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From shadow schools to public schools: Insights from substitute EFL teachers' identity conflicts

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ABSTRACT

Research on EFL teacher identity concentrates on identity conflicts from tensions between personal identity pressure and contextual pressures. Limited research considers identity conflicts of marginalized substitute EFL teachers with shadow school teaching experience during their career transition. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research explores identity conflicts of primary school substitute EFL teachers from shadow schools to public schools in China. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity is used as the theoretical framework. Four identity conflicts were identified when the participants talked about their administrative working experience, career goals, pedagogical decisions and actions as well as teacher-student relationships. These conflicts influenced the participants' identity construction through the "conflict-emotion-agency-identity (transformation or deconstruction)" process, influenced by the participants' career adaptability, motivation and continuous learning. Practical implications are provided for school administrations in scientific management and the professional development of substitute teachers.

1. Introduction

The identity conflict is a crucial theme in the study of language teacher identity, given its importance to teachers and teaching. English as a foreign language (EFL) or a second language (ESL) teaching is regarded as identity work, where language learning and teaching essentially entail relationships with oneself and others (Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). Teacher identity, termed as the meaning teachers make of themselves and the images they present to others (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), affects teachers' professional development (Lee & Jang, 2023) and teaching effectiveness (Xing, 2022). The evolving research trend of EFL/ESL teacher identity encompasses a shift from an initial focus on Native Speaker Fallacy to a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the dynamic construction of identity in various sociocultural contexts, encompassing the discursive, agentive, contested and affective construction of identity (Maddamsetti, 2022; Park et al., 2024; Zang et al., 2024; Zhang & Jiang, 2023). This trend highlights the "shifting and in conflict" nature of identity (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 35), providing a perspective to better understand the construction process of identity. Specifically, EFL/ESL teachers

inevitably encounter identity conflicts arising from the tension between personal identity pressures and contextual demands (Sherman & Teemant, 2023). Lack of attention to these conflicts leads to teachers' negative emotions (Yang et al., 2021) and even identity deconstruction (Beijaard et al., 2023). Hence, continued research on EFL/ESL teacher identity conflicts is essential for improving both teacher identity development and teaching quality.

EFL/ESL teacher identity conflicts have garnered scholarly attention. Evidence has shown that the conflicts are between EFL/ESL teachers' (1) imagined identity and practiced identity (e.g., Lee & Jang, 2023; Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2024); (2) demographic identity and professional identity (e.g., Eslamdoost et al., 2020; Hayik, 2023); (3) present identity and imposed identity (e.g., Goktepe & Kunt, 2021; Zhang & Jiang, 2023); (4) emotional identity and cognitive identity (e.g., Maddamsetti, 2022; Morris, 2022). These four focuses indicate that identity conflicts can be better understood by analyzing external and internal factors (Ahmad & Abd Samad, 2018). External factors are explored through education reform (e.g., Jiang, 2022; Zhang & Jiang, 2023), stages from learning to teaching (e.g., Kennetz et al., 2020; Wang, Elahi Shirvan, & Taherian, 2021) and the teaching contexts of different countries (Xu &

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Ou, 2022). Internal factors include emotions (e.g., Yang et al., 2021; Zhang & Jiang, 2023), beliefs and values (e.g., Hayik, 2023; Yang et al., 2021). These contributing factors mean that external teaching context changes may cause identity conflicts, which will be eased or aggravated by teachers' internal factors. Studying identity conflicts of EFL teachers who are experiencing teaching context changes, including the marginalized substitute teachers from shadow schools to formal schools, may add new insights to this field.

To date, language teacher identity conflicts have been investigated from different perspectives, but greater attention should be given to this issue concerning marginalized teachers. Scholars have explored this issue from social-cognitive perspectives on teachers' critical reflection and agency within socio-political contexts (Maddamsetti, 2022) as well as post-structural perspectives that highlight the power dynamics of identities (Goktepe & Kunt, 2021; Yoshihara, 2018). Despite these studies examining identity conflicts amongst formal teachers, substitute teachers have received limited attention in the literature due to their precarious nature, including lack of employment stability as well as unpredictable work and earnings (Reupert et al., 2023). As an integral part of the teaching workforce, unresolved identity issues among substitute teachers may exacerbate turnover and marginalization (Bray & Hajar, 2023; Uchida et al., 2022). Therefore, our study focused on identity conflicts of substitute teachers between different professional role identities from shadow schools to public schools, emphasizing the continuous and dynamic emerging nature of identity within its environment. Many countries also face similar issues and have conducted studies on substitute teachers' challenging experiences (Amacher, 2021; Yip et al., 2024). However, it is particularly pronounced in Chinese public schools, where the proportion of substitute EFL teachers is very high (Li, 2022). This issue is further exacerbated by teacher establishment culture in China, which prioritizes formally employed teachers and provides limited institutional support for substitutes. If such identity conflicts remain unaddressed, they may not only hinder teachers' professional growth and commitment but also undermine the overall effectiveness of school teaching practices.

Kaplan and Garner's (2017) Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI) from a complex dynamic systems perspective is a potential framework for understanding teachers' identity conflicts through analyzing the harmony-disharmony, alignment-misalignment and integration-lack of integration structure of identity. This framework is appropriate for understanding Chinese substitute teachers' identity conflicts, as it emphasizes the interconnected components and the influence of social and cultural contexts, including the exam-oriented culture (Jiang et al., 2021) and traditional gender norms (Lee et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What identity conflicts do substitute EFL teachers encounter?
2. How do these conflicts affect the identity construction of substitute EFL teachers?

