

A Systematic Review on ESL Educators' Discursive Construction of Professional Identities: Unpacking the Intersecting Factors (2016 – 2026)

Norazrin Zamri¹, Wan Syariza Wan Yadri^{2*}, Sathiyaperba Subramaniam³, Doreen Dillah⁴

Centre of Foundation Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Selangor, Kampus Dengkil,
43800 Dengkil, Selangor

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review (SLR) synthesises global research on the discursive construction of professional identities among English as a Second Language (ESL) educators between 2016 and 2026. Following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, this study rigorously screened 210 records from the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases, resulting in the selection of 30 peer-reviewed articles for final synthesis. The review addresses three core research questions, mapping contemporary trends, methodological frameworks, and the intersecting contextual factors that shape the professional identities of ESL educators. The findings reveal that professional identity is not a static construct but a dynamic, negotiated process of "identity work" occurring at the intersection of five emerging pillars: *Teacher Education & Development*, *Institutional Power & Constraints*, *Emotional Labour & Well-being*, *Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation*, and *Digital Pedagogy & Technology*. The synthesis indicates that while narrative and phenomenological inquiries remain dominant, there is a clear trend toward micro-discursive and multimodal methodologies. Crucially, the review highlights that ESL educators' identities are continuously shaped by the tension between institutional accountability and personal agency. However, there remains a critical gap in understanding how intersecting dynamics such as academic hierarchies, linguistic ideologies, and institutional precarity are navigated within the multiculturally unique tertiary institutions of Southeast Asia. Future empirical research must explore how ESL educators in these stratified settings negotiate their complex and competing professional identities and agency discursively.

Keywords: ESL educators, discourse analysis, identity construction, professional identities

INTRODUCTION

The global landscape of English as a Second Language (ESL) education is currently undergoing a paradigm shift, in which the focus has shifted from mere instructional efficiency to the complex interplay among psychological well-being, professional identity, and the educator (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). Internationally, the rise of "Global Englishes" and the post-pandemic digital transition have destabilised traditional teaching roles, making the construction of a stable professional identity a primary challenge for educators worldwide. This research is significant because it examines how these global shifts manifest in educators' lived experiences, offering insights into teacher retention and pedagogical quality in an era of unprecedented educational reform (Gu & Day, 2013).

This shift is not merely academic; it reflects a fundamental change in how the profession conceptualises the 'teacher-self.' As educators increasingly operate within multicultural and technologically mediated spaces, their identities are no longer singular or fixed, but rather fluid, contested, and continuously negotiated through interactional discourse (Varghese et al., 2016). Scholars have long argued that educators' identities are multifaceted and complex, representing a dynamic interplay between professional and personal life (Beijaard et al., 2004). This conceptual evolution suggests that professional identity is not a static property acquired during

initial teacher education but a site of ongoing 'identity work' in which educators constantly negotiate their subjectivities and 'investments' in their pedagogical practices (Norton, 2000). Because this work is deeply tied to the socio-political context of the classroom, it is often fraught with emotional struggle and resistance to dominant institutional power (Zembylas, 2003). Consequently, this 'identity work' determines how educators interpret policy, relate to students, and sustain their motivation over time (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Given this complexity, systematic mapping of the field is essential to reconcile disparate findings and to clarify how discursive practices both shape and are shaped by the evolving educational environment (Barkhuizen, 2017).

Having established the broader theoretical significance of identity work, it is now crucial to examine how these concepts function as a foundational pillar of teacher agency within the diverse, often high-pressure realities of contemporary ESL classrooms.

Professional Identity Construction:

An Essential Construct for Educators Professional identity has become a central construct in teacher education because it shapes how educators understand themselves, make professional decisions, and respond to the changing demands of their work. Rather than representing a fixed set of personal characteristics, professional identity is increasingly understood as an evolving process shaped by educators' experiences, beliefs, relationships, and professional contexts. According to Beijaard et al. (2004), educators' professional identities are characterised by the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of professional experiences. It develops through the interaction between personal beliefs and professional contexts, comprises multiple sub-identities, and evolves throughout educators' careers. This perspective highlights professional identity as a dynamic, context-dependent construct continually shaped by both individual experiences and the environments in which educators work.

Within regional and local ESL contexts, however, professional identity is increasingly shaped by native-speakerism and neoliberal accountability, both of which prioritise standardised outcomes over teacher autonomy (De Costa & Norton, 2017). As a result, ESL educators continually negotiate their professional roles, beliefs, and values, making professional identity an evolving rather than fixed construct.

Recent studies show that professional identity is influenced by social, institutional, and policy contexts. Ershadi et al. (2024) found that native-speakerism, reinforced through institutional practices, can undermine educators' confidence, professional legitimacy, and agency, particularly among non-native English-speaking teachers. Likewise, neoliberal accountability places greater emphasis on measurable performance and compliance, reducing educators' professional autonomy and contributing to increasingly precarious working conditions (Rana, 2022). These challenges are often more evident in resource-constrained settings, where limited institutional support restricts teachers' opportunities to exercise professional judgement. Jin and Kim (2026) similarly found that educators in such contexts continually negotiate their professional identities within structural constraints that shape their roles and agency.

Despite these challenges, educators are not passive recipients of institutional pressures. They continue to construct and reconstruct their professional identities by reflecting on their experiences, exercising agency, and adapting to institutional expectations (Nigar & Kostogriz, 2025b). This process often requires balancing their ideal professional self with institutional demands for accountability and standardisation. Professional identity construction is therefore a continuous process of aligning personal beliefs with professional expectations. It enables educators to maintain agency, adapt to changing educational contexts, and remain committed to their profession.

Understanding Professional Identity Construction Processes among ESL Educators

The process of professional identity construction among ESL educators involves a continuous interaction between educators' personal experiences and the professional expectations of the institutions in which they work. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) describe professional identity as an ongoing process of negotiating multiple professional roles rather than a fixed personal characteristic. Similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991) explain that

identity develops through participation in professional communities, where educators learn, interact, and gradually build professional competence. These perspectives suggest that professional identity is continually shaped through experience, reflection, and social interaction.

Within ESL education, identity construction is further influenced by the linguistic, cultural, and institutional contexts in which educators work. Recent studies show that ESL educators continually negotiate and reconstruct their professional identities in response to changing curriculum demands, diverse learners, and evolving educational environments. Identity is therefore not a static characteristic but a process that develops through educators' everyday interactions with students, colleagues, and school communities (Li, 2023; Neupane et al., 2022).

However, this process is often challenged by institutional expectations and policy changes. In many regional and local ESL contexts, educators are expected to adapt to new policies, accountability measures, and shifting professional responsibilities while remaining committed to their own pedagogical beliefs and values. These competing demands require educators to continually reinterpret their professional roles and practices. Recent research suggests that professional identity is constructed through balancing personal beliefs with institutional expectations, enabling educators to adapt while maintaining professional agency and commitment (Nazari et al., 2023).

Overall, professional identity construction among ESL educators is best understood as a continuous process of negotiation between individual experiences and contextual influences. Rather than being a fixed outcome, identity is continually reconstructed as educators respond to changing professional demands, institutional contexts, and educational reforms. This ongoing process enables ESL educators to remain adaptable while preserving their professional purpose and commitment to effective teaching.

Theoretical Foundation: The Discursive Turn in Applied Linguistics Identity Studies

Recent advancements in applied linguistics have indicated a "discursive turn" that reframes teacher identity not as a fixed internal construct but as a shifting, socially constructed entity (Barkhuizen, 2017; Varghese et al., 2016). Rather than viewing identity as an internal mental state, this theoretical approach focuses on how ESL educators use discourse to claim power, demonstrate expertise, and resist marginalisation within their specific school cultures (Miller, 2009), and on how they continuously perform and revise their roles in response to situational demands.

This shift reflects a broader international move toward post-structuralist research that prioritises the "voice" of the teacher as a site of struggle and agency, rather than simplistic cognitive models that pathologise identity conflict as an individual failure. The more discursive perspective emphasises recognising the systemic and linguistic environments as crucial elements shaping educators' daily pedagogical practices, enabling researchers to go beyond merely characterising their burnout. Nonetheless, understanding this discursive foundation requires a thorough examination of the ongoing personal and professional negotiations that shape educators' daily career trajectories.

