

The Impact of AI-Supported Classroom Instruction on Novice ELT Teachers' Professional Identity Formation

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Abstract

As AI technologies are introduced into the language classroom, their impact on teacher development—especially in terms of professional identity—requires thorough exploration. This qualitative exploratory study investigated how twelve pre-service ELT teachers (semester-long practicum) constructed and negotiated their professional identities while incorporating AI-supported classroom instruction. Data sets included reflections written each week, teaching artifacts (lesson plans and classroom video recordings), and interviews given at the end of the semester in a semi-structured format, all of which were thematically analyzed with NVivo, along with triangulation achieved through the different types of data. The findings indicated that initially AI overlapped participants' traditional conceptions of role, whereby uncertainty about authority and creativity ensued, but with many participants again redefining themselves as facilitators and instructional designers and practitioners of data information. Participants also identified continuing gaps between technological efficiency and humanistic commitments and other emotional labor while mediating AI-student interaction. The study indicated that AI accelerates the negotiations of identity and foregrounds autonomy and pedagogical creativity and ethics matters in tech-enhanced ELT. The author recommends the embedding of structured support for identity building such as guided reflections, mentoring, and modules on critical digital pedagogy within teacher education.

Keywords: AI-supported instruction; professional identity; pre-service ELT teachers; reflective practice; critical digital pedagogy.

Introduction

The incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into teaching has basically reshaped the nature of learning and teaching within different fields. In English Language Teaching (ELT) area, teaching with the help of AI, via tools like intelligent tutoring systems, automated feedback programs, adaptive learning platforms, and generative AI models—has started to change the way educators design lessons, test learners' knowledge, and conceptualize their professional roles (Almegren et al., 2025; Babanoğlu et al., 2025; Tiwari, 2024). This development goes beyond mere educational growth; it challenges traditional ideas of teacher autonomy, creativity, and identity. With the transition of classrooms into more technology-mediated forms, realizing the way teachers define themselves in AI-enhanced settings becomes a central challenge in modern teacher education. In the meantime, the change is not just about using new tools, but about redefining the relational, affective, and cognitive aspects of being an instructor (Shao & Sun, 2025; Syuhra et al., 2025).

While an increasingly expansive body of research has investigated AI's affordances for learners' engagement, assessment, and language ability (British Council, 2023), far less attention has been paid to teachers' professional identity. The majority of existing studies focus on cognitive outcomes and performance—such as learner gains or resource-use efficiencies—while largely ignoring the deeper, more personal aspects of professional development that may arise from the introduction of such technologies. For example, one study of Chinese tertiary EFL teachers has noted that professional identity of teachers in AI-enabled instruction was influenced and shaped by critical factors such as institutional support, professional development, peers, and attitudes to AI (Zhou et al., 2024). Professional identity, here defined as the evolving sense of self which educators construct and reconstruct through reflection, interaction and participation in instruction-related contexts, is an important factor in deciding how the professional roles they inhabit will be interpreted, the teaching decisions made, and how curriculum innovations are dealt with. Seen from a sociocultural and post-structural point of view, the idea of professional identity is one which is seen as dynamic, dialogic and offered in a context, that is dependent on social interaction, institutional discourse, and technology-mediated discourse (Almazán-López et al., 2025).

In recent years, researchers have started to uncover how AI affects teachers in terms of their roles, agency, and identity in the classroom. For example, teachers in AI-rich ELT environments mentioned new roles such as “evolving facilitator,” “blended-role practitioner,” “flexible material designer,” and “creativity prompter,” conveying a transformation in the way teacher identity is realized (Trevisan et al., 2024; Zaman et al., 2024). Other work indicates that unless teachers receive professional learning relative to matters of ethics, agency, and AI literacy, they are subject to reduced agency and fragmented self-information (Yu-Ju, L., & Nian-Shing, 2024). Similarly, it has been found in a study that comprehensive professional learning is crucial for teachers to achieve agency in dealing with ethical issues involving the implementation of AI in education (Satvati et al., 2025).

In the light of these changes, some questions arise such as: How and by what means do novice participants in ELT practicum environments adjust their sense of professional identity when AI-facilitated instruction is present? What are the expressions of tension between pedagogic models of humanistic teaching tradition and taught practices encasing technology? And, how do teachers in initial training orient themselves to the evolving profession reality of identity, agency, and the process of being? In spite of the growing AI presence, studies focusing on the identity formation of instructional novice ELT teachers when faced with AI-facilitated classroom instruction are still rare, especially in non-Anglophile contexts (Ozkan, 2025; Trent, 2012). This gap is particularly pertinent to Iranian EFL teacher education, where AI tools are progressively introduced to pre-service programs and where cultural and institutional factors mediate teacher identity (Gheitasi & Aliakbari, 2022).