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher identity

The concept of identity has transitioned from a focus on roles and statuses of self to self-sense-making about others and contexts (Maclure, 1993). This evolving lens includes the interconnectedness of identity with cognition and emotion (Antonek et al., 1997), investment in the community of practice (Wenger, 1999) and possibilities for the future (Norton, 2000). Another lens of identity acknowledges "multiple subject positions, or identity options" (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 35), emphasizing self-construction through negotiation with self, contexts and people in different social activities (Miller, 2009). In essence, teacher identity is a continually developing process through teachers' self-understanding and engagement in sociocultural practices. Scholars

have found that language teachers' self-understanding and identity socialization can be reflected through their metaphoric expressions. For example, early career EFL teachers used metaphors to describe their shifting roles, such as moving from a "doctor" controlling the learning environment to a "motivator" focusing on students' learning. This shift reflected their transition from a control-oriented approach to one that prioritizes students' learning needs as they gained teaching experience (Farrell, 2023). Similarly, EFL student teachers' self-generated metaphors before and after student teaching illustrated changes in their pedagogical orientation and transformative roles (Zhu et al., 2022). In contrast to pre-service or novice teachers, whose metaphors focus on developing pedagogical skills, experienced teachers' metaphors highlight attention to students' age-related features and overall development, as seen in a Malaysian ESL teacher's roles as a "mother" and "facilitator" for young learners (Ahmad & Abd Samad, 2018). These metaphors provide teachers with a framework to reflect on how they interpret and assess teaching-related experiences and events (Aghaei et al., 2020).

2.2. Identities of shadow education tutors and substitute teachers

Shadow education is private supplementary tutoring to strengthen students' formal school education (Yang et al., 2023), controlled by neoliberalism and the free market (Yang & Fan, 2021). Nowadays, shadow education is prevalent globally and has been increasingly recognized as an indispensable part of the education system (Bray, 2009; Bray & Hajar, 2023). Although there has been little discussion on the identity of shadow school tutors (Xiong et al., 2022), who are difficult to monitor due to their informal status and high turnover (Bray & Hajar, 2023), some studies have explored this topic. For example, in Wang et al.'s (2021a) study, an EFL shadow school tutor named Jane took on four negative identities: (1) an attendant with anxieties about students' departure; (2) a firefighter to adapt to the irregular hours and fluid working schedule; (3) a coolie to fulfill non-teaching related commitments; and (4) a tramp due to the lack of job security. Similarly, in Xiong et al.'s study (2022, p. 78), four EFL shadow school tutors experienced identity conflicts between their authority in the teaching roles and a service-provider in the role of "salespeople" to boost sales and attract students. They also constructed the identity as "exam experts" because of the screening function of education and "underdogs" due to their inferior status to public school teachers. These studies highlight the complementary role of shadow education in formal education, emphasizing shadow school tutors' impact on students' academic performance and service provision due to market competition and profit motives.

Substitute teachers, or casual relief teachers (CRTs), work as independent contractors, offering services to schools on a temporary, as needed basis in the formal school (Charteris et al., 2017). Due to the precarious nature of their employment, substitute teachers faced various challenges when constructing their identities. For example, a group of primary school CRTs described their roles as nurturers to take care of students and as animal keepers to manage the classroom. While they were constructing their identities, they felt unsupported, anxious and disposable, struggling to gain support from school communities, make progress and secure job stability (Uchida et al., 2021). Similarly, a lack of job security and a sense of belonging compromised CRTs' professional identity when they migrated from Asia to Australia (Yip et al., 2024). This study emphasized the influence of the mismatch between skills and knowledge of CRTs and the school's expectations, as well as the effects of their lower social position, the transformation of beliefs and values, and agency on their professional identity. These challenges highlight the importance of support systems for substitute teachers in shaping their identities in new contexts, including career adaptability (Wang, Guo, et al., 2021) and fair performance evaluation systems (Donaghue, 2020). However, due to substitute teachers' alienated and unsupported positions (Charteris et al., 2017), research on their identity construction, particularly regarding EFL/ESL substitute teachers, remains limited.

2.3. Identity conflicts of EFL/ESL teachers

Identity conflict is a lens to better understand language teacher identity by analyzing factors and agency. Identity conflicts are the result of opposing forces (Eslamdoost et al., 2020), resulting from intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual factors (Maddamsetti, 2022). The contradictory factors may cause tensions and promote teachers' agency to (re)construct identities. The agency is defined as intentional actions within the social cognitive framework (Bandura, 2001), affected by their competencies (Bowen et al., 2021), learning awareness (Huang & Yip, 2021) and motivations (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). Agency in this study refers to teachers' intention and responsiveness to purposeful actions. To be specific, teachers are not passive instruments subjected to geopolitical forces. Instead, they exercise agency to address the challenges in identity conflicts (Lu & Zhang, 2023) and promote their professional development (Teng, 2019). Analyzing the contradictory factors and varying levels of teachers' agency helps scholars understand the dynamic process of identity construction through the lens of identity conflicts.

