < .05$ ] with a rather moderate effect size ( $\eta^2 = .05$ ). However, not a similar difference was located between their use of passive strategies. Therefore, while female participants reported a significantly higher use of active coping strategies, passive strategies were similarly used, or to be more accurate based on the findings from the previous quantitative question, similarly avoided by both men and women.

In order to investigate the differences caused by age, another pair of t-tests were run to compare younger and older EFL teachers' use of active and passive strategies. For this purpose, it was decided to convert the continuous variable age into a categorical one in order to avoid inconsistency in statistical analysis and maintain congruency with the other analyses run for the present study. To this end,



the participants were divided into two age categories based on the sample mean ( $M = 28.66$ ); hence, participants above the age of 28 ( $N = 68$ ) fell into the older group and those equal or below 28 years in age ( $N = 82$ ) fell in the younger group. The descriptive data as well as the results of independent samples t-tests are presented in tables 5 and 6 below while unequal variances were assumed for active strategies and equal variances for passive strategies based on Levene's test for equality of variances.

**Table 5**

*Descriptive Statistics of Strategy Use by Teachers below and above Average Age*

	age cat	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Active Str	Below Ave	82	64.43	17.31	1.91
	Above Ave	68	64.41	13.71	1.66
Passive Str	Below Ave	82	45.22	16.24	1.79
	Above Ave	68	39.15	12.86	1.55

**Table 6**

*Independent Samples t-test Between Younger and Older Teachers' Use of Strategies*

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	(2-Mean Difference)	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Active Str	.008	147.71	.994	.019	2.53	-4.98	5.02
Passive Str	2.49	148	.014	6.06	2.42	1.26	10.86

As indicated in table 6 above, there was a significant difference in terms of using passive strategies between EFL teachers below average age ( $M = 45.22$ ,  $SD = 16.24$ ) and those above average age ( $M = 39.15$ ,  $SD = 12.86$ ),  $t(148) = 2.49$ ,  $p < .05$ , with a small to moderate effect size ( $\eta^2 = .04$ ) based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines. However, no such difference was located in case of active strategies; therefore, older teachers tended to use less passive strategies than younger ones while they demonstrated no significant difference in using active coping strategies.

In order to compare the use of active and passive strategies by teachers from different experience levels and educational backgrounds, four one-way between-groups ANOVA tests were run after checking the required assumptions. Categorizations of experience and educational background along with their

descriptives per active and passive strategies are summarized in table 7 below.

**Table 7**

*Descriptive Analysis of Strategy Use by Teachers from Different Experience and Educational Background Groups*

	No.	Category	Passive Strategies		Active Strategies		N
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Experience	1	< 1 years	46.72	13.88	55.88	14.21	17
	2	1-3 years	45.15	14.62	63.00	15.71	41
	3	3-5 years	41.90	17.59	63.03	16.69	33
	4	> 5 years	39.70	13.91	68.64	14.63	59
		Total	42.47	15.07	64.42	15.73	150
Educational background	1	extensive training	43.21	14.23	65.68	15.25	71
	2	intensive training	40.93	15.78	65.39	14.63	55
	3	on-job training	41.22	20.92	57.14	18.79	7
	4	no training	44.87	14.34	59.01	19.17	17
		Total	42.47	15.07	64.42	15.73	150

The results from the four ANOVA tests revealed that only levels of experience created a significant difference in case of EFL teachers' use of active strategies [ $F(3, 146) = 3.44, p = .018$ ] with a medium effect size ( $\eta^2 = .06$ ). The results of a post-hoc Tukey test located this difference between novice teachers with less than one year of experience ( $M = 55.88$ ) and experienced teachers with more than 5 years of experience ( $M = 68.64$ ). In case of teachers with different experience levels using passive strategies [ $F(3, 146) = 1.57, p = .197$ ], as well as teachers from different educational backgrounds using active strategies [ $F(3, 146) = 1.40, p = .245$ ], and using passive strategies [ $F(3, 146) = .40, p = .750$ ], no significant difference was indicated. These findings are further elaborated on and discussed in the next section.

## 5. Discussion

The qualitative phase of the study revealed that Iranian EFL teachers appealed to two major types of coping strategies when facing identity tensions: *active* strategies and *passive* strategies. This finding is in line with those from Admiraal et al. (2000) who identified *problem-focused* coping behavior versus *emotion-focused* strategies in case of teachers' general tensions. As the quantitative results of this study corroborated the qualitative findings, it was indicated that teachers preferred active

strategies to the passive ones. This finding is supported by Pillen, Beijard, and den Brok's (2013b) results as they found problem-focused strategies to be more popular than emotion-focused ones in case of teachers' identity tensions.