In the Iranian context, many teachers, especially those under training, are faced with tensions in the interaction of traditional humanistic ideas of teaching, which cover relational pedagogy, rapport between teacher and learner and communicative interaction, and the mechanized efficiencies promised by AI tools (Fathi et al., 2023). These tensions often cause uncertainty, role conflict, and imperative for identity reconstruction as educators try to make an

alignment between deeply held pedagogical beliefs and emerging digital practices (Ashegh Navaie et al., 2024; Benek, 2025). For instance, learners in Jordanian EFL classrooms assumed that although AI increased efficiency, they nevertheless asserted that teacher empathy, cultural understanding and relational engagement was still irreplaceable (Almashour et al., 2025). Such results highlight the complex interrelationship between innovation and tradition, and the extent to which teacher identity is relational, negotiated and challenged.

As a result, this study fills a major gap in the literature as it considers how novice ELT teachers construct, negotiate and reformulate their professional identities whilst implementing AI-supported classroom instruction in their practicum. In focusing on pre-service teachers' lived experiences and reflective narratives, this study seeks to contribute to an awareness of professional identity construction within a technology-supported teacher education program, which may ultimately help to inform supportive frameworks for providing a balance between pedagogical innovation and the humanistic essence of teaching. By doing so, the present research contributes both to ELT and teacher education fields, and to emerging dialogues around AI literacy, teacher agency and professional formation in intelligent instruction age. Specifically, the study examined (a) how novice teachers constructed and negotiated professional identities, (b) how AI influenced their sense of agency and pedagogical creativity, and (c) how reflective mediation helped reconcile ethical and humanistic tensions

Statement of the Problem

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) in education has revolutionized the design, delivery and assessment of instruction by teachers. In ELT, AI-supported instruction is becoming increasingly important in lesson design, feedback, adaptive learning management systems, and classroom analytics. This is not only revolutionizing the efficiency of offered instruction, but changing teachers' conceptions of professional identity, the construct which determines teachers' beliefs, agency and pedagogical choices (Shao & Sun, 2025). Teacher professional identity, understood as the evolving sense of self that educators construct through reflection, interaction and contextual engagement, is deeply influenced by technological, institutional and social forces (Sydnor, Davis, & Daley, 2024).

Previous research has focused primarily on the technological affordances of AI (e.g., learner performance, administrative efficiency) or on teachers' adoption attitudes (Giannakos et al., 2024; Ren & Wu, 2025). Yet studies examining how AI integration affects teacher identity—particularly that of novice and pre-service teachers—remain sparse. For example, although early-career teachers have been shown to experience identity transitions and vulnerabilities (Xue et al., 2025), little attention has been paid to how AI mediated instruction reshapes these transitions in ELT contexts. In the specific domain of novice ELT teachers, whose professional identity is still emerging and thus more susceptible to external influences, the consequences of AI support are underexplored (Liu et al., 2025).

In non-Anglophone contexts such as Iranian EFL teacher education—where AI tools are being gradually introduced into teacher training programs and where cultural, institutional and pedagogical traditions emphasize humanistic communication—the question of how novice teachers negotiate and reconstruct professional identities becomes particularly urgent. If teacher educators do not gain the required insight into how AI-enhanced instruction contributes to professional identity formation, they may prepare graduates who are technically proficient, but unclear about their professional

purpose, professional boundaries, and relational role (Ulla, Lemana & Kohnke, 2024). Thus, addressing this gap necessitates a close, context-sensitive inspection into how novice ELT teachers construct, negotiate and change their professional identities, as they incorporate AI into their classroom practice. This is the fundamental problem which is to be explored in the present study.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its multidimensional contribution to the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in understanding how artificial intelligence (AI) influences the professional identity formation of novice teachers.

1. Theoretical Significance. This study extends current discussions of teacher professional identity by situating it within the emerging paradigm of AI-supported instruction. While identity formation has been widely examined through sociocultural and post-structural frameworks, few studies have connected these perspectives to the challenges and affordances of intelligent technologies in ELT (Zhou et al., 2024; Shao & Sun, 2025). By exploring how novice teachers construct and renegotiate their professional selves amid AI integration, this study bridges identity theory with digital pedagogy and contributes to the conceptualization of “AI-mediated professional identity” in teacher education.

2. Practical Significance. On a pedagogical level, the results provide insights that can be readily applied to the work of teacher educators, curriculum writers, and policymakers interested in responsibly infusing AI into pre-service teacher education programs. Identifying the ways in which AI affects new teachers’ perceptions of autonomy, creativity, and relational teaching can inform the development of reflective training modules, mentoring programs, and digital ethics courses that support more balanced professional growth (Ulla et al., 2024). In addition, the use of reflective journals, teaching artifacts, and interviews in the present research offers a model for assessing teacher identity formation in technology mediated settings.

3. Contextual Significance. Conducted within the context of the Iranian EFL teacher education system, this research gives voice to a community that is often under-represented in the global AI and ELT literature. It illustrates the role that sociocultural norms and institutional imperatives play in conjunction with technological innovation in shaping identity trajectories. By illuminating these localized experiences, this research contributes to the larger global discourse concerning equitable and context-specific integration of AI into education (Almazán- López et al., 2025). Although it is rooted in the Iranian context, its results will contribute to the reflective practice of EFL teacher education in other contexts which are undergoing similar digital transformation.