2.3.1. Conflicts between imagined or desired identity and practiced identity

EFL/ESL teachers may experience identity conflicts when their imagined and practiced identities do not align. Imagined identity means the identity one creates in imagination (Norton, 2013). In contrast, practiced identity refers to one's identity in actual participation and interactions within one's community of practice (Wenger, 1999). For example, pre-service native EFL teachers teaching abroad in Korea confronted identity conflicts between their imagined identities (English teachers) and practiced identities (assistant teachers). This conflict hindered them from building a mutual teacher-student relationship and professional identity. They exercised agency to address the conflicts, including becoming members of the community by utilizing social skills and networks (Lee & Jang, 2023). Similarly, Vietnamese preservice teachers encountered identity tensions caused by the adjustment of teaching methods from previous learning periods to the current teaching period (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023). Except for the preservice teachers, novice EFL teachers in Macau experienced a dynamic process of identity shift from imagined identity to practiced identity: renegotiation, evolution, establishment and sustainment. Factors of personal beliefs, learning experiences, teaching practice and the institutional exam-oriented culture were highlighted in this process (Jiang et al., 2021). The imagined identity, as teachers' self-perceptions, may cause conflicts when they are inconsistent with their practiced identities. The conflicts open chances for identity negotiation and agency enactment (Xu, 2013) or identity deconstruction (Jiang et al., 2021). Harmonizing imagined identity with practiced identity will strengthen identity verification.

Tensions between teachers' desired identity and practiced identity may cause conflicts as well. The identity conflicts arise more in education reform when teachers' desired selves and situation-preferred selves do not align (Schaap et al., 2021). For instance, Chinese EFL teachers navigated conflicts between applying effective communication-oriented classroom methods mandated by curriculum reforms and exam-based teaching goals. Finally, they exerted agency and adjusted their pedagogy to balance long-term language use and examination success (Liyanage & Walker, 2023). It highlights the influence of teachers' agency in dealing with identity conflicts. Similarly, the influence of agency on EFL teachers' identity tensions and shifts, resulting from the transition of teaching formats from in-person to online during the COVID-19 pandemic has been explored (Zhang & Hwang, 2023). Overall, these instances support the view that teacher identity is flexible and complex. Teachers need to balance their sense of self between their own goals and the requirements of the workplace (Hong et al., 2018). Teachers with more autonomy to exercise their agency find it easier to overcome conflicts between desired and imposed identities, helping them adapt to the reform and promote the enactment of the new policy.

2.3.2. Conflicts between professional identity and demographic identity

Conflicts among EFL/ESL teachers arose from an undermined sense of professional identity, which was significantly influenced by their demographic identity. Professional identity means the way teachers define their professional selves to themselves and others (Lasky, 2005). It is influenced by demographic identity, relating to age, race, gender and socioeconomic status (Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020). To illustrate, an Israeli female teacher encountered a controversy between her demographic identity and professional identity in the teaching community. She formed an oppositional identity to rebel against gender-related norms (Hayik, 2023). Teachers' own beliefs and values of their demographic identity hold significant meaning in constructing their professional identities, especially when they are oppressed by prevalent social norms. Indeed, female language teachers in many countries are experiencing identity conflicts due to discrimination based on gender, including Japan (Mason & Chik, 2020) and Turkey (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021). This is similar to the foreign teachers working as EFL teachers abroad, who confronted identity conflicts from cultural struggles. The factors are derived from different performance evaluation systems as well as work and drink culture (see Lee & Jang, 2023; Leigh, 2019). In sum, teacher identity is inherently social, influenced by power relations within communities and cultural settings as well as personal social-cultural characteristics, including gender, race, nationality and ethnicity.

2.3.3. Conflicts between emotional identity and cognitive identity

Identity conflicts exist in the dissonance of teachers' emotional identities and cognitive identities. Identity is connected to their cognitive and emotional engagement in teaching (Maddamsetti, 2022). Cognitive identity refers to teachers' cognitive knowledge about their profession, whereas emotional identity represents teachers' emotional attitudes toward their identity (Qian & Huang, 2019). A native EFL teacher working in Japan is a good illustration. He was troubled by the dissonance between his desired friendly identity and the professional responsibility of displaying negative emotions to undisciplined students. The conflicts made him stressed (Morris, 2022). In another instance, a content classroom teacher experienced identity conflicts between her "less comfortable" attitude (emotional identity) and advocacy identity (cognitive identity) in advocating for emergent bilinguals (Maddamsetti, 2022, p. 9). These conflicts were affected by the monolingual policy and accountability contexts, which constrained her advocacy identity negotiations. Both cases demonstrate that negative emotional identity in teaching needs to be emphasized. Indeed, attention has been attracted to the affective dimension of language teacher identity recently, including vulnerability (Song, 2016), emotion expression strategies (Zhang & Jiang, 2023), emotion regulation (Han et al., 2024) and emotional literacy (Ghiasvand et al., 2024). The emotions mentioned above play the role of the manifestation of teacher identity conflicts (e.g., Lu & Zhang, 2023; Zhao & Wang, 2024) and the catalyst role in identity development through agency (Huang & Yip, 2021). This process may facilitate teacher identity transformation (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023) or lead to identity deconstruction (Beijaard et al., 2023).

All the identity conflicts above highlight the interactive, affective, agentic and contextual dimensions of identity construction. To be specific, teacher identity is not innate. It is continuously negotiated and constructed within a specific socio-cultural environment through interactions with various stakeholders and policy systems, by constantly exercising agency to balance different tensions. Marginalized teachers, like substitute ones with different teaching experiences in the new context, are inevitably to encounter tensions. Understanding their identity conflicts and providing suggestions is of great significance.

2.4. Theoretical framework

Thus far, this study emphasizes that there is an interplay among the

dynamic, contextual and contested nature of teacher role identity. The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI) is a useful tool to explain identity conflicts and transfer by analyzing its content and structure (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). In the DSMRI framework, “content” is seen as the components’ dynamic change. The theoretical definitions of the components are shown in Table 1.