The professional identity construct is characterised as an ongoing site of dynamic "identity work" where educators negotiate their subjectivities and personal investments. This continuous evaluation suggests that identity is not a permanent attribute acquired during initial training but an ever-changing process in which educators constantly "re-story" their lived experiences and align their psychological well-being with shifting instructional realities (Beijaard et al., 2004; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018).

These patterns persist because the complex interplay between an educator's inner life and outer professional scripts forces individuals to invest in specific pedagogical personas to maintain structural legitimacy. As a broader consequence, this active engagement determines how they interpret policy mandates, build meaningful student-educator relationships, and sustain long-term career motivation. Nevertheless, this individualised identity work does not occur in a vacuum; it is frequently constrained by overarching institutional power dynamics and macro-level educational ideologies.

Structural institutional constraints and dominant linguistic ideologies profoundly impact educator subjectivity, transforming classrooms into spaces of emotional struggle and resistance. In many ESL environments, educators face severe systemic pressures driven by native-speakerism and neoliberal accountability measures that systematically devalue professional autonomy (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). These high-pressure environments exist because contemporary education landscapes place importance on standardised, measurable outcomes and idealised native-speaker norms over localised pedagogical expertise, leaving non-native educators marginalised. The broader implication of these rigid systems is the forced emergence of emotional labour, which can alienate educators from their authentic professional values and constrain their capacity for agency. Despite the widespread recognition of these macro-level systemic pressures, the current literature fails to adequately document how these tensions are managed at the micro-discursive level in specific local contexts.

The Research Gap: A Discursive Approach to Unpacking ESL Educators' Fragmented Professional Identity Construction

Despite the wealth of global research on teacher identity, a persistent and localised research gap remains, particularly in understanding how specific discursive practices, such as "positioning" or "small stories", reveal the fragmentation of the ESL professional self, particularly in non-Western contexts (Bamberg, 2004; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Most current studies focus on broad psychological outcomes such as "burnout", whereas this research narrows its focus to the subtle linguistic ways in which educators reconcile conflicting institutional roles.

Due to the ways educators discursively portray themselves being inextricably tied to pedagogical quality and programme sustainability, exploring this "managed achievement" of identity is critical for the field. In addition, the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the precise conversational mechanisms through which professional legitimacy is constantly co-constructed and contested highlights the need for a systematic synthesis of international empirical evidence to map these complex interactional phenomena. Moreover, existing data are scattered across disparate regional and international journals, limiting the overarching global trends in discourse-analytical identity studies. This further emphasises on the need to tap into theoretical consolidation and clear methodological insights to improve professional development programmes globally.

This systematic review specifically addresses and synthesises a decade of global research (2016 – 2026) to identify key trends in the discursive construction of professional identities and methodological shifts within the field. By mapping the intersections of contextual factors, this study provides a necessary bridge between high-level post-structuralist theory and the practical realities of the ESL classroom. The review is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What trends are evident in the discursive construction of ESL educators' professional identities globally?

RQ2: What methodological approaches are employed in the included discourse analytical studies of ESL educators' professional identities?

RQ3: What are the intersecting contextual factors in the discursive construction of professional identities among the ESL educators?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) approach that adheres to the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. PRISMA is widely used in SLR studies for its rigorous steps, adaptability, replicability, and transparency (Page et al., 2021). For these reasons, this systematic review closely follows the PRISMA protocols for identification, screening, eligibility, and included, as shown in Figure 1 below.

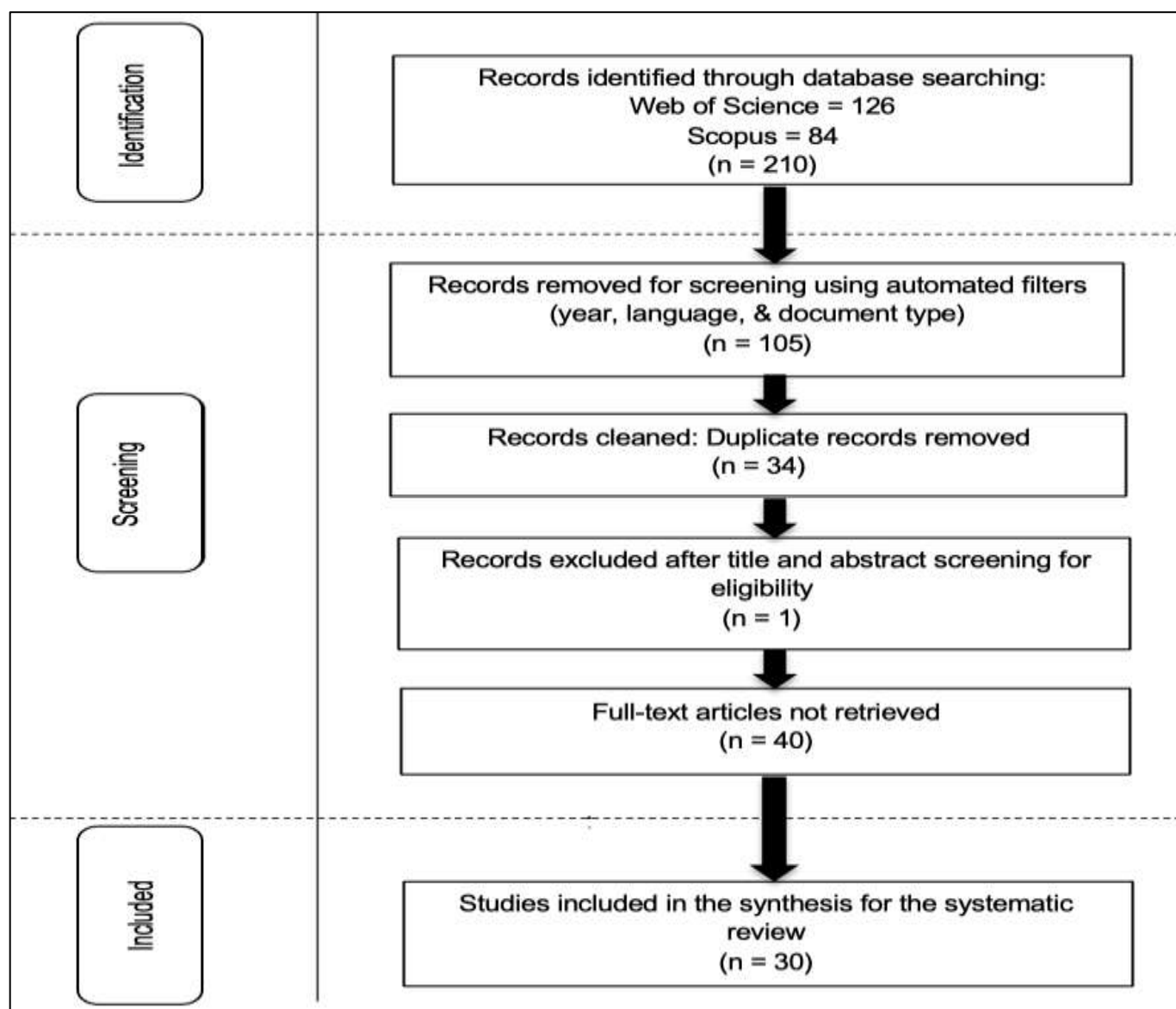


Figure 1 PRISMA systematic review adapted from Page et al. (2021)

Data Collection Methods

The data collection phase of this SLR was designed to ensure a comprehensive and replicable search for high-quality empirical studies. By utilising established academic databases and specific, construct-aligned search strings, this process aimed to identify the full breadth of research concerning how ESL educators discursively navigate their professional identities. The following subsections detail the three-stage process of identification, screening, and inclusion, in accordance with the PRISMA framework.

Identification

The first step involves selecting appropriate databases and establishing a robust search strategy using relevant search strings. This phase is referred to as the identification step. In this study, two primary databases, Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), were utilised for their extensive and pertinent coverage of high-impact journals in Applied Linguistics, specifically in discourse studies. The search strings chosen match the constructs intended for review, as reflected in the research questions. Upon keying in the search strings into the databases, 210 articles, i.e., 126 and 84 articles in Scopus and WoS, respectively. The search strings used to generate these numbers for each database are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Search strings used in this study.