Overall, this body of research provides a theoretically informed, empirically supported, and contextually meaningful understanding of the way AI supported instruction is reformulating issues of professional identity development for novice ELT teachers. The implications of this research will hopefully guide the future practice of teacher education which brings the benefits of technological innovation into harmony with the lasting humanistic core of language education.

Purpose of the Study

In response to the growing influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on teacher education and the limited understanding of its impact on novice teachers' identity formation (Kılıçkaya & Kic-Drgas, 2025; Zhang & Dikilitaş, 2025), this study seeks to explore how AI-supported classroom instruction shapes the evolving professional identities of novice English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers. Specifically, it aims to examine how engagement with AI-mediated pedagogical tools during practicum experiences influences teachers' perceptions of their roles, agency, and pedagogical beliefs.

Grounded in sociocultural and post-structural perspectives on professional identity, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive design to capture the lived experiences of novice teachers as they navigate technological, institutional, and emotional dimensions of their work. Through reflective journals, classroom artifacts, and semi-structured interviews, the research seeks to interpret how teachers negotiate tensions between humanistic teaching values and technologically driven demands.

The overarching purpose is not only to describe patterns of identity change but also to generate a deeper theoretical and practical understanding of identity negotiation in AI-supported ELT contexts. Insights derived from this study are expected to inform teacher education programs, highlighting how critical reflection and guided mentorship can support identity stability and pedagogical adaptability in the era of intelligent instruction. To this end, the following research questions are posed:

1. How do novice ELT teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities through engagement with AI-supported classroom instruction during their practicum experiences?
2. How does AI-mediated pedagogy influence novice teachers' sense of agency, autonomy, and pedagogical creativity in the ELT context?
3. What tensions or challenges do novice ELT teachers experience when reconciling humanistic teaching values with the affordances and constraints of AI-supported instruction?

Literature Review

AI in ELT: affordances and emerging challenges

Since 2020, there has been a plethora of research on artificial intelligence in ELT and this proves both clear educational affordances and sustained socio-technical challenges. Systematic reviews and sector reports demonstrate that AI tools—adaptive tutors, automated feedback systems, chatbots, and generative models—can increase the amount of engagement on the part of the, provide tailored practice pathways, and free teachers of repetitive tasks like low-stakes grading, thus making time for higher-order instructional tasks (British Council, 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; Garzón et al., 2025). Meanwhile, policy and scholarly bodies continuously show

their concerns about integrity of assessment, privacy of data, algorithmic bias, and inequitable access; concerns that may reconfigure but not eliminate teacher work (Miao & Holmes, 2021, 2021; OECD, 2023; Crompton & Burke, 2024).

Beyond these practical tensions, there is a conceptual problem: AI's affordances reconceptualize where teaching expertise is situated and how it is performed. For instance, generative systems can produce candidate lesson sequences or model responses; analytics can profile learner patterns; and conversational agents can scaffold practice outside class (Luckin et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2019). These capacities invite teachers to reposition themselves — not simply as deliverers of content but as designers who curate, critically evaluate, and contextualize machine outputs. Yet the literature also stresses that such roles only emerge when institutional supports for critical use and professional judgement are present (Runge et al., 2025; Erdem Coşgun, 2021).

Teacher professional identity and technology

Teacher professional identity (TPI) is widely theorized as a dynamic, socially-situated process where educators construct a sense of self via participation, reflection, and negotiated practice (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Lai & Jin, 2021). Sociocultural and post-structural perspectives emphasize that institutional discourses and technological artefacts enter the scripts by which teachers make meaning of their roles (Barkhuizen, 2021; Norton & Toohey, 2021). Recent conceptual reviews argue that AI's particular affordances—automated assessment, predictive analytics, and generative outputs—create dialectical tensions: while allowing greater personalization and efficiency, they can also challenge teachers' sense of authorship, authority, and moral responsibility (Shao & Sun, 2025).

A growing number of studies reframe identity not as a fixed property but rather as a negotiated practice established through interaction between human, machine, and institution (Latour, 2005). Within this hybrid framing, artefacts (AI tools, dashboards, prompts) serve as co-actors in identity work, mediating classroom routines and inspiring ethical and reflective decisions that feed back into identity conception. This evolution of scholarship in TPI requires digital affordance theory be integrated or merged with sociocultural lenses (Crompton & Burke, 2024).

Novice teachers, practicum, and identity formation

Novice and pre-service teachers are a specifically significant group for identity research study since their professional selves still need to be constructed and thus more vulnerable to contextual effects (Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022; Zeinali et al., 2023). Research in different settings indicate that teachers who are in their early career normally experience inconsistency of identity when confronted with expectations posed by institutes, classroom realities, and new technologies; they move between conceived professional selves and enacted practices, triggering processes of reconstruction (Zeinali et al., 2023). Empirical work proposes that while technology can help competence and confidence, without guided reflection and mentorship, the adoption of tools may result in superficial competence instead of incorporated professional agency (Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Seifoori & Mir, 2024).