The relationships between the components in the structure can be used to explain identity conflicts or transfers. The relationships, including harmony (disharmony) between the elements in a particular role identity, alignment (misalignment) between different components and integration (lack of integration) between different role identities, can explain identity conflicts. Teachers may encounter identity conflicts when their two goals are in disharmony in a role identity or the misalignment of their goals and actions. Additionally, identity conflicts may also arise when their role identities lack integration, including being a mother to accompany their children and a teacher to work. Scholars have investigated teacher identity conflicts and transfer with the DSMRI model. For example, the dynamic changing process of role identities was investigated with graduate students’ participation in the certificate program (Gunersele et al., 2016), preservice teachers’ identity exploration intervention (Heffernan, 2016) and an EFL teacher’s transition from practicum to first-year teaching (Wang, Elahi Shirvan, & Taherian, 2021). Together, the DSMRI model explains the dynamic system of role identity with four interconnected influencing components, and factors of social contexts, subject domains, culture and personal dispositions. It provides a suitable theoretical framework to investigate teacher role identity by considering its shifting, relational, agentic and emotional characteristics.

3. Methodology

Considering the multidimensionality and context-specificity of teacher identities as well as their dynamic and ontological features (Hong et al., 2018; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018), this study adopts a qualitative case study approach. The case means a concrete entity, including an individual or a small group. This approach is useful to describe the real-life identity conflicts of two substitute teachers (a case) in the bounded system (from shadow schools to public schools in China). Furthermore, this approach is well-suited to addressing “what” (what identity conflicts are) and “how” (how the conflicts affect identity construction) questions by analyzing interview and observation data using thematic case descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects with the approval number: JKEUPM-2024-074 dated February 27, 2024. Two female participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. They understood that they had the right to withdraw from this

Table 1
Components of the dynamic systems model of role identity (DSMRI) (Source: Kaplan & Garner, 2017).

No	Components	Explanation
1	Ontological and epistemological beliefs	Ontological beliefs concern the knowledge, belief, perception, assumption, conception and related emotion that the person expresses as true about the world. Epistemological beliefs concern the person’s sense of certainty, complexity, and the credibility of sources of their ontological beliefs.
2	Purpose and goals	Purpose for action, goals, objectives and related emotions in the role in particular contexts and situations.
3	Self-perceptions and self-definitions	A person’s knowledge and emotions regarding his or her own personal and social attributes and characteristics concerning his or her role.
4	Perceived action possibilities	The internal and external behaviors as well as emotions concerning the role.

study at any time. Furthermore, the first author, as a former primary school EFL teacher, held the insider position (Merriam, 2009) to better understand participants’ experience and context. The second and third authors, as non-Chinese teacher educators, provided an alternative perspective by questioning and clarifying ambiguous or implicit aspects of the data, contributing additional insights.

3.1. Research context and participants

This study concentrated on identity conflicts of public school substitute EFL teachers who used to work in shadow schools. In 2021, China enacted the “Double Reduction” policy to compress shadow education. It aims to alleviate substantial workloads and after-school training burden on compulsory education students (Yang et al., 2023), essentially prohibiting for-profit tutoring. Such a compressing policy badly affected language training, and hundreds of thousands of EFL tutors lost their jobs (Curran, 2024), with the majority preferring more stable jobs, such as teaching positions in public schools (Yang et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). Unfortunately, many shadow school tutors are unable to take the Official Teachers Selection Exams to become public school teachers due to age restrictions. Hence, they have to be contract-based substitute teachers, whose identity is constantly negotiated through teaching experience (Kalali Sani et al., 2022). Therefore, EFL teachers with past teaching experience in shadow schools inevitably encounter professional identity conflicts in public schools. This leads to an urgency to explore these teachers’ identity conflicts to help them construct new identities and reduce the turnover rate in the new teaching context.

F Primary School is an urban public school in the northern part of China. There are 2500 pupils between the ages of 6 and 12 and 129 teachers (51 % substitute teachers). The school was chosen as the research site for its high turnover rate of substitute teachers and its accessibility. It provides the possibility and necessity for studying the identity conflicts of substitute teachers with shadow school teaching experience. The purposive sampling method was employed (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The headmaster recommended three EFL teachers who met the provided criteria for sampling: (1) Obtained education qualification certificates, and (2) Worked as a substitute EFL teacher with more than 5 years of shadow education working experience. Two of them, Lian and Song (names were pseudonyms), were willing to participate. Their detailed background information is provided in Table 2.

3.2. Data collection

Identity is constructed through language (Gee & Gee, 2007) and performance (Stets & Burke, 2000). Therefore, data from semi-structured interviews (n = 2, each lasting 40–50 min) and classroom observation (n = 6, each lasting 40 min) were collected to ensure an in-depth description of the case and better understand teachers’ identities (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Interviews (Appendix A) focused on the participants’ background, previous teaching experience and self-perceptions as EFL teachers according to the DSMRI. That is, the participants were asked to describe their goals or plans for teaching, and

Table 2
The participants’ background information.

Name	Gender	Age	Major	Work experience
Lian	female	39	English Education	9-year shadow education working experience at an urban shadow school and 2.5 years of working experience at F Primary School as a substitute EFL teacher.
Song	female	36	Business English	11-year shadow education working experience at an urban shadow school and less than half a year of working experience at F Primary School as a substitute EFL teacher.

beliefs about teaching by describing their experience, teaching strategies and perceptions of their roles as EFL teachers. The observation focused on recording aspects related to the teachers' instructional activities, teacher-student interactions and teachers' emotions, with observation field notes taken. During the interviews, the participants naturally used metaphorical expressions to describe their role identities, which can function as "an archetype of professional identity" (Zhu et al., 2022, p. 2). These original expressions were analyzed in conjunction with other narrative data to better understand their identity conflicts. All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese (the participants' first language) to "put them at ease", audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis (Yuan & Zhang, 2020, p. 8). Back-translation procedures were followed by two bilingual translators for the English presentation (Chen & Boore, 2010).