Database	Search String
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("discourse" OR "discursive") AND ("professional ident*" OR "teach* identit*" OR "pedagogic* identit*") AND ("ESL educator*" OR "ESL teacher*" OR "ESL lecturer*" OR "English educator*" OR "English teacher*" OR "English lecturer*" OR "English language educator*" OR "English language teacher*" OR "English language lecturer*"))
Web of Science	TS=(("discourse" OR "discursive") AND ("professional ident*" OR "teach* identit*" OR "pedagogic* identit*") AND ("ESL educator*" OR "ESL teacher*" OR "ESL lecturer*" OR "English educator*" OR "English teacher*" OR "English lecturer*" OR "English language educator*" OR "English language teacher*" OR "English language lecturer*"))

Screening

To refine the search results for easier subsequent data management, the screening step applied database-level filters to the advanced search results. This process was done to limit the results to English-language articles published between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2026 and to peer-reviewed journal articles. This preliminary filtering was conducted at the database level rather than applied at the subsequent step, as in some other SLRs, to ensure a focused dataset prior to duplicate removal. The 210 articles were screened using the inclusion and exclusion criteria shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 A summary of inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies conducted between 1st April 2016 and 31st March 2026 (10-year timespan)	Studies conducted outside the timespan of 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2026
The text was written in the English language	The text not written in the English language
Articles from peer-reviewed journals	Conference proceedings, review articles, book chapters, reports
Related to ESL educators' discursive professional identity construction	Not related to ESL educators' discursive professional identity construction

This screening process yielded 105 articles eligible for further review. These articles were exported and imported into Mendeley, a reference management software, where 34 duplicate entries were identified and removed. The remaining 71 records then underwent a final screening, i.e., the eligibility phase, to assess their relevance to the study's keywords and research questions. This phase involved a title and abstract-based assessment of the remaining articles using the study's keywords to ensure that only studies aligned with the review's focus were included. At this stage, 1 article was found to be not aligned with the study's objectives. 40 articles were further excluded due to blocked access to the full texts via the researcher's institutional online database login.

Included

The articles for this systematic review focused on discourse studies on the construction of professional identities among ESL educators. Following the final exclusion stage, 30 articles were finalised for inclusion in the synthesis of this systematic review.

A structured data extraction matrix was developed to provide a clear overview of all included studies, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 A summary of the selected studies (Chronological)

No.	Study	Database	Aim	Methodology	Findings
1	Tseng (2017)	Scopus/WoS	To explore how Taiwanese preservice EFL teachers constructed their	A qualitative case study incorporating written journals, service-learning portfolios, field observations, and semi-	Participants experienced conflict between Confucian and American educational discourses, which they

			professional identities within a service-learning project emphasising TESOL and cross-cultural communication.	structured interviews with eight preservice teachers.	reconciled through discourse appropriation, leading to identity empowerment and professional development.
2	Loo et al. (2017)	Scopus/WoS	To examine non-local English teacher identity through the conflicts and agency emergent from their personal narratives.	A sociocultural discourse analysis of narrative accounts from five non-local English teachers working in Bangkok, Thailand.	Teachers faced conflicts between employer expectations and students' circumstances, responding agentically by modifying their pedagogy or by opposing the administration in line with workplace social norms.
3	Tajeddin & Ameri (2018)	Scopus/WoS	To explore how Iranian EFL teachers discursively establish and demarcate identity boundaries between themselves and their learners.	A qualitative content analysis based on semi-structured interviews with 58 Iranian EFL teachers.	Teachers established identity boundaries using knowledge and power as indicators, setting classroom rules but maintaining flexible limits implicitly and non-discursively.
4	Hayik & Weiner-Levy (2019)	Scopus/WoS	To invite prospective Arab English teachers to narrate meaningful experiences and explore how emotions from sociocultural challenges shape their professional identities.	A qualitative narrative analysis of life stories and critical teaching events written by 15 female prospective Israeli-Arab English teachers.	Coercive power relationships and patriarchal restrictions stirred powerful negative emotions, which ultimately played an empowering and resilient role in shaping their professional identities.
5	Howard (2019)	Scopus/WoS	To explore how the experiences and beliefs of expatriate native-speaking EFL teachers promote or hinder their professional identity constructions in South Korea.	A descriptive qualitative study involving an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with 11 native English-speaking teachers on E-2 visas.	Identity constructions are complex and ambivalent, leading to five conceptualisations: Distanced Other, Commercial Asset, Replaceable Part, Cultural/Linguistic Ambassador, and Professional/Respected Educator.
6	Alam (2019)	Scopus Only	To provide a contextual understanding of the dichotomy between native and non-native English language teachers regarding ELT curriculum implementation.	A critical literature review examining educational and sociological theories regarding language teacher categories.	The native/non-native dichotomy persists as a major paradigm, with the curriculum often reflecting biases towards standard English as symbolic capital, while also recommending the fostering of users' appropriation of English.
7	Donaghue (2020)	Scopus/WoS	To understand how identities shape and are shaped by the goal of post-observation feedback meetings between teachers and supervisors.	Microanalysis and conversation analysis of 17 audio-recorded dyadic feedback meetings with in-service English language teachers and a supervisor in a Gulf state.	Identities of experience and power are fluidly co-constructed; because evaluative identities were prioritised over developmental ones, feedback remained primarily evaluative, compromising instructional improvement.

8	Lawrence (2020)	Scopus/WoS	To investigate the discursive construction of "native" and "non-native" speaker English teacher identities via institutional ascription and student-teacher interactions.	A linguistic ethnographic framework incorporating membership categorisation analysis of classroom observations, interviews, and institutional artefacts with two university instructors in Japan.	While institutional interactions strongly ascribed fixed identities, leading to discrimination, teachers had greater scope and agency to perform and negotiate desired identities during direct interactions with students.
9	Huang (2021)	Scopus/WoS	To examine issues of teacher attrition and sustainable professional development in relation to an early career ESL teacher's agency and identity.	A longitudinal qualitative case study tracking one Hong Kong secondary ESL teacher over seven to eight years using interviews, informal communications, and autobiography.	The teacher's agency was dynamic: a mix of early successes and complex school environments constrained her identity, leading her to resign and then reconsider her career.
10	Mansouri (2021)	Scopus/WoS	To explore professional identity positionings reflected in the lived experiences of Iranian EFL teachers exposed to overt and covert ELT policies.	A qualitative case study drawing from a A three-level positioning approach to analyse narrative interviews and written journals from two female teachers over two re-storying cycles.	The teachers adopted different approaches to positioning themselves and others; labelling games and contradictory policies significantly impacted their identity negotiation and discourse positioning.
11	Huang & Yip (2021)	Scopus/WoS	To examine how early-career secondary ESL teachers exercised teacher agency to take control of their teaching and professional development.	A longitudinal qualitative multiple-case study drawing on in-depth interviews and supplementary data with three Hong Kong ESL teachers over several years.	The teachers demonstrated varying degrees of proactive, reactive, and passive agency influenced by intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness in response to environmental and behavioural determinants.
12	Neupane et al. (2022)	Scopus Only	To systematically review existing empirical studies on English language teacher identity that used narrative inquiry as their methodology.	A PRISMA-guided systematic review and thematic synthesis of 30 peer-reviewed articles published between 2004 and 2022.	Developed a preliminary framework showing that identity trajectory is influenced by macro factors, learning communities, critical incidents, and emotions across different stages of professional development.
13	Anabalón Schaaf (2022)	Scopus/WoS	To examine processes of precarisation among university English teachers by analysing their affective-discursive practices, known as the "pedagogy of love".	A sociolinguistic ethnography utilising observations, field notes, and interviews with three English language teachers at a private Chilean university.	The "pedagogy of love" constitutes a communicative register that teachers enact to secure good evaluations and navigate precarious labour conditions, while the university benefits by gaining financial stability.
14	Nazari & Karimpour (2022)	Scopus/WoS	To examine the role of emotional labour in Iranian English language teachers' identity construction from an Activity Theory perspective.	A qualitative study utilising semi-structured interviews and narrative frames with experienced EFL teachers at an Iranian private language school.	Institutional work structured emotional labour across three dimensions: managing subjective conflicts, dealing with tensions in caring for students, and aligning agency with resisted identities.
15	Cassandra et al. (2024)	Scopus/WoS	To explore how engaging in a	A phenomenological case study utilising dialogic encounters,	PLC participation helped teachers cultivate self-