AI, teacher agency, and ethical considerations

Agency is the main theme in the literature on AI adoption. If AI systems are implemented top-down—without teacher input into design, interpretation of analytics, or ethical supervision—educational repertoires risk narrowing and teacher autonomy could be diminished (Miao & Holmes, 2021; OECD, 2023). On the contrary, when teachers keep interpretive control and enhance AI literacy, tools can extend rather than substitute educational judgement (Viberg et al., 2023; Zhang, 2023). Therefore, literature aligns with a critical pedagogical claim: teacher preparation must include both technical skills and ethical deliberation, data literacy, and processes for evaluating AI suggestions against local curricular and cultural goals (Akgun & Greenhow, 2022; Erdem Coşgun, 2021).

Empirical links between AI use and teacher identity

Empirical investigations remain in early stages, but evidence of a range of new role framings as facilitators, data-informed designer, prompt engineers, and creative prompt writers, has been gathered with considerable variance in appropriation patterns (Lan, 2024; Crompton and Burke, 2024; Sun & Sun, 2025). Some teachers move towards an augmentation of creativity and personalization with AI. Others say that in mediating AI-student interactions they experience identity dissonance and increased affective labor and epistemic worry. Nation-wide studies indicate that socio-cultural policy contexts mediate these outcomes so that what is empowering teachers in one context may become disempowering for other teachers in another context (Viberg et al, 2023; OECD, 2023). Notably studies show that prompt design and interpretative judgement are emergent skills for teachers. Being a competent teacher in the GenAI time increasingly involves prompt production, reading model responses critically, turning analytics into pedagogy (Lee et al., 2025; Szabo and Szoke, 2024).

Reflective practice, mentoring and scaffolding identity in AI contexts

Reflective practice (journals, peer review, supervisor feedback) is still fundamental to identity development (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2020; Zeinali, et al, 2023). Recent suggested triadic support forms (peer + faculty + AI as issue) indicate that AI can, paradoxically, be designed to assist identity work provided it is associated with collective reflection and mentoring, and ethics (Runge, et al, 2025; Ulla et al., 2024). Evidence from ELT indicates that reflective frameworks combined with professional development (AI literacy, critical prompt design, contextualized ethical training) enrich teacher agency and decrease fragmentation of identity (Kalali Sani et al., 2022; Seifoori & Mir, 2024). In practicum contexts, AI-generative output purposefully used for reflection (not final answers) is particularly fruitful for the consolidation of the pedagogic purpose.

Methodological trends, governance and persistent gaps

Methodologically, there are three trends in the literature: (1) early, system-level quantitative research emphasizing efficiency and learning gains, (2) an increasing number of small-scale qualitative studies of teacher perceptions and identity, and (3) calls for rigorous mixed-methods and longitudinal research designs to explore identity trajectories over time across practicum and induction (British Council, 2023; Shao & Sun, 2025; Zeinali et al., 2023). Two persistent, substantive gaps are especially clear. First, governance—policy frameworks, institutional guidance on authorship/transparency, data-protection regimes—has received relatively little attention in identity studies, in spite of its centrality to how teachers interpret AI (Miao & Holmes, 2021; OECD, 2023). Second, equity and access issues in terms of Global South contexts that relate to connectivity, device availability, English/technology literacies—have been largely ignored, even if they fundamentally structure whether AI is an empowering scaffold, or extractive workload (Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022). Addressing these gaps will require studies that integrate rich, qualitative tracing of identity work with policy and cross-context comparative designs.

Contextualizing the gap: Iranian and Middle East studies

Regional empirical work on Iranian EFL teachers shows the way in which local pedagogical traditions, institutional constraints and cultural expectations generate responses to technological change (Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022; Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Zeinali et al., 2023). However, little of this research has engaged with how novice teachers negotiate their developing professional identities while they integrate AI into their practicum teaching. Most studies remain descriptive, focusing on attitudes to technology rather than tracing how the experience of AI alters teachers' identities in their reflective, cognitive and affective dimensions over time. In addition, institutional structures of support for AI-mediated teaching are still largely lacking in many teacher education contexts (mentoring systems, digital literacy programs and ethical guidelines). Consequently, there is a pressing need for empirical inquiries that explore how AI-supported classroom instruction affects the dynamic shaping of professional identity among novice ELT teachers, particularly within culturally nuanced contexts such as Iran. The present study responds to this gap by examining how engagement with AI tools during practicum and early teaching experiences helps the construction, reinforcement, or changing of novice teachers' professional selves.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive multiple-case design informed by sociocultural and post-structural perspectives on teacher professional identity (Barkhuizen, 2021; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Such an approach was appropriate because the goal was not to test hypotheses but to understand how novice ELT teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities while engaging with AI-supported classroom instruction. The interpretive paradigm allows for the exploration of teachers' lived experiences and meaning-making processes within their social, technological, and institutional contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Following Braun

and Clarke's (2021) emphasis on reflexive thematic inquiry, the study focused on depth and interpretation rather than generalization.