As reported by the teachers in the qualitative data, "improving personal competencies" (CS1) was the most frequently used strategy followed by "seeking professional support" (CS2), both among active strategies. Regarding the former, the teachers frequently stated that they found themselves responsible for both their feelings and their success and many of them tried to compensate for their lack of experience or confidence by improving their personal qualities. They also believed that this helped them evade or survive the criticism and negative judgments of their supervisors, peers, students, and students' families. For instance, one of the respondents stated that:

Teacher No. 4: *I always try to improve myself and stay up to date, both in general English and teaching methods. By doing so, there's not much room left for criticism. As long as the learners are satisfied, there is no reason for supervisors and managers to complain. Therefore, I feel more confident.*

As evident in this example, the teachers felt more secure when they were confident regarding their English proficiency and professional knowledge; therefore, a noticeable portion of the teachers consciously and actively tried to maintain both as a protective shield against identity tensions. The second popular active strategy was "seeking professional support", through which the teachers tried to benefit from the advice of other professionals. Employing this strategy, they tried to negotiate the tensions they felt with a supervisor, mentor, trainer, administrator, or even a more experienced colleague in the hope of being inspired by solutions. It must be noted that this active strategy is different from the passive CS9 (seeking a comforting companion), in which the teachers were not actually hoping for professional advice, but rather an intimate shoulder to cry on among friends and family members. This finding supports those from Pillen, den Brok, and Beijard (2013), Nichols et al. (2017), and Izadinia (2015), all of which have emphasized the role of support offered by mentors and supervisors in reducing tensions. In order to explicate this strategy better, evidence from teachers' interviews is offered below.

Teacher No. 9: *Frequently checking with my supervisors and colleagues and consulting with experienced teachers is so helpful to me; I try to talk to them instead*

*of trying to solve it by myself as my mind is already busy with many other things.*

On the other hand, “postponing the problem” (CS12) and “reducing the workload” (CS13), both passive strategies, were the least popular ones used with only single cases reported for each in the qualitative phase. This indicates that many teachers chose to deal with their tensions rather than ignoring them or withdrawing from their responsibilities. Three teachers also reported that they felt better when they shared their daily tensions or frustrations online via social networks (mostly twitter) or wrote about their problems more personally in a diary (CS7). It is reminded that this strategy is different from CS6 (surfing the internet for solutions) in which teachers actively looked for online tips rather than merely complaining about their challenges.

The quantitate results indicated that female teachers resorted to active strategies more often than their male colleagues did while they similarly shunned passive ones. This finding could probably be attributed to the unbalanced distribution of power in a rather patriarchic society where women usually need significantly more diligence, perseverance, and effort to maintain the same degree of confidence, success, and professional acceptance than their male counterparts or feel more pressured by a more complex network of identity tensions in professional settings. These findings tend to supplement those from Pillen, Beijard, and den Brok (2013b) who concluded that female teachers were more susceptible to identity tensions when compared to their male peers.

The quantitative findings also showed that while aging teachers start to increasingly relinquish their use of passive strategies, the younger ones are on a par with them in abundantly benefitting from active coping strategies. In other words, although older teachers do not significantly overtake their younger colleagues in use of active strategies, they probably cut down on their use of passive ones. This finding is also backed up by the results from comparing teachers with different levels of experience as age and experience could be arguably related, though not synonymous. Teachers with more than five years of experience displayed a significantly higher rate of employing active strategies than novice teachers in their first year of the career. Therefore, it can be inferred from these two findings that with increase in teachers’ age and experience they gradually abjure passive coping strategies and develop more active ones to fight their identity tensions.

Finally, it was revealed that different types of training did not indeed affect

teachers' choice of active and passive strategies. In other words, teachers with long-term extensive training and even short-term intensive coaching did not significantly differ with their colleagues who had had on-job-training only or simply no training. This finding points towards the hypothetical failure of most training programs in forecasting and addressing identity tensions and equipping student-teachers with efficient tools to cope with them. There seems to be a negligence of the issue in training courses, regardless of their type and duration, and decisions appear to have been left to teachers' intuition and experience. This inference is supported by the qualitative data of the study in which none of the participants could identify a single occasion in which identity tensions and ways to cope with them were brought up in their training. These findings also seem to supplement Pillen, Beijard, and den Brok (2013b) in which age, experience, and teacher education did not show any significant effect on teachers' experience of tensions. The present study showed that although teachers from these different groups experienced similar amounts of tensions (as concluded by Pillen, Beijard, & den Brok, 2013b), an increase in age and experience can help teachers develop more efficient active strategies.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study focused on the coping strategies frequently employed by EFL teachers when dealing with identity tensions. These tensions are defined as incongruences in the balance between the personal and professional aspects of developing one's identity as a teacher embodied in subjectivities and ideologies of the individuals divergent from what is imposed or expected by the professional context (Beijard et al., 2004; Pillen, Beijard, & den Brok, 2013b; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). Coping strategies refer to any tricks or treats teachers might pull to save themselves all feelings of despair, frustration, anger, displacement, and being lost induced by identity tensions. The findings from the initial qualitative and the follow-up quantitative phases of the study showed that active coping strategies – efforts to boost personal qualities or actively search for solutions – are more popular among Iranian EFL teachers than passive ones – ignoring the problem and trying to soothe the side effects. Active strategies are also more popular with experienced teachers and it seems that they do not owe this to the type of training they have received but, instead, to their tedious years of trial and error. It is speculated that EFL teachers would forsake appeal to passive strategies as they age and become

more experienced and, accordingly, develop more active strategies to better deal with tensions of the kind.