			professional learning community (PLC) facilitated Indonesian teacher-educators' reconstruction of identity as scholarly writers.	reflective essays, and collaborative manuscript drafting with three female academics.	awareness, overcome the teaching-researching dichotomy, and enact their scholarly writer identities through collaborative efforts.
16	Guo & Sidhu (2024)	Scopus/WoS	To investigate the shift from "unbecoming" to "becoming" in the language teacher identities of multilingual and multicultural English teachers across different life stages and contexts.	A duoethnography employing solo chronological narratives and dialogic, asynchronous/synchronous conversations between two teacher-researchers.	Identity construction is a perpetual process shaped by cross-cultural experiences; embracing multilingualism empowered the teachers toward positive identity "becoming" and informed their pedagogical choices.
17	Ershadi et al. (2024)	Scopus/WoS	To explore how native-speakerism influences non-native English-speaking teachers' agency-related critical incidents and the construction of professional identity.	A qualitative case study gathering data via open-ended questionnaires, narrative frames, and semi-structured interviews with 15 Iranian NNESTs.	Native speakerism, exacerbated by school policymakers, marginalised NNESTs, fostered a "pedagogy of doubt," and constrained their professional agency and identity development.
18	Zeng & Fickel (2024)	Scopus Only	To understand the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and pedagogic research experiences of teaching-oriented academics negotiating their identities.	A single-site, multiple-case study employing Social Network Analysis and narrative interviews with two College English teachers in China.	Participants navigated complex subjectivities, revealing a collective subordination of practice-oriented research to dominant disciplinary research discourses.
19	Nigar et al. (2024)	Scopus/WoS	To investigate how non-native English-speaking teachers' professional identities are affected by employment experiences and hiring discrimination in Australia.	Hermeneutic phenomenological narrative analyses drawn from reflective writing and spoken interviews with migrant NNESTs.	Hiring discrimination based on race, accent, and linguistic heritage had severe psycho-emotional impacts, yet these teachers navigated "othering" to further their hybrid professional actions.
20	Teng & Yip (2025)	Scopus Only	To examine how English language teachers negotiate their professional identities amid the integration of GenAI in writing instruction.	A narrative inquiry involving six Chinese EFL teachers using semi-structured interviews and observations.	Teachers navigated ideological tensions and capital disparities, evolving into either "worriers" (resisting AI) or "warriors" (embracing AI).
21	Diamond & Bulfin (2025)	Scopus/WoS	To investigate how long-serving English teachers sustain their practice and understand their careers over decades, amidst performance-driven policies.	A dialogic, intergenerational life history approach featuring interviews and a focus group with 12 late-career and retired secondary English teachers in Australia.	Professional learning and acts of "care of the profession" sustained careers, enabling democratic participation and critical engagement beyond mere technical compliance.
22	Ho (2025)	Scopus/WoS	To investigate how YouTube English teachers construct	A multimodal and thematic analysis of 70 channel banners, teacher biographies, and semi-	Teachers strategically aligned or distanced themselves from

			their online identity and legitimacy within the dominant ideologies of linguistic entrepreneurship and raciolinguistics.	structured interviews with five online teachers.	professional teacher, micro-celebrity, and entrepreneurial identities to navigate the online ELT marketplace.
23	Nigar et al. (2025a)	Scopus/WoS	To explore the multi-layered hybrid professional identities of immigrant non-native English-speaking teachers using Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto'.	A hermeneutic phenomenological narrative enquiry approach examining focal participants from a group of immigrant NNESTs in Australia.	Immigrant NNESTs' identities are fluid and multifaceted like cyborgs, allowing them to transcend the native/non-native binary through "hybrid professional becoming" and inclusive pedagogical innovation.
24	Ramezanzadeh et al. (2025)	Scopus/WoS	To examine the presence of meaning and well-being in the lives of non-native TESOL teachers within the discourse of economic sanctions.	A qualitative narrative enquiry combining "big and small stories" collected via narrative and interactive interviews with 18 Iranian English language teachers.	The sanctions acted as a turning point, triggering "critical hope" and a shift towards plurilingual practices of agency that helped teachers challenge native-speakerism and transform their pedagogy.
25	Zhou et al. (2025)	Scopus/WoS	To investigate the evolving pedagogical strategies and professional identity development of novice college English teachers through multimodal interactions.	Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis of video-recorded lessons from two novice teachers in China, analysing visual transcripts and pitch-intensity spectrograms.	Teachers transitioned from textbook-reliant instruction to student-centred pedagogy by using multimodal strategies, navigating identity configurations of compliance, experimentation, and dialogic enactment.
26	Nigar et al. (2025b)	Scopus/WoS	To examine how immigrant English teachers (IETs) navigate systemic barriers and discursive contestations during settlement to reconstitute their professional identities.	A long-term study employing hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative inquiry with 16 migrant NNESTs in Australia.	IETs utilised critical reflection and hybrid consciousness to challenge native-speakerism and marginalisation, thereby demonstrating hybrid professionalism and envisioning themselves as cosmopolitan educators.
27	Nigar & Kostogriz (2025)	Scopus/WoS	To demonstrate the methodological advantages of combining hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative inquiry to examine the professional identity formation of non-native English-speaking teachers.	An integrated methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative inquiry analysing lived experiences and reflections from 16 immigrant English language teachers in Australia.	The combined approach provided holistic insights into the spatial-temporal and corporeal-relational dimensions of identity, revealing how teachers form "hybrid professional becoming" beyond binary categorisations.
28	Barahona et al. (2026)	Scopus/WoS	To investigate how English language teacher educators discursively construct professional identity and position, preservice teachers.	A qualitative case study using positioning theory and the grammar of agency to analyse narrative frames and interviews from eight teacher educators.	Identities are dynamically negotiated through discursive practices, emerging as five recurrent storylines (Savant, Caregiver, Exemplar, Optimist, and Compliant)

					shaped by institutional demands.
29	Faridah et al. (2026)	Scopus/WoS	To explore the formation of professional identity among novice English educators participating in the "Freedom to Learn" program in Indonesia.	A qualitative, constructivist-oriented descriptive study using semi-structured interviews with 21 novice EFL teachers.	Embodied professional identity was reflected in technology utilisation, supportive teacher-student relationships, collaborative teaching roles, and classroom sensitivity developed through peer support.
30	Jin & Kim (2026)	Scopus/WoS	To investigate how English teachers in resource-constrained private universities construct and transform their identities over time amid structural and discursive constraints.	A qualitative multiple case study using narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and ethnographic data from three English teachers.	Identity transformation was conceptualised into four trajectories (Unfulfilled Initiative, Adaptive Reframing, Residual Functionality, Reinforcing Engagement) driven by fluctuations in willingness, capability, and power.

A total of 30 relevant journal articles were identified for data extraction, following the PRISMA 2020 step-by-step process. A comprehensive indexing audit of these 30 articles revealed that 26 (86.7%) were cross-indexed in both Scopus and the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection. The remaining 4 articles (13.3%) were indexed exclusively in Scopus, and the selected articles broadly appeared in specialised regional and international journals such as TESL-EJ, The Journal of Asia TEFL, Veredas do Direito, and LEARN Journal.

Based on Table 3, all selected studies were centrally related to the construction, negotiation, and development of professional identity among ESL educators. The majority of the research was conducted at the higher-education (tertiary) level (e.g., Barahona et al., 2026; Howard, 2019; Jin & Kim, 2026; Teng & Yip, 2025). Significant thematic clusters emerged regarding the identity negotiation of immigrant or non-local educators (Loo et al., 2017; Nigar et al., 2025a; Nigar et al., 2025b; Nigar & Kostogriz, 2025) and the shifting identities of novice and preservice teachers (Faridah et al., 2026; Tseng, 2017; Zhou et al., 2025). Conversely, specialised areas of inquiry were identified, including the intersection of professional identity and technological shifts such as Generative AI (Teng & Yip, 2025).