Participants

Twelve novice ELT teachers (eight female, four male) who enrolled in a semester-long practicum course held at the central office of Safir Language Academy participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 22 to 27. All had completed courses in teaching methodology and educational technology but lacked independent teaching experience, situating them within the novice teacher identity formation phase (Zeinali et al., 2023). Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity of perspectives and voluntary consent (Palinkas et al., 2023). Participants were informed of confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal rights.

Instruments and Data Sources

Data were gathered from three complementary sources, enabling methodological triangulation (Nowell et al., 2017):

1. **Reflective journals** – Participants wrote weekly digital journals throughout the 16-week practicum, documenting classroom experiences, interactions with AI-supported tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Grammarly, Quillbot), and perceived changes in professional self-concept.
2. **Teaching artifacts** – Lesson plans, AI-enhanced materials, and short classroom recordings illustrated enacted pedagogical identities and role performance.
3. **Semi-structured interviews** – Each participant engaged in a 45-minute end-of-term interview designed to elicit reflections on evolving professional roles, agency, and ethical awareness regarding AI integration.

Each data source addressed a dimension of the research questions: journals captured internal reflections; artifacts documented practical enactments; and interviews explored interpretive self-positioning.

Procedure

The study unfolded across four stages over one academic semester:

1. **Orientation and training:** Participants received a workshop on ethical AI use, reflective journaling, and confidentiality protocols (Runge et al., 2025).
2. **Implementation phase:** Teachers integrated at least one AI-supported tool per teaching cycle and maintained weekly reflective logs.
3. **Artifact collection:** Teaching materials were collected mid-term and at semester end to trace identity enactments longitudinally.

4. **Interviews and validation:** Following the practicum, participants took part in individual interviews. Member checking was conducted to confirm transcript accuracy and preliminary interpretations (Birt et al., 2016).

Data security followed institutional policy: pseudonyms replaced real names, and all digital materials were stored on encrypted drives accessible only to the researcher.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis using NVivo 12 software: (1) familiarization; (2) generating initial codes; (3) constructing themes; (4) reviewing and refining; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) synthesizing interpretive narratives. Analytic memos were maintained throughout to document decisions and reflections (Nowell et al., 2017).

Trustworthiness was enhanced through (a) triangulation of journals, artifacts, and interviews; (b) peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts; (c) member checking with participants; and (d) thick description to promote transferability (Nowell et al., 2017). Researcher reflexivity was ensured through continuous journaling on positionality and interpretive bias (Barkhuizen, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of respect, informed consent, and participant welfare guided all research activities (Cohen et al., 2023). AI tools were restricted to educational uses compliant with Safir Language Academy's data-protection policies, and participants were encouraged to discuss potential ethical dilemmas in their reflective journals.

Results

The reflections found within the analysis of reflective journals, teaching artifacts, and interview transcripts served to develop three prominent themes, and a few related subthemes which reflect the dynamic and complex process of professional identity construction that novice ELT teachers are undergoing in AI-assisted classrooms. These themes align with the three research questions of the study, and are presented as follows.

Across all the data sets novice ELT teachers were seen to actively reconstruct their professional identity through engaging with AI-assisted teaching. They were not simply adopting technological tools in a passive way, rather, the novice teachers simultaneously negotiated their identities as reflective practitioners through iterative engagement with the technology, critical examination and evaluation of the pedagogical offerings by AI, and dialogue with their colleagues. This process presented a preliminary manifestation of self-awareness and professional confidence. As an example, Maryam stated, 'AI made me question why I teach the way I do,' indicative of one novice's reflective repositioning as part of the identity negotiation framework for teachers. In total, across the journals and interviews, 10 of 12 novice teachers provided evidence of moving forward from being a user of digital technology, towards being

critical co-designers of learning. These findings respond to RQ1 by illustrating that identity construction is not only an active, dynamic, and reflective process, but it is also shaped by engagement with AI.

Theme 1: Repositioning and Negotiation of Professional Identity (RQ1)

In line with the first research question, all participants revealed that incorporating an AI component into their lesson planning and classroom activities resulted in a re-negotiation of identity. In the first phase, most participants positioned themselves as "AI suggestion followers" and "novices relying on tools"- but throughout the semester, they began to define AI as a collaborator in teaching, no longer considering it authoritative.

"Initially, I just copied what feedback I got from Grammarly, now I'm more questioning," implied Maryam at Journal 8, "and I sort through the corrections to see what fits the students' level."

This transition from reliance on technology to critical appropriation demonstrates a growth in identity based on critical consideration of digital mediation for reflection of agency. Participants expressed that AI-supported planning allowed for experimentation with greater numbers of teaching tasks, expanding their pedagogical repertoires to greater lengths.

"AI allowed me to focus on the communicative parts instead of grammar correction; it felt like a co-teacher," Hamed stated during the interview.

This repositioning across cases, built educators' confidence and affirmations of their developing professional identity aligns with prior findings on digital empowerment for novice teacher identity agents (Seifoori & Mir, 2024; Ulla et al 2024). In summary, the findings line-up with research question 1 by demonstrating professional identity growth through engagement with AI-supported classroom instruction as part of their teaching practicum.