3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis in the case study is through the description and themes of the case (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The interview transcripts (about 30,000 words) and classroom observations (240 min) were analyzed with inductive-deductive qualitative content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). Specifically, after defining the unit of analysis as the participants' role identity, the first author carefully read all the transcripts and identified the tangible role identities by referring to the participants' original expressions, including the metaphorical expressions (e.g., classroom teacher, babysitter, language communicator, etc.). Then, she deductively coded the statement within each role identity that revealed the components of the DSMRI model (e.g., self-perception, emotions, goals) and prior literature (e.g., agency, demographic identity, teacher-student relationship). Next, she conducted an inductive thematic analysis to explore themes of role identity conflict by examining the disharmony or misalignment among components in the DSMRI model. This included shifts in pedagogical strategies and misalignments between goals and action. During this process, the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) was applied to better understand the factors of the participants' identity conflicts (e.g., education function, performance evaluation system) and different levels of agency (e.g., continuous learning, career adaptability).

Notably, several strategies ensured the trustworthiness of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): (1) Clear coding procedures, detailed descriptions, and data triangulation between interviews and observations were used to ensure credibility and transferability. For example, the emphasis on students' scores in the interview was consistent with the pedagogical practice of highlighting note-taking and grammar points during classroom observations. (2) Consistency in the study process and internal coherence of findings were emphasized to ensure dependability and confirmability. For instance, the research team held bi-weekly discussions to ensure consistency in coding and themes, and the findings were reviewed with both the team and the participants to ensure internal coherence.

4. Findings

Four identity conflicts were identified when the participants talked about their administrative working experience, career goals, pedagogical decisions and practice as well as teacher-student relationships. These conflicts influenced their identity construction through the "conflict-emotion-agency-identity (transformation or deconstruction)" process. The whole process was influenced by various factors. The themes, factors, explanations in DSMRI structure and the participants' agency were summarized in Table 3. A detailed explanation is presented in the following section.

4.1. Identity conflicts in different school systems

Focusing on teaching is the participants' self-perception of the

Table 3
Summary of the findings.

Identity conflicts	Explanations in DSMRI Structure	Agency	Factors
Different school systems	1. Tensions between practiced identity (busy) and imagined identity (relaxing) 2. New identity stimulation (babysitter): misalignment between components in the structure: self-perception (language teaching) VS perceived action possibilities (non-teaching tasks).	Song and Lian: bear negative emotions and inaction.	Education reform; Education function.
Different professional development	1. Low degree of integration between the professional identity and demographic identity. 2. New identity stimulation (aimless follower): misalignment between components in the structure: purpose and goals (desire to develop) VS perceived action possibilities (constrained chances to develop);	Song: only complain and inaction. Lian: learn from the video and actively prepare for the demonstration lessons.	Performance evaluation system; Professional development opportunities; Demographic identity; Motivation; Continuous learning;
Different teacher-student relationships	1. New identity stimulation (a manager): change in elements (emotion expression strategies) 2. Original identity self-organization (previous pedagogical skills)	Song: continue to express emotions gently Lian: express real emotions in class	Career adaptability; Classroom capacity.
Different pedagogical decisions and actions	1. Original identity self-organization (previous teaching goals and methods) 2. New identity stimulation (a language communicator): change in elements (evolving teaching goals and methods)	Song: stick to past teaching goals and methods Lian: change teaching goals and methods.	Teaching goals and methods; Induction program; Continuous learning; Career adaptability.

primary role of an EFL teacher in shadow schools, like a professional classroom teacher. When they were dealing with non-teaching tasks in public schools, they thought they carried out the role of a babysitter. These different roles as EFL teachers reflected their identity conflicts in different school systems. In China, public schools undertake various education tasks to nurture well-rounded students, including non-teaching administrative tasks (Wang et al., 2023). Especially with the enactment of the "Double Reduction" policy, primary school teachers have taken on more responsibilities, including managing students' lunch and nap at noon and extending working hours to offer non-academic courses in the afternoon. For instance, Song's self-perception of teachers in shadow schools is: "Teachers are teachers, and they are quite respectful. I am proud of being a teacher". Her belief of being a qualified EFL teacher was having enough time to teach: "Teachers should calm down to mark students' homework, design lessons ...". However, Song expressed herself as a "babysitter" in public schools because of her

perceived action possibilities to deal with non-teaching tasks, with complaining tones:

It seems all the teachers here are not relaxing but are very busy. I never thought that before! Teachers have to do so many ... take care of students for lunch and lunch break ... almost everything. Teaching is the last thing ... I am not a teacher, but a babysitter! I am always irritable!

Obvious in Song's expression are negative feelings towards the role of a "babysitter" to deal with non-teaching tasks. Misalignment between the components of DSMRI (self-perceptions to teach knowledge and actions to deal with non-teaching tasks) in the new identity (a babysitter) caused Song's identity conflicts and triggered her negative emotions (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). Another reason contributing to this identity conflict was the lack of integration between her practiced identity (busy) and imagined identity (relaxing). Similar identity conflicts were also illustrated in Lian's negative emotions when she said: "How angry when I was marking the paper, school administrators asked me to fill in the traffic safety blanks first!" In her mind, playing the role of a classroom teacher to mark the paper should prioritize the non-teaching tasks.

4.2. Identity conflicts in professional development

The second conflict is reflected in the participants' descriptions of their career goals in their professional development. Specifically, the participants had clear career goals in the shadow schools but played roles as "aimless followers" in the public school. The participants' salaries and benefits in shadow schools were directly linked to students' registration rates and learning outcomes. Therefore, both participants had clear career goals, including being model teachers or team leaders, with feelings of pride and excitement:

Song: My career goal is to be the gold medal teacher, like the top teacher on the mountain with the highest salary (exciting tones).