Data Analysis Procedures

To facilitate a rigorous interpretive analysis of the research questions, the 30 identified journal articles were organised into structured data-extraction matrices that directly address each research question (presented sequentially in Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3). Given the depth of the qualitative data, generative AI (Large Language Model) was integrated into the workflow to provide initial summaries of the study objectives and results (as tabulated in Table 3) and to assist with the primary code clustering. This computational phase was immediately followed by a comprehensive human-led verification process, in which every AI-generated output was cross-referenced with the original source text to maintain data integrity.

The subsequent stage involved manual axial coding to refine emerging patterns and capture the subtle intersections between teacher identity, emotional labour, and environmental context. This manual refinement specifically scrutinised institutional pressures and administrative mandates to ensure a nuanced thematic synthesis. The resulting transition from initial data points to finalised themes is validated by the Master Coding Audit Trail (Table 4), which confirms a high degree of transparency and analytical depth throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section synthesises data extracted from the 30 studies published between 2016 and 2026, providing a multidimensional view of ESL educators' construction of professional identities across global landscapes. Before addressing the specific trends for RQ1, Table 4 demonstrates how these main themes emerged from the

raw data. This master audit trail ensures transparency in the analytical process, tracking the transformation of raw excerpts into conceptual axial categories, sub-themes, and main themes.

Table 4 Master coding audit trail (Excerpt of 30 articles - alphabetical)

No.	Study	Initial Coding (Excerpts)	Axial Coding (Conceptual Categories)	Sub-theme (Specific Identity Type)	Main Theme
1	Tseng (2017)	"reconcile identity conflict", "appropriating discourses", "Confucian and American educational discourses".	Discourse Negotiation	Novice Integration	Teacher Education & Development
2	Loo et al. (2017)	"encountered conflicts with different social entities", "modifying pedagogy or teaching content", "opposing the school administration".	Managing Constraints	Workplace Agency	Institutional Power & Constraints
3	Tajeddin & Ameri (2018)	"knowledge and power as indicators", "implicitly and non-discursively", "setting boundaries by drawing up classroom rules".	Discursive Demarcation	Teacher-Learner Dynamics	Institutional Power & Constraints
4	Hayik & Weiner-Levy (2019)	"coercive power relationships", "patriarchal social restrictions", "strong emotions played a significant role".	Sociocultural Restrictions	Affective Responses	Emotional Labour & Well-being
5	Howard (2019)	"characterised by much ambivalence", "Commercial Asset", "Replaceable Part", "Cultural and Linguistic Ambassador".	Expatriate Identity	Commodification	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation
6	Alam (2019)	"native and non-native dichotomy", "standard 'authentic' English as symbolic capital", "fostering	Linguistic Hegemony	Native-Speakerism	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation

		users' appropriation".			
7	Donaghue (2020)	"identities of experience and power", "feedback is primarily evaluative", "institutional ritual and roles".	Asymmetrical Relations	Supervisory Feedback	Institutional Power & Constraints
8	Lawrence (2020)	"deliberate construction of difference", "categorising him as not a 'native speaker'", "erased Yusuke's very existence".	Institutional Ascription	Identity Representation	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation
9	Huang (2021)	"struggles to stay in or opt out", "insulting classroom revisiting", "depressing working environment".	Environmental Constraints	Teacher Attrition	Teacher Education & Development
10	Mansouri (2021)	"overt and covert ELT policies", "reciprocally discursive, experiential", "three-level positioning".	Policy Navigation	Discursive Positioning	Institutional Power & Constraints
11	Huang & Yip (2021)	"take control over their teaching", "intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness", "triadic reciprocity".	Ecological Agency	Early Career Agency	Teacher Education & Development
12	Neupane et al. (2022)	"learning communities", "critical incidents", "imagined identity and investing", "macro factors like gender, race".	Trajectory Influences	Professional Evolution	Teacher Education & Development
13	Anabalon Schaaf (2022)	"affective-discursive practices", "pedagogy of love", "precarious higher education market".	Affective Capitalism	Precarity	Emotional Labour & Well-being
14	Nazari & Karimpour (2022)	"institutional expectations clash with teachers'	Emotion Regulation	Emotion Labor	Emotional Labour & Well-being

		internal subjectivity", "managing conflicts in subjectivity", "aligning agency with resisted identities".			
15	Cassandra et al. (2024)	"dichotomy between teaching and researching", "joint activity performance", "cultivating self-awareness as scholarly writers".	Collaborative Growth	Professional Learning Communities	Teacher Education & Development
16	Guo & Sidhu (2024)	"unbecoming to becoming", "asset-based appreciation of their multilingualism", "feelings of self-loss, self-doubt".	Multicultural Identity	Identity Transformation	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation
17	Ershadi et al. (2024)	"pedagogy of doubt", "native speakerism as a source of NNEST marginalisation", "NS-induced inequality".	Critical Incidents	Native-Speakerism Impacts	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation
18	Zeng & Fickel (2024)	"subordination of CE teachers' joint endeavours", "stratification of knowledge", "tension between performance-driven research and PedR".	Academic Hierarchies	Scholarship of Teaching	Institutional Power & Constraints
19	Nigar et al. (2024)	"hiring discrimination", "visible and audible markers of difference", "psycho-emotional impacts".	Systemic Discrimination	Employment Inequity	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation
20	Teng & Yip (2025)	"GenAI integration", "navigate ideological tensions", "roles as either 'worriers' or 'warriors'".	Technological Investment	AI Adoption	Digital Pedagogy & Technology
21	Diamond & Bulfin (2025)	"care of the profession", "learning beyond performance and	Professional Stewardship	Praxis & Ethics	Institutional Power & Constraints

		compliance", "ethical orientation".			
22	Ho (2025)	"micro-celebrity persona", "linguistic entrepreneurship", "raciolinguistic ideologies".	Persona Branding	Online Identity	Digital Pedagogy & Technology
23	Nigar et al.(2025a)	"hybrid professional becoming", "fluid and multifaceted, akin to cyborgs", "transcend the NEST – NNEST dyads".	Post-humanist Identity	Hybrid Professionalism	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation
24	Ramezanzadeh et al.(2025)	"emergence of critical hope", "plurilingual practices of agency", "discourse of economic sanctions".	Meaning-Making & Resilience	Well-being & Agency	Emotional Labour & Well-being
25	Zhou et al. (2025)	"multimodal strategies", "compliance, experimentation, and dialogic enactment", "student-centred pedagogy".	Multimodal Interaction	Pedagogical Evolution	Digital Pedagogy & Technology
26	Nigar et al. (2025b)	"challenge dominant discourses of nativeness", "hybrid consciousness", "envision themselves as cosmopolitan educators".	Dialogism & Resistance	Immigrant Teacher Settlement	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation
27	Nigar & Kostogriz (2025)	"hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative inquiry", "spatial-temporal and corporeal-relational dimensions", "beyond binary categories".	Phenomenological Interpretation	Methodological Identity Analysis	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation
28	Barahona et al. (2026)	"dynamically negotiated through discursive practices",	Discursive Storylines	Teacher Educator Roles	Teacher Education & Development

		"recurrent storylines (Savant, Caregiver, Exemplar, Optimist, Compliant)".			
29	Faridah et al. (2026)	"Freedom to Learn program", "embodiment of professional identity", "technology utilisation, teacher-student relationships".	Practical Embodiment	Educational Innovation	Teacher Education & Development
30	Jin & Kim (2026)	"Willingness, Capability, Power (WCP) framework", "discursively orphaned identity", "performed stagnation".	WCP Constraints	Institutional Disempowerment	Institutional Power & Constraints

Table 5 Operationalised definitions of the emerging main themes

No.	Main Theme	Core Focus	Operationalised definition
1	Teacher Education & Development	Professional growth & learning trajectories	How educational programmes, peer communities, and mentoring facilitate a teacher's identity development and pedagogical skills.
2	Institutional Power & Constraints	Workplace tensions & systemic demands	How teachers navigate restrictive policies, unequal power dynamics, and performance-driven evaluations within their institutions.
3	Emotional Labour & Well-being	Affective dimensions & psychological resilience	How teachers manage their emotions, build resilience, and sustain meaning amidst sociocultural and workplace pressures.
4	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation	Native-speakerism & identity resistance	How non-native or immigrant educators experience, negotiate, and challenge systemic biases and hiring discrimination.
5	Digital Pedagogy & Technology	Tech integration & digital personas	How emerging technologies (e.g., GenAI), multimodal tools, and online platforms reshape teaching practices and digital teacher identities.