Theme 2: Agency, Autonomy, and Pedagogical Creativity in AI-Mediated Pedagogy (RQ2)

The second theme addressed the effect of AI-mediated pedagogy on novice teachers' sense of agency, autonomy, and pedagogical creativity in the ELT context. This means that AI-mediated tools enhanced participants' sense of agency by streamlining lesson planning and freeing time for creative pedagogical decisions. Findings revealed that 10 of 12 participants used AI suggestions as scaffolds rather than scripts, thereby exercising autonomy in adapting outputs to suit their learners' needs. Teachers' description of AI as 'a co-teacher that lets me think more creatively' illustrates this redefined agency. Teachers expressed increased empowerment in trying communicative and project-based activities. The data indicate that AI contributed to autonomy by (a) reducing repetitive tasks, (b) increasing the amount of instruction in their

instructional repertoire, and (c) supporting self-directed experimentation. These results answer RQ2 by indicating that AI assisted efficiency and supported creative professional growth.

Theme 3: Ethical, Emotional, and Humanistic Tensions, and Reflective Mediation (RQ3)

The last theme pinpointed the tensions and dilemmas that participants encountered as they attempted to balance the affordances of AI with the many ethical and emotional dilemmas associated with AI. These tensions emphasized the instructors' struggle to balance their humanistic teaching beliefs and values—including empathy, authenticity, and relational responsiveness—with the affordances and limitations of AI-supported instruction that emphasized efficiency on the part of the teacher. Instructors expressed anxiety about authenticity and authorship in AI-mediated assignments for their students, fearing that the reliance on the AI algorithm would create blurred boundaries between work generated by teachers vs. machines.

“Writing weekly reflections helped me see how my role was changing—from someone who ‘uses tools’ to someone who *decides* how to use them responsibly.” (Laleh, Journal 14)

Participants’ reflections indicated that structured mentoring and guided peer exchange acted as mediating tools, promoting coherence between beliefs and practices (Zeinali et al., 2023; Barkhuizen, 2021).

“Discussing my reflections with the supervisor made me realize that being a teacher today means being an ethical decision-maker, not just a language model user.” (Nima, Interview)

These narratives indicate that reflective mediation made a connection between teachers' engagement with technology and their professional identity shift. Teachers did not only reconceptualize their professional values alongside each other but began to view themselves as ethical innovators in the expanding AI-supported ELT context.

Many participants navigated their ongoing tensions of values as humanist teachers and the opportunities that AI offered for instruction. Some of the ethical dilemmas that arose in the interviews and reflective journals included authorship, authenticity, and emotional connections of teachers with their students. Sara posed the question, 'did you write this or was it ChatGPT'? – which is an example of prevalent anxiety on the part of teachers that AI has weakened their authorship or originality, as writing is often deemed a treasured aspect of being a professional teacher. However, through reflective mediation with journal reflections, peer discussions, and mentoring, participants began to reframe these tensions in new ways that engaged in professional growth. Their reflections in relation to AI transformed the tensions of their professional values into opportunities to enhance their practice. For example, Laleh questioned her previous hesitation to take risks with technology, and over her weekly reflections, she transitioned from uncertainty to a mindful and ethical approach for her strategic use of AI. Reflective practice mediated emotions and ethical tensions, and allowed novice teachers to re-evaluate their integration of AI into their teaching. Thus, RQ3 demonstrates how reflective practice mediated both emotion and ethical tension in aligning AI integration with humanist teaching values.

The above themes are also summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Overview of Major Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes	Aligned Research Question
1. Repositioning and Negotiation of Professional Identity	(a) Transition from dependence to reflective agency; (b) Expansion of pedagogical repertoire through AI-supported experimentation	RQ1
2. Agency, Autonomy, and Pedagogical Creativity in AI-Mediated Pedagogy	(a) Exercise of professional autonomy through adaptive use of AI; (b) Emergence of pedagogical creativity and self-directed innovation	RQ2
3. Ethical, Emotional, and Humanistic Tensions, and Reflective Mediation	(a) Authorship and authenticity dilemmas; (b) Emotional ambivalence and ethical negotiation; (c) Reflective mediation as a reconciliatory process	RQ3

Cross-Case Synthesis

While the degree of transformation varied, all cases demonstrated progressive identity consolidation characterized by (a) enhanced technological agency, (b) awareness of ethical responsibility, and (c) reflective competence. Participants who engaged most consistently in journaling and mentor feedback exhibited deeper identity integration, aligning with Creswell and Poth's (2024) view that reflection and narrative co-construction are central to qualitative identity research.

Overall, it can be concluded from the above findings that AI-supported instruction, when coupled with structured reflection, can serve as both a catalyst and a context for professional identity formation, promoting critical, ethical, and adaptive teacher selves.