Lian: I want to be the team leader, so I will have more chances to study outside (smile).

These exciting words reflected that both teachers' goals and self-perception of being EFL teachers (focusing on teaching) were in harmony in shadow schools, so they felt excited to talk about it. However, both teachers described their roles in public schools with no specific goals:

Song: I do not know. I have never thought about my career goals here. I am sorry ... (sad voice)

Lian: No specific goals (wry smile). Aimless follower! Follow the rules, take responsibility as a member of the team ... That's all.

Both participants' vague career goals and negative emotions reflected their identity conflicts from the new identity stimulation (e.g., aimless followers). This may be explained by the limitations in professional development opportunities and the unfair performance evaluation system for substitute teachers in public schools compared with regular teachers. Regular teachers' salaries in public schools are related to their professional titles, while substitute teachers, like the participants, have no chance to be conferred the professional title. In addition, the participants' demographic identity extended these conflicts. Both teachers mentioned that they had no extra energy and time to pursue career development as middle-aged teachers and mothers. The conflicts can be explained by the low degree of integration between their professional identity to spend time in their career and their demographic identity to take care of their family.

4.3. Identity conflicts in teacher-student relationships

The identity conflicts also exist in the participants' interpersonal relationships with students, reflected in the participants' changing

strategies to express emotions in classroom management. In shadow schools, both participants described their experience of hiding real emotions to attract students, like a "server". However, Lian changed her emotion expression strategies in the public school. She explained the reason for her different emotion expression strategies of being a "server" and a "manager" in different schools:

I will not be nervous to express my anger because they will not drop out. It seems the stricter I am, the more they respect me, and the easier to manage the class (in public schools). I will hide my real emotions under the same circumstances, or the students and parents will complain (in shadow schools).

Lian's different emotion expression strategies reflected her self-perceptions of her identity, manifesting her identity conflicts from new identity stimulation (a manager). It also reflected Lian's identity transfer because of the change in elements (emotion expression strategies in classroom management) in the DSMRI. This transfer was also observed in the classroom observation where Lian's angry facial expression and loud voice made students realize the problem and settle down quickly. Such a changing process also highlights Lian's career adaptability in solving problems with different strategies in a large classroom capacity. Career adaptability includes career confidence in solving problems, vocational exploration to acquire career-related information, planning competence and personal agency in career decision-making (Savickas, 2002). Song's emotional connection with students reflected similar conflicts:

I chatted with students about various topics and paid close attention to every student. I need to attract them to ensure the registration rate. While my attention is only focused on disruptive students here (in public schools). The challenge for me is to make the students quiet and follow me.

Song's role as a server in the shadow school was reflected in her effort to "chat" and attend to every student in order to boost the registration rate. This may have been motivated by the small class size in shadow schools. Unlike Lian's evolving strategies, Song maintained her original pedagogical approach in the observation, including a gentle tone lacking authority, which was not suitable for large-class settings to manage the classroom at all. This experience frustrated Song a lot, indicating her low career adaptability to exert agency in new teaching contexts.

4.4. Identity conflicts in pedagogical decisions and actions

The participants also experienced identity conflicts from the changes in their pedagogical decisions and actions, including different teaching goals and methods. Both teachers described their roles as "test-machine" makers in shadow schools, focusing on improving students' academic performance. For example, Lian recalled her teaching experience in shadow schools: "I just teach knowledge such as grammar to improve their grades, I am a test-machine maker!" Song's description of the most satisfying part of being a teacher in the shadow school confirmed Lian's argument: "Students can get a high mark."

Interestingly, Lian and Song narrated and enacted different teaching roles in public schools. The difference was initially reflected in their distinct teaching goals. Song was knowledge-centered and still emphasized that "it did not matter how proficient they become, but achieving a good score would be enough". Such knowledge-centered teaching was also reflected in Song's classroom observation where she emphasized the importance of taking notes and spent much time explaining grammar points. It shows the consistency of Song's past and present roles as test-machine makers with traditional teaching methods, emphasizing her past identity of self-organization.

In contrast, Lian became ability-centered and endeavored to "be a language communicator to create a language environment and encourage students to use English to communicate" in public schools.

Lian's role as a "language communicator" was further supported by her task-based language teaching method to engage students to finish language tasks in groups in the classroom observation. It seemed that Lian's evolving teaching goals (from students' high scores to students' ability to communicate in English) and adapting teaching methods (from traditional language teaching to task-based language teaching) helped her better survive in the new teaching context. Conversely, Song's original teaching methods hindered her from "coping with the changes" in public schools, including attracting students' attention and managing the classroom during teaching. Notably, the participants' learning experience may explain their different roles in public schools. Lian went to F primary school earlier than Song, so she had the chance to join the induction program. The training experience impressed Lian a lot, she further argued:

They organized a 5-day training for new teachers. I learned to design a lesson, such as establishing an English learning environment, designing learning tasks ... It is different from the teaching mode in shadow schools.

The new pedagogical knowledge Lian learned in the induction program helped her better adapt to new teaching contexts. It can be explained that this new knowledge as the changing elements in the DSMRI, triggered Lian's identity conflicts and transfer.