The findings of this systematic review are further elaborated and structured around the three research questions that guide it, as outlined in the following three subsections.

RQ1: What trends are evident in the discursive construction of ESL educators' professional identities globally?

The systematic analysis of the 30 included studies reveals that the discursive construction of ESL professional identity is a dynamic, multifaceted process of "identity work" that occurs at the intersection of institutional mandates, emotional responses, and evolving linguistic ideologies. Although development of identity was historically conceptualised as a gradual progression towards expertise, contemporary literature showcases a significant change toward understanding identity as a contested site of struggle, resistance, and constant reconfiguration. Five overarching themes (*Teacher Education & Development*; *Institutional Power & Constraints*, *Emotional Labour & Well-being*, *Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation*, and *Digital Pedagogy & Technology*) have emerged across the 2016-2026 period, as shown in Table 6. These intersected themes provide

a taxonomy of how educators discursively navigate their roles in an increasingly uncertain and technologically mediated educational landscape, forming a complex tapestry of modern English language teaching.

Table 6 Trends included studies of ESL educators' discursive construction of professional identities.

Theme	Main themes	No. of studies (out of 30) and %	Representative Studies	Literature-based Contributions
1	Teacher Education & Development	7 (23.3%)	Barahona et al. (2026); Tseng (2017)	Shifts conceptual focus from technical training to longitudinal "becoming"; emphasises the role of professional learning communities in scaffolding educator agency.
2	Institutional Power & Constraints	7 (23.3%)	Donaghue (2020); Jin & Kim (2026); Barahona et al. (2026); Diamond & Bulfin (2025)	Identifies identity as a site of strategic survival; reveals the tension between neoliberal performance mandates/evaluative feedback and pedagogical autonomy.
3	Emotional Labour & Well-being	4 (13.3%)	Nazari and Karimpour (2022); Anabalon Schaaf (2022); Ramezanzadeh et al. (2025).	Validates emotional labour as professional expertise; highlights how teachers reframe affective regulation as a discursive tool for resilience and meaning-making.
4	Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation	9 (30.0%)	Alam, 2019; Ershadi et al. (2024); Nigar et al. (2025); Nigar & Kostogriz (2025a)	Critically dismantles "native-speakerist" binaries; promotes "hybrid professional consciousness" as a means for immigrant/NNEST educators to reclaim agency.
5	Digital Pedagogy & Technology	3 (10.0%)	Ho (2025); Teng & Yip (2025)	Positions technology as a site of discursive contestation; distinguishes between "worriers" and "warriors" navigating online personas and AI-mediated authority.

Teacher Education and Development

Professional identity construction among ESL educators is increasingly conceptualised as a longitudinal trajectory of "becoming" rather than a fixed acquisition of skills. Early-career and pre-service educators are the primary focus of this thematic cluster, where identity is negotiated through participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) and collaborative initiatives. For instance, studies by Tseng (2017) and Faridah et al. (2026) demonstrate that novice educators often experience initial friction between personal pedagogical beliefs and the demands of their teaching contexts, which they resolve by appropriating dominant institutional discourses. This shift, often termed the transition from "unbecoming" to "becoming" (Guo & Sidhu, 2024), suggests that educators actively reconstruct their identities by moving from textbook-reliant instruction to more autonomous, student-centred pedagogies (Zhou et al., 2025). The implication of this trend is that teacher education programmes must evolve from purely technical training to discursive "identity workshops" that scaffold the development of agency. By shifting the focus from mere instructional efficiency to the cultivation of "hybrid professional becoming", educators can better navigate the transition from novice to expert. This developmental trajectory serves as the foundational layer upon which other institutional and emotional pressures are subsequently imposed.

Institutional Power and Constraints

While professional growth is a primary focus, it is consistently disrupted by the realities of institutional power, where professional identity is frequently reduced to a site of strategic survival. Often, educators find their identities constrained by neoliberal accountability (performance-based) measures, standardised testing, and administrative feedback mechanisms that prioritise compliance over pedagogical autonomy. Research by Donaghue (2020) and Jin and Kim (2026) underscores that feedback sessions and performance evaluations are rarely neutral; they are sites of power where evaluative identities are imposed, forcing educators to strategically align or distance themselves from institutional expectations. In these settings, educators often enact a “managed achievement” of identity, in which they perform the roles expected of them, such as the “compliant” or “exemplar” teacher (Barahona et al., 2026), to maintain employment and professional legitimacy. The implication here is that institutional environments often inadvertently erode educator agency, requiring a redesign of policy to foster “care of the profession” over mere technical compliance (Diamond & Bulfin, 2025). This institutional tension compels educators to reconcile their internal professional values with external demands, thereby highlighting the necessity of agency in maintaining their professional self-worth.

Emotional Labour and Well-Being

The management of emotional labour has emerged as a central pillar of professional identity, reflecting a shift from treating emotions as peripheral to recognising them as essential components of pedagogical expertise. Studies such as Anabalon Schaaf (2022) and Nazari and Karimpour (2022) reveal that ESL educators perform a “pedagogy of love” or complex emotion regulation to navigate precarious labour conditions and manage the subjective conflicts that arise in the classroom. This is particularly evident in high-pressure contexts, where educators are forced to balance their care for students with the need to protect their own psychological well-being amid sociopolitical instability (Ramezanzadeh et al., 2025). Rather than being viewed as an individual failure or professional weakness, emotional labour is increasingly recognised in the literature as a discursive tool or a means for educators to reframe their struggles as acts of resilience. This shift indicates that future support systems for educators must move beyond simplistic “burnout” interventions to address the structural causes of emotional distress. By institutionalising support that acknowledges the affective nature of identity, educational organisations can better sustain teacher commitment and prevent attrition.

Linguistic Ideology and Marginalisation

A profound shift has occurred in the literature regarding the discursive construction of non-native and immigrant ESL educators, moving from an acceptance of the native-speaker/non-native-speaker binary to a rigorous critique and rejection of these linguistic hierarchies. The “native-speakerist” ideology, which posits standard English as symbolic capital, is frequently cited as a primary driver of hiring discrimination, racism, and professional marginalisation (Alam, 2019; Ershadi et al., 2024). However, recent research (Nigar et al., 2025) highlights an evolution in this trend: instead of merely internalising these biases, educators are increasingly adopting “hybrid professional” identities that transcend binary categorisations. Through hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, immigrant educators demonstrate “hybrid consciousness” to challenge their othering and reframe themselves as cosmopolitan experts rather than deficient outsiders (Nigar & Kostogriz, 2025a). The implication of this discursive shift is critical; it necessitates a systemic shift away from hiring practices that privilege accent or perceived nativity, and instead advocates recognising plurilingual competence as a professional asset. This movement towards hybridity signals a transformative period in applied linguistics, in which the very definition of “English teacher” is being rewritten from the margins of the profession.

Digital Pedagogy and Technology

The most rapidly emerging trend in the discursive construction of identity is the role of digital transformation and technology, which acts as both a catalyst for pedagogical innovation and a source of significant ideological tension. With the integration of generative AI and the rise of the digital “micro-celebrity” persona, ESL educators are experiencing a reconfiguration of their expertise (Ho, 2025; Teng & Yip, 2025). The literature identifies a bifurcation in how educators navigate this space: they tend to position themselves either as “worriers”, who resist

technological encroachment to preserve traditional humanistic roles, or “warriors” who embrace digital tools to reinvent their pedagogical authority. This trend underscores that technology is not merely a tool but a discursive space where professional legitimacy is contested; educators must not negotiate an “online identity” that exists parallel to, and often in tension with, their physical classroom persona. The implications for institutional development are profound, as schools must now provide training that addresses not only the technical aspects of digital literacy but also its identity-related dimensions. As educators continue to construct their identities through digital footprints and online interaction, the boundary between the “teacher-self” and the online-professional-persona” will continue to blur, requiring new theoretical frameworks to capture these post-humanist identity shifts.