Discussion

This research investigated the ways in which classroom instruction sustained by artificial intelligence shapes the professional identity development of novice ELT teachers in an Iranian practicum context. Results have shown to comprise of three interdependent identity processes: (1) repositioning as reflective practitioners, (2) negotiating ethical and emotional tensions, and (3) weaving insights through reflective mediation, all of which contribute to an understanding of professional identity as a dynamic, situated, and technologically supported process. Finally, these results support the claim that identity develops via continuous negotiation between personal beliefs, institutional demands, and mediated classroom experience (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Barkhuizen, 2021).

Repositioning as Reflective Practitioners

Participants initially relied heavily on AI suggestions and positioned themselves as “followers of technological guidance.” Over time, however, they enacted more critical roles as evaluators, designers, and decision-makers. This shift demonstrates not only increasing

confidence but also emerging pedagogical judgement, aligning with sociocultural theories of identity as enacted participation in meaningful activity (Wenger, 1998; Norton & Toohey, 2023). AI served as a mediating tool that prompted teachers to interrogate their assumptions about teaching, curriculum design, and learner engagement—similar to findings by Holmes et al. (2019) and Sun & Sun (2025), who argue that AI can support teacher agency when used reflectively.

This study extends previous work by showing that iterative reflection on AI outputs fosters higher-order pedagogical reasoning, not simply technological competence. The recurrent interaction between teacher judgement and machine suggestions serves as a fertile site for identity repositioning (Latour, 2005; Luckin et al., 2016). For many participants, AI became a catalyst for understanding their developing professional voice, thereby reinforcing the claim that identity development emerges through dialogic tension between tool affordances and personal meaning-making (Runge et al., 2025; Ulla et al., 2024).

Negotiating Ethical and Emotional Tensions

Besides increasing agency, the participants also reported ethical dilemmas and emotional ambivalence especially regarding authorship, authenticity, fairness, and the relational dimensions of teaching. These tensions speak to larger debates in the AI-in-education research temporally concerning the potential of algorithmic influence on pedagogical judgement (Miao & Holmes, 2021; OECD, 2023). These dilemmas also intersect with concerns of similar nature, previously identified in ELT contexts where teachers are concerned about a loss of authorship and encroaching professional boundaries (Crompton & Burke, 2024; Erdem Coşgun, 2025).

In this study, ethical tensions were intensified by cultural and institutional expectations in Iranian ELT programs, where integrity, assessment transparency, and the teacher's moral role are emphasized (Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022). Novice teachers often felt compelled to balance humanistic commitments—empathy, responsiveness, and relational care—with AI-enabled efficiency. Their emotional oscillation mirrors Pennington & Richards' (2016) argument that identity in language teaching is inherently emotional and tied to teachers' moral and relational obligations. This finding adds nuance to global literature by illustrating how AI integration heightens emotional labor in contexts where professional identity is deeply intertwined with ethical responsibility (Shao & Sun, 2025).

Transforming Identity Through Reflective Mediation

Structured reflection—which encompassed weekly journaling, discussion with peers, and conversations with colleagues—was found to be indispensable for supporting teachers in their work via ethical tensions and crafting a cohesive professional identity. The significance of reflective practice was a theme, in line with decades of research that deems reflective practice as the main dimension of teacher learning (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2020). Teachers who engaged more steadily in the reflective cycles gained higher clarity about their professional identity, intentions with pedagogy, and self-assurance in dealing with their AI-mediated teaching.

Ultimately, this study indicates that AI can play a role as a reflective stimulus. The act of contemplating, evaluating, and revising suggestions made through AI sparked teachers to

examine their pedagogical assumptions, reconstruct professional boundaries, and reconsider their intentions for their instructional purposes. This supports emerging studies proposing that AI produced outputs can serve as “identity mirrors” that create metacognitive awareness and responses to ethical assumptions of the educator (Lan, 2024; Szabo & Szoke, 2024).

Theoretical Synthesis

This set of findings supports a model of educational identity formation in three parts, namely, A) Cognitive Dimension which develops critical AI literacy and pedagogical agency; B) Affective Dimension which manages emotional turbulence and ethical dilemmas; and C) Reflective Dimension which integrates reflection into evolving narratives of professional identity.

The model expands beyond sociocultural and post-structural theories (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Barkhuizen, 2021) and draws on digital affordance theorizing considering the ways technologies mediate identity work (Crompton & Burke, 2024; Holmes et al., 2019). The contribution is in illustrating how the identity trajectories of novice teachers are co-shaped by interactions among human actors, institutional practices, and non-human actors, like AI systems.

Pedagogical and Practical Implications

These results suggest four main educational and institutional concerns to design teacher training programs that integrate AI responsibly while supporting novice teachers’ construction of identity.