4.5. The influence of conflicts on identity construction

By analyzing the identity conflicts of the participants, we found that these conflicts influence their identities through a process of conflicts-emotions-agency-identity transfer or deconstruction. More specifically, the identity conflicts trigger the participants' different emotional responses, indicating their identity conflicts and increasing the "instability" of their original role identity system (Kaplan & Garner, 2017, p. 19). It includes the participants' emotional experiences from non-teaching tasks, constrained professional development opportunities, and challenged pedagogical strategies and methods. These emotions played roles as catalysts in their identity instability, offering opportunities for the participants to exert agency. For example, triggered by the negative emotions from limitations in professional development, Song and Lian exerted different levels of agency:

Song: I am willing to develop myself, but we have no chance to study. I can not change the reality.

Lian: I always learn from teaching videos on the internet. As a language teacher, you need to live to learn, or you may be out of date. Others think preparing for a demonstration lesson is a burden, but I think it is a learning opportunity.

As manifested in the interview, Lian's continuous learning and active preparation for the demonstration lesson were in sharp contrast to Song's inaction. This reflected Lian's career adaptability in vocational exploration to acquire career-related information. Lian's words also reflect her reflection on the subject characteristics that language is evolving and language teachers need to "live to learn". It highlights the influence of Lian's continuous learning on her agency to her identity transfer. In addition, their different levels of agency were also influenced by their motivations. Precisely, Song wanted to be recognized by salary level, while Lian hoped to have more chances to study outside. Song's salary could not be improved because of the unfair performance evaluation system. While Lian's motivation can be achieved through her agency in continuous learning. Furthermore, Lian's evolving teaching methods and goals also illustrated the influence of career adaptability on her agency to solve problems and deal with changes in career roles (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Remarkably, during this process, the obstructive role of original identity self-organization in Song's agency and identity transfer cannot be overlooked, including her past pedagogical strategies as well as

teaching goals and methods. For example, they expressed different perceived action possibilities in the future:

Song: I am uncertain about staying (crying). It is too big a leap, and I cannot cope with the changes here.

Lian: If the school does not lay me off, I will continue to stay here. This place is relatively stable. I have adapted.

Song's "uncertain" attitude and Lian's "adapted" experience illustrated their identity construction in the new teaching context. It seemed that the identity conflicts, closely linked to the participants' emotions and agency, led to Song's identity deconstruction and Lian's identity transfer. This process emphasized the influence of the participants' continuous learning, motivation and career adaptability in their identity construction when facing identity conflicts.

5. Discussion and implication

Two Chinese EFL teachers with shadow school teaching experience were interviewed and observed to understand their identity conflicts in changing teaching contexts. Their identity conflicts, based on the DSMRI model, illustrate the dynamic process of professional role identity construction in the conflict-emotion-agency-identity (transfer or deconstruction) process, as shown in Fig. 1. In this section, a thematic view of the dynamic process is interpreted in response to existing literature.

Firstly, we found that the integration degree between different identities caused the participants' identity conflicts. It supports the DSMRI model by demonstrating that a low degree of integration between the target role identity and other central identities contributes to identity conflicts and shifts (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). Specifically, Song's identity conflicts between her imagined identity and practiced identity echo those of native EFL teachers' identity conflicts (Lee & Jang, 2023), emphasizing the impact of expected roles and responsibility in actual teaching practice. These findings reinforce the need to help teachers negotiate their imagined identity to better adapt to the new teaching context with the balance of personal and contextual factors (Jiang et al., 2021). In addition, both participants' identity conflicts between their professional identity and demographic identity extend what has been reported about the negative influence of demographic identity on female EFL teachers. It is similar to female language teachers' employment options and possibilities in Japan (Mason & Chik, 2020) and the influence of gender-related norms on female EFL teachers (Hayik, 2023). This study highlighted the constraints of age and gender on the participants' self-perception of their professional identity. The conflicts between demographic identities and professional identities plague many female teachers. Scholars advocate for deeper research into gender identity among language teachers to shed light on this issue (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021).

Furthermore, we found that the participants' new identity stimulated their identity conflicts, reflected in the misalignment between components and change in elements (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). These findings reinforce the challenges substitute teachers face, including inadequate support, limited professional development and learning opportunities (Uchida et al., 2021), inequities in performance evaluation systems (Donaghue, 2020), as well as the mismatch between substitute teachers' knowledge and the expectations of schools (Yip et al., 2024). Our findings also support the influence of situation-preferred selves under the education reform on EFL teachers' identity conflicts (Liyanağ & Walker, 2023), such as Song and Lian's roles as babysitters. Additionally, Lian's evolving pedagogical methods echo the influence of teaching methods adjustment on EFL teachers' identity conflicts (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023). Our study also supports shadow school tutors' anxieties about students' departure (Wang, Guo, et al., 2021) and service-provider role (Xiong et al., 2022) when the participants described their emotion expression strategies. Notably, our study extends previous research on the influence of the participants' emotion expression strategies on

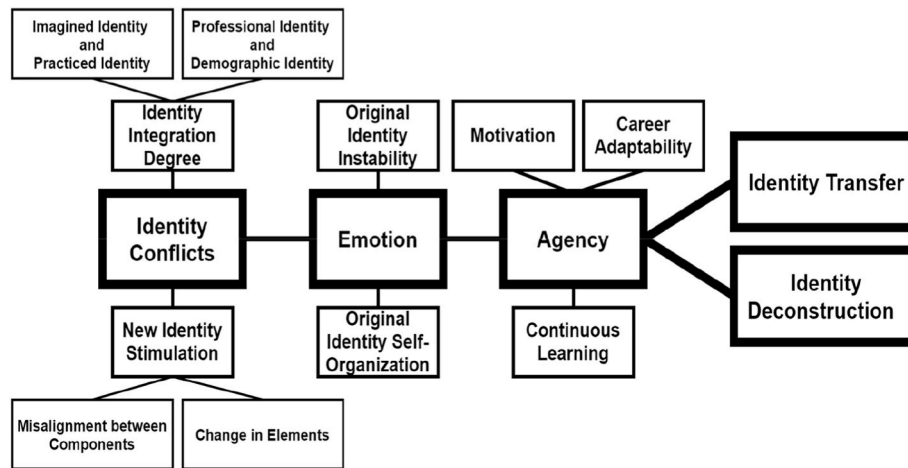


Fig. 1. Professional role identity conflicts and construction.