Collectively, the five themes reveal that ESL professional identity is not a static construct but a dynamic, negotiated, and discursively constructed process. The trends identified over the 2016-2026 period confirm that ESL educators operate in a state of perpetual “identity work”, wherein they constantly align, resist, and hybridise their professional selves in response to the competing demands of global neoliberalism, local linguistic prejudice, and rapid technological advancement. This proves that identity is not something an educator has, but something they do through interaction and discourse. Thus, understanding the professional identity of an ESL educator requires examining the persistent interplay between their individual agency and the diverse, often contradictory, contexts they inhabit.

RQ2: What methodological approaches are employed in the included discourse analytical studies of ESL educators’ professional identities?

To address the second research question, the methodological approaches employed in the included studies were systematically analysed. Based on data extracted from the 30 studies from 2016 to 2026, the findings revealed that the methodological approaches are closely aligned with the theoretical assumption that professional identity is not fixed but dynamic, a socially and discursively constructed process (Nigar & Kostogriz, 2025a). Therefore, discourse analytical studies have moved beyond descriptive qualitative designs towards specialised approaches. Table 7 summarises the major methodological approaches identified in the included studies.

Table 7 Methodological approaches employed in the included studies on discursive identity construction among ESL educators.

Methodological Theme.	Specific Design	Description & Theoretical Focus	No. of studies (out of 30) and %	Representative Studies	Methodological Insights
1. Narrative and Phenomenological Inquiries	Narrative inquiry, hermeneutic phenomenology, life history and duoethnography	Focuses on exploring professional identity through human experiences, autobiography and identity trajectories. Theoretically grounded in poststructuralist (not fixed) perspectives that view identity as continuously negotiated through discourse.	14 studies (46.7%)	Teng & Yip (2025); Cassandra et al. (2024), Ramezanzadeh et al. (2025), Nigar & Kostogriz (2025a)	Provides deep, holistic tracking of identity shifts over time. Innovative formats like duoethnography allow researchers to act as both subjects and analysts, while combining interviews and everyday talk captures a comprehensive picture of identity.

2. Micro-discursive and Linguistics Framework	Microanalysis, positioning analysis, discourse analysis and grammar of agency	Investigates on real time communication and highly detailed linguistics choices to see how educators assert authority, construct boundaries and negotiate roles.	5 studies (16.7%)	Barahona et al. (2026), Donaghue (2020), Mansouri (2021)	Shift focus from self-reported beliefs to actual discursive practices in real-time interactions. It reveals how micro-level language choices implicitly negotiate power, allocate duties, and construct professional legitimacy during a high stakes environment.
3. Ethnographic and Social Network Inquiries	Linguistic ethnography, Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), social network analysis	Examines how identities are attributed and resisted within physical and social institutional contexts. Focuses on communities of practice, peer relationships and how institutional labels influence everyday workplace identities.	4 studies (13.3%)	Lawrence (2020), Zeng & Fickel(2024)	Explains how structural constraints and relationships with colleagues shape teachers' professional identity.
4. Specialised discourse analytical approaches and critical frameworks	Narratives frames, Critical Incident Technique (CIT), Activity Theory analysis, restorying cycles.	Uses structured prompts to elicit reflections on emotion labour, systemic contradictions and critical turning points. Theoretically focused on how teachers manage emotional challenges and exercise agency when confronting institutional power or policy constraints.	4 studies (13.3%)	Ershadi et al. (2024), Nazari and Karimpour (2022)	Effectively scaffolds participant reflections on highly specific, emotionally charged moments. Narrative frames and restorying cycles help participants focus their attention on identity tensions, making it easier for researchers to map the relationship between structural power and teacher agency.
5. Multimodal and Digital Methodologies	Multimodal (Inter) action Analysis (MIA), digital artefacts, Integrated qualitative frameworks and visual transcripts.	Investigates non-verbal semiotic resources and digital footprints used to construct professional identity, expertise and micro-celebrity status.	3 studies (10%)	Ho (2025), Zhou et al (2025)	Captures physical and visual aspects of identity. It highlights that identity is expressed not only through spoken words but also through classroom behaviours and online professional identity.

Table 7 demonstrates that the most prominent methodological landscape of discourse analytical research on ESL educators' professional identities is narrative inquiry and phenomenological inquiry (Neupane et al., 2022). The findings suggest that researchers often combine narrative inquiry and phenomenology to explore ESL educators' lived experiences (Nigar & Kostogriz, 2025a). Within these approaches, several innovative research designs have emerged. For example, some studies employ duoethnography, in which researchers reflect on and compare their life experiences through collaborative writing and discussions to explore their multicultural identities (Guo & Sidhu, 2024). Other studies utilise restorying cycles, in which participants repeatedly write, reflect, and participate in follow-up interviews to deepen their understanding of their professional experiences (Mansouri, 2021). In addition, some researchers integrate "big stories" (formal life story interviews) with "small stories" (informal everyday conversations) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how educators construct meaning in their daily lives (Ramezanzadeh et al., 2025).

To better understand how educators discursively perform their identities, many studies used detailed linguistic frameworks. For example, Positioning Theory and the grammar of agency are commonly applied to examine how language features, such as pronouns and modal verbs, reflect educators' negotiation of power and authority (Barahona et al., 2026; Tseng, 2017). In addition, some studies use narrative approaches. Narrative approaches enabled researchers to examine how educators interpreted critical incidents and emotional labour (Ershadi et al, 2024).

Furthermore, as the educational landscape continues to evolve through digital transformation, researchers have increasingly adopted multimodal and ethnographic methodologies. Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis (MIA) is used to examine both verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources, such as gaze, gestures, and vocal pitch, during real-time classroom teaching (Zhou et al., 2025). According to Ho (2025), netnography explores educators' digital footprints, such as YouTube banners and online biographies, to understand how they construct their professional persona as micro-celebrities. Finally, social network analysis and mapping tasks help visualise how educators negotiate identities within their professional communities of practice (Zeng & Fickel, 2024).

Overall, these methodological approaches provide researchers with effective tools to examine how ESL educators construct their professional identities through language, narratives, and experiences.

RQ3: What are the intersecting contextual factors in the discursive construction of professional identities among the ESL educators?

Building on the thematic trends identified in Section 3.1 and the nuanced methodological frameworks explored in Section 3.2, this section addresses how the discursive construction of ESL professional identities is operationalised in practice. The reviewed literature demonstrates that professional identity does not develop in a vacuum; rather, it is a highly contextualised process shaped by the collision of macro-level ideologies, meso-level institutional constraints, and micro-level relational dynamics.

To systematically capture these intersections and answer RQ3 comprehensively, Table 8 synthesises the specific macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors identified across all 30 included studies, illustrating how their convergence dictates educators' "identity work".

Table 8 Thematic Synthesis of Intersecting Contextual Factors Shaping ESL Teacher Identity (2016–2026)