First, AI literacy needs to be reconceptualized as more than just knowing how to operate AI tools effectively, meaning that teacher training must also prepare educators for thinking critically about the affordances and limitations of AI tools, ethical reasoning, and reflective engagement with AI enriched resources, as new research suggests that AI literacy must also entail pedagogy judgment and ethical inquiry to avoid surface level or uncritical uses of AI tools (Viberg et al., 2023; Zhang, 2023; Akgun & Greenhow, 2022). However, structured tasks, such as thoughtfully critiquing lesson plans enriched by AI or pondering the nature of authorship in relation to AI, will help create more teacher self-awareness to reimagine changing identities. Second, mentoring and collaborating with reflections, adults must address the conflict around AI used as a tool and the inconsistencies of infusing a humanistic pedagogy with technology because the realities and tensions teachers face will differ in humanistic pedagogy as imposed pressures from education technology ethics lessens the thinking and pedagogical task of trying to incorporate these technologies; nevertheless, risky relationships such as engaging in critical discussions with your more senior colleagues help give validity to doubts around tension, assist educators build emotional resilience, and help grow agency as the involvement of others transfer the idea that identity growth incrementally occurs through collective social semiotic meaning making processes (Barkhuizen, 2021; Wenger, 1998; Zeinali et al., 2023). Third, school policies need to have clear concepts on how to implement a framework for authoring, plagiarism thresholds, privacy of data, and transparency concerning students to set clear ethical and responsible methods for using AI tools so this can facilitate teacher autonomy and clarify job expectations and responsibility when using AI and can help mitigate the fragmented experience of identity formation when using AI and being instructor advised to infuse AI in their classroom

(Miao & Holmes, 2021; OECD, 2023; Yu-Ju & Nian-Shing, 2024). Ultimately, teacher education programs must reaffirm and highlight the importance of humanistic pedagogy by explicating relationality, empathy, and contextual sensitivity. In this regard, while AI tools can alleviate and streamline the demands of pedagogy, they cannot replace the relational and affective elements of teaching that underpin language learning. Supporting teachers in being able to present and maintain their humanistic values can afford teachers a stable and coherent professional identity in increasingly technological contexts (Almashour et al., 2025; Shao & Sun, 2025).

Limitations and Future Research

This study provides rich interpretive possibilities for novice teachers' identity processes but is not without its limitations, which are detailed in the following four sections. The first limitation is the small sample size of 12 novice teachers from one institution, which hinders the transferability of the findings and raises questions of generalizability across broader contexts of English Language Teaching (ELT). This is particularly salient considering that identity is often highly contextual, and the mediated experience of AI as a tool will differ across institutional, cultural, technological, and systemic contexts (Viberg et al., 2023; Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022). Second, the snapshot nature of the study provides limited insight on how identity shift will take place over time. In other words, longitudinal data gained through observing the trajectories of all aspects of the transition from practicum-to-induction would provide insight into how identity consolidation may shift over time, as AI becomes more deeply embedded into teachers' professional identity practices (Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Zeinali et al., 2023). Third, while qualitative methods limited but appropriate for engagement with lived experience, mixed-methods approaches integrating narrative data with quantitative approach to AI literacy, teacher agency, emotional resilience, and ethical awareness could provide richer insight into teachers' identity shifts (Luckin et al., 2016; Zhang, 2023). Fourth, it is important to emphasize limitations related to cross-cultural variation or teacher–student relationship, which are important elements to account for in order to examine how sociocultural norms and rules embedded in classroom and school practices guide ethical positions, emotional labor, identity positioning and accountability in AI-assisted learning (Miao & Holmes, 2021; OECD, 2023) and how the social order envisioned in AI-supported learning may reconfigure existing boundaries and relational work in language classrooms (Shao & Sun, 2025; Xu, 2025). Addressing these four limitations through multi-context, multi-method and relationally sensitive design would refine theoretical models on identity mediated by AI and provide more contextually relevant teacher education practices.

Conclusion

This research investigated the impact of AI-assisted classroom instruction on the professional identity formation of novice ELT teachers in the Iranian practicum context. The results revealed that identity development occurred through cognitive, affective, and reflective connected processes: forming agency as reflective practitioners, managing ethical and emotional dilemmas, and integrating experiences through the use and structure of reflective mediation.

Theoretically, this research contributes to emerging research studies that examine AI-mediated teacher identity development by framing AI as an artifact that serves a mediational tool as it evokes critical inquiry, reconfigures professional responsibilities, and provokes ethical reasoning (Barkhuizen, 2021; Holmes et al., 2019; Latour, 2005). This triadic model extends sociocultural teacher identity frameworks by foregrounding the mediational role of technology as an important factor in teacher development in a contemporary society.

Pedagogically, the findings indicate the need for teacher education programs to incorporate reflective AI literacy and ethical engagement together with supervising the development of novice teachers' agency and sense of coherence as they navigate an AI-integrated classroom. Teacher education institutions should also form ethical guidelines to ensure transparency, protect professional boundaries, and promote responsible AI integration (OECD, 2023; Miao & Holmes, 2021).

Although this study is limited in scope and context, it offers a foundation for future longitudinal and comparative inquiries into AI-mediated teacher identity formation. In conclusion, the evidence confirms that even with intelligent technologies, language teaching is essentially human and based on reflection, empathy, relational care and ethical professionalism. If incorporated thoughtfully, AI can function not as a threat but rather, as a transformative partner that enriches teachers' reflective capacities and assists the development of resilient, responsible, and future-ready professionals in ELT.

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