A number of theoretical and pedagogical implications are derived from these findings. First, researchers in the realm of teacher identity can benefit from the proposed taxonomy of coping strategies and the resulting questionnaire in propelling research in this area, especially in EFL contexts similar to Iran. Second, language teachers, particularly less experienced ones, can expose themselves to a variety of choices made by their peers and get inspired by experienced teachers' more prevailing use of active strategies as novice teachers are the most prone to complications arising from identity tensions. It must be reminded that given the reportedly high rates of teacher burnout and dropout (e.g. see Henry, 2016; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013), those who abide in the profession are automatic candidates of higher resiliency with expectably better survival skills. Thus, it is probably not much of an overindulgence if novice teachers are advised to follow the lead of experienced teachers in prioritizing active coping strategies. Also, supervisors and mentors are advised to take identity tensions and the resulting emotions seriously by providing both professional and personal support to their younger colleagues as they pass through the early stages of identity development. Finally, and probably most importantly, teacher trainers might find these results of interest as they offer a picture of the patterns by which EFL teachers deploy coping strategies and where training programs must stand in this regard. This makes even better sense when juxtaposed with the fact that many interviewed teachers could not recall even a single case where identity tensions, including their nature, causes, types, and possible coping strategies, were brought up in training programs. Therefore, teacher trainers are invited to better familiarize themselves with these tensions, their consequences, and solutions and consider integrating them into their curriculum. Merely discussing these tensions backed up by evidence from earlier student-teachers' experiences can make a marked difference in preparing novice teachers for what they can anticipate in their early years of their career.

Similar to any other study, the present research was affected by a number of limitations, which can be dealt with in future studies. First, the number of male and female teachers as well as the teachers in different training groups were not balanced in the current study. Although it might be argued that these proportions are actually representing their real portions in Iranian EFL teachers' population, it is recommended to replicate the study with cohorts more balanced in number. Second,



it might have been helpful if several items instead of one represented each coping strategy in the quantitative questionnaire; the present questionnaire can be used as a basis for future improvements.

Nonetheless, a number of suggestions could be made to guide interested researchers in continuing this line of research. First, future researchers can delve into the nature of identity tensions experienced by Iranian EFL teachers and try to establish a connection between these tensions and the coping strategies teachers tend to employ for a better understanding of coping mechanisms. Another suggestion entails focusing on the emotions accompanying identity tensions and the ways in which they may contribute to teacher burnout. It is also worth investigating to conduct interviews with dropout teachers who have switched to other lines of career and track the traces of identity tensions in their decisions to relinquish their jobs. Conducting similar studies in different contexts and comparing the results from a cross-cultural perspective can also be insightful.

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**Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions**

1. Do you think teaching English is a stressful job?
2. Have you ever felt confused or insecure about your role, responsibilities, authority, or value as a teacher?
3. If we define identity tension as an array of conflicts and internal struggle affecting your self-image with regard to unpleasant situations, conflicts or mismatches between your desired *self* and your perception of your *self* in reality, or any other confusions regarding your identity as a language teacher, do you remember any instances when you faced an identity tension? What was it?
4. What have you done/do you do in case you experience any of these identity tensions?
5. What factors do you think affect your choice of coping strategies in face of identity tensions?
6. How do you think other parties including administrators, supervisors, trainers, and colleagues can help you or any language teacher reduce these tensions or cope with them?
7. Tell me about the formal or informal occasions during your training in which a discussion of identity tensions was brought up. What intrigued the discussion, who talked about it, and what did you learn from it?



**Appendix B: Identity Tensions Coping Strategies Questionnaire**

Having the above definition and examples of identity tensions in mind, how often do you use the following strategies when you face those tensions?

No.	Strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Usually	Always
1	I try to relax by for example using techniques such as meditation, yoga, and exercises or engaging in my favorite hobbies.						
2	I try to write about my feelings and worries in a diary or I post them on my blog and social media such as Twitter and Instagram.						
3	I try to get to know my students and colleagues better.						
4	I know things will get better in a while so I just wait for time to pass.						
5	I try to improve my knowledge and personal qualities by keeping updated and informed.						
6	I try to be better-organized as a teacher with more practical plans and schedules.						
7	I employ different strategies to overcome tensions and try to find a solution by trial and error.						
8	I ask my supervisor or colleagues for help and seek their comments on the issue.						
9	I look for solutions on the internet or post my questions on a forum for professionals to offer help.						
10	I moderate my work hours and try to take on fewer classes so that I can concentrate on my problems.						
11	I try to share my feelings with my family and friends out of the work circle in order to feel better.						
12	I try to avoid the issue; I say I can always deal with this later.						
13	I try not to think about the problem and keep my mind busy with other things.						

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