identity transfer, with Lian's strategy of real emotion expression reflecting her shift from a server to a manager. Teacher emotions are performative (Zembylas, 2005), this finding supports the manifestation role of teachers' emotion expression strategies on their identities (Zhang & Jiang, 2023). The direct expression of emotions to students should involve teachers' conscious emotional expression, rather than unregulated emotional displays. This study warrants further investigation of the identity transfer process from the perspective of teachers' emotion expression strategies.

In addition, our study highlighted the conflict-emotion-agency-identity (transfer or deconstruction) process of the participants' identity construction. Precisely, the participants' negative emotional experiences indicated their identity conflicts and made their original identity system "instability" (Kaplan & Garner, 2017, p. 19), providing room for their agency in identity transfer. This process corroborated the manifestation role of emotions on teachers' identity conflicts (e.g., Lu & Zhang, 2023; Zhao & Wang, 2024) and the catalyst role through agency in identity transfer (Huang & Yip, 2021). Interestingly, our study extends the "tensions-emotion-agency-identity" process (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023, p. 1), emphasizing the interfering role of original role identity self-organization in this process. Original roles can provide content and structural bases for one's present identity to increase component harmony (Kaplan & Garner, 2017). It is similar to the positive or negative impact of teachers' past learning and working experiences on their current identities (Jiang et al., 2021). This study emphasizes the impact of original identity self-organization on Song's identity, reflected by her adherence to her previous pedagogical methods. This finding reinforces the importance of teachers' professional knowledge growth and accumulated experiences in the new teaching context to facilitate their identity transfer (Zhu et al., 2022).

Next, our study highlights the significant role of the participants' agency in their identity transfer, influenced by their motivation, career adaptability and continuous learning. These findings support that agency is mediated by past and present competencies (Bowen et al., 2021), critical awareness of learning opportunities (Huang & Yip, 2021), learning new knowledge (Zhang & Hwang, 2023) as well as goals and motivation (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). Notably, the influence of career adaptability on identity conflicts through Lian's agency to solve problems and acquire pedagogical knowledge (Savickas, 2002), adds empirical research evidence to teacher identity transfer. It supports the close connection between teacher career adaptability and identity formation and the suggestion for a novice EFL shadow school teacher, Jane, to better transition her identity by enhancing her career adaptability (Wang, Guo, et al., 2021). The influence of the participants' agency on their identity transfer is significant as it may cause substitute teachers' identity deconstruction, like Song's intention to resign.

Taken together, this study has two implications for better reducing substitute teacher attrition by helping them transfer their identities in the new teaching context. First, school administrators should guide teachers to set goals consistent with their practice identities to increase their confidence. They should also organize collaborative reflective activities to help teachers critically reflect on their past learning and teaching experiences, to establish the correct career goals and motivations. Furthermore, they should organize induction programs for substitute teachers to increase their career adaptability. The content should include pedagogical knowledge (upcoming challenges in teaching and suitable pedagogical methods for large class capacity), psychological knowledge (help teachers overcome identity-related negative emotions), and identity conflict strategies (enhance alignment between past and future identities). Second, the school management should prioritize fairness in performance evaluation systems to empower substitute teachers with a "valued identity" (Donaghue, 2020, p. 13), with consideration of teachers' demographic identities and professional development opportunities.

6. Conclusion

This study discussed identity conflicts with two Chinese substitute teachers who changed their jobs from shadow schools to public schools. The novelty here is to fill the gap of EFL teachers' professional role identity conflicts in different education governance systems. The findings enrich existing literature by examining the participants' identity conflicts and their influence through the conflict-emotion-agency-identity (transfer or deconstruction) process. This study is not without limitations. First, teachers' identities and career adaptability evolve with the accumulation of teaching experience and pedagogical knowledge. This qualitative case study was conducted over only one semester with two experienced substitute teachers, offering insights that are context-dependent. Second, the small sample size and limited duration may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution when applied to different contexts. More research is needed to explore teacher identity conflicts with marginalized teachers in different contexts to enrich the literature, including the influence of teachers' career adaptability and emotion expression strategies on identity construction in a diachronic study.

Statement: During the preparation of this work the first author used ChatGPT in order to improve readability and language of the work. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the published article.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Chao Du: Writing – original draft. **Norhakimah Khaiezza binti:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Halimah binti Jamil:** Writing – review & editing.

Ethics statement

The research “From Shadow Schools to Public Schools: Insights from Substitute EFL Teachers’ Identity Conflicts”, adhered to the [Declaration of Helsinki](#) and informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study.

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Appendix

An Interview Protocol.

Q1: How did you become an EFL teacher?

Q2: What was the most meaningful experience you had as an EFL teacher? Why?

Q3: What provides you the most satisfaction as an EFL teacher?

Q4: What challenges do you have as an EFL teacher?

Q5: Can you describe the role of an EFL teacher?

Q6: Do you have career goals or plans as an EFL teacher?

Q7: Do you have any unforgettable experiences?

Q8: What do you imagine for yourself in the future?

Q9: What difficulties do you have in teaching? Do you have any strategies?

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