Key Tension (The "What?")	Intersecting (The "So")	Macro-Discursive Factors (Societal/Ideological)	Institutional/Meso Constraints (Workplace/Policy)	Relational/Micro Dynamics (Interpersonal/Classroom)	Supporting Studies (n=30)
1. <i>Linguistic Marginalisation & "Othering"</i> Teachers must forge hybrid/cosmopolitan		Native-speakerism; colonial legacies; standard English ideologies.	Discriminatory hiring practices; unrecognised overseas qualifications; top-	Accent bias; student prejudice; feelings of "imposter syndrome"; microaggressions.	Alam (2019); Howard (2019); Lawrence (2020); Ershadi et al. (2024); Guo & Sidhu (2024);

identities to resist discrimination and reclaim professional legitimacy.		down native-speaker standards.		Nigar et al. (2024); Nigar et al. (2025a); Nigar et al.(2025b); Nigar & Kostogriz (2025a)
2. Emotional Labour & <i>Institutional Precarity</i> Teachers must commodify their emotions and perform compliant or "loving" identities to navigate job insecurity.	Affective capitalism; neoliberal marketisation of education; education as a consumer product.	Zero-hour precarious contracts; strict reliance on student evaluations; mandatory performance appraisals.	Asymmetrical supervisor feedback; enacting a "pedagogy of love" (e.g., forced smiling, gentleness) to manage students.	Hayik & Weiner-Levy (2019); Donaghue (2020); Anabalon Schaaf (2022); Nazari & Karimpour (2022); Ramezanzadeh et al. (2025)
3. Academic Hierarchies & Disempowerment Teaching-focused faculty experience "discursively orphaned" identities when their practical knowledge is subordinated to traditional research.	Stratification of knowledge; dominance of traditional disciplinary research over pedagogic research.	Resource constraints; heavy teaching workloads; lack of institutional support for professional learning communities.	Loss of epistemic voice; isolation from faculty peers; asymmetrical teacher-student dispute resolution.	Cassandra et al. (2024); Zeng & Fickel (2024); Diamond & Bulfin (2025); Jin & Kim (2026)
4. <i>Novice Integration & Pedagogical Conflict</i> Early-career educators adapt their identities by reconciling personal pedagogical beliefs with rigid school structures.	Global vs. local educational models (e.g., Communicative vs. Traditional/Confucian approaches).	Lack of mentoring; rigid curriculum mandates; contradictory institutional policies and environments.	Navigating student discipline; establishing boundaries and classroom rules; building rapport.	Tseng (2017); Loo et al. (2017); Tajeddin & Ameri (2018); Huang (2021); Mansouri (2021); Huang & Yip (2021); Neupane et al. (2022); Barahona et al. (2026); Faridah et al. (2026)
5. <i>Digital Disruption & Technification</i> Teachers adapt into "warriors" or "worriers" as algorithms threaten traditional epistemology and online identities merge with entrepreneurship.	Global integration of GenAI; linguistic entrepreneurship; raciolinguistics in digital spaces.	Disparities in institutional tech resources; mandates to catch AI plagiarism or integrate digital tools.	Students bypassing teachers for AI answers; cultivating online micro-celebrity personas; managing multimodal interactions.	Teng & Yip (2025); Ho (2025); Zhou et al. (2025)

As illustrated in Table 8, a teacher's professional identity is never shaped by a single factor, but rather by the friction generated when broad societal discourses filter down into daily classroom realities.

Linguistic Marginalisation & "Othering"

At the macro level, the pervasive ideology of native-speakerism and colonial legacies establish rigid boundaries of legitimacy that historically privilege native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) while marginalising non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). These societal discourses filter down into meso-level institutional

constraints, resulting in discriminatory hiring practices, the devaluation of overseas qualifications, and top-down mandates enforcing native-speaker standards. Consequently, at the micro level, ESL educators frequently encounter accent bias and student prejudice, triggering feelings of "imposter syndrome" and psycho-emotional distress. To navigate this intersection, the literature reveals that NNESTs actively resist these essentialist labels by forging "hybrid professional becoming" or cosmopolitan identities, leveraging their translanguaging and cross-cultural empathy to reclaim professional legitimacy.

Emotional Labour & Institutional Precarity

A second major intersection occurs where the macro-level neoliberal marketisation of education and affective capitalism reframe education as a consumer product. Institutionally, this translates into precarious employment conditions, zero-hours contracts, and high-stakes performance appraisals that are heavily reliant on student satisfaction. At the micro level, teachers must continuously commodify their emotions to manage asymmetrical supervisor feedback or enact a "pedagogy of love", such as forced gentleness or smiling, to pacify students and secure basic financial stability. The convergence of these factors forces educators to perform compliant identities, highlighting that identity construction is heavily mediated by the emotional labour required to survive institutional precarity.

Academic Hierarchies & Disempowerment

Within higher education contexts, macro-level discourses dictate a stratification of knowledge where traditional disciplinary research is prized over pedagogic or teaching-oriented scholarship. At the meso level, this hierarchy produces resource constraints, heavy teaching workloads, and a lack of institutional support for language educators seeking to engage in professional learning communities. On a micro, relational level, teaching-focused academics experience a profound loss of epistemic voice and isolation from their disciplinary peers, often finding themselves positioned as inferior service providers. The resulting tension forces these educators into "discursively orphaned" identities or "performed stagnation," where they withdraw emotional investment while completing functional duties, unless they can successfully rebuild their scholarly identities through collaborative networking.

Novice Integration & Pedagogical Conflict

For early-career educators, macro-level tensions frequently arise between global communicative language teaching models and localised traditional or Confucian educational discourses. These broad ideological clashes manifest at the meso level as rigid curriculum mandates, contradictory school policies, and a distinct lack of mentoring support. In the classroom (micro level), novice teachers must constantly negotiate how to establish boundaries, manage student discipline, and build rapport while reconciling their personal pedagogical beliefs with these restrictive institutional structures. Ultimately, this intersection requires novice educators to dynamically adapt their identities, moving from passive compliance to proactive, student-centred experimentation as they learn to navigate and appropriate the competing discourses within their specific school ecologies.

Digital Disruption & Technification

The rapid macro-level integration of Generative AI, alongside prevailing ideologies of linguistic entrepreneurship and raciolinguistics, has created new frontiers for identity negotiation. Institutions at the meso level often exacerbate this disruption by imposing mandates to seamlessly integrate digital tools or police AI plagiarism, despite significant disparities in technological resources. At the micro level, educators face altered power dynamics in which students bypass their instruction in favour of AI-generated answers or are forced to cultivate online micro-celebrity personas to maintain visibility in the digital marketplace. To survive this technification, educators' identities fracture and evolve; some become resisting "worriers," while others adapt as technological "warriors" who rely on multimodal strategies and emotional connection to reaffirm their irreplaceable human value.

DISCUSSION

This section evaluates the synthesised findings from the systematic review (2016–2026) and establishes three core contributions to research on the discursive construction of ESL educators' professional identities. By intersecting the thematic trends in this focused research field (RQ1) with the methodological lenses employed (RQ2) and the intersecting contextual factors that constrain and enable educators (RQ3), this discussion frames professional identity as an active, negotiated survival strategy, rather than a static set of pedagogical traits.

The Negotiated Self: Pedagogical Identity as a Site of Strategic Survival

The findings demonstrate a profound shift in how the field conceptualises the identities of ESL educators: it is no longer viewed as a static set of pedagogical skills acquired during teacher education, but rather as an active, continuous mechanism for survival in highly politicised environments. ESL educators are frequently forced to negotiate their identities when macro-level ideologies, such as native-speakerism and the neoliberal marketisation of education, clash with meso-level institutional precarities, such as short-term contracts, heavy workloads, and evaluative supervisory feedback. In these resource-constrained or profit-driven environments, teaching-focused faculty often experience a "discursively orphaned identity," in which their pedagogical capabilities are overshadowed by administrative structures that prioritise compliance and research output over classroom autonomy.

To navigate these overwhelming pressures, ESL educators rely heavily on intense emotional labour to forge strategic survival identities. For example, in the face of precarious zero-hour contracts, some educators commodify their emotions by enacting a "pedagogy of love", such as utilising forced gentleness, patience, and soft tones, specifically to secure positive student evaluations and attain basic financial stability. Similarly, immigrant and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) who face systemic hiring discrimination and "othering" based on race and accent actively resist these deficit narratives to survive.

By embracing their plurilingualism, these educators transcend the native/non-native dichotomy, forging a "hybrid professional becoming" to reclaim their legitimacy and establish themselves as culturally empathetic, cosmopolitan educators. Ultimately, identity construction serves as a strategic buffer that allows educators to reconcile their personal pedagogical beliefs with the often-harsh realities of the global ELT industry.

The Methodological Imperative: Bridging Qualitative Findings with Discursive and Longitudinal Lenses

Methodologically, this review reveals that while descriptive narrative and phenomenological inquiries have provided deep insights into educators' lived experiences, the field must continue advancing beyond isolated qualitative snapshots. To capture the true complexity of identity work, researchers are increasingly adopting a sharp "discursive lens," utilising tools such as micro-analysis of workplace talk, positioning theory, and the grammar of agency.

These nuanced approaches are imperative because they capture exactly how power dynamics are negotiated in real-time interactions. For instance, grammatical choices, such as the use of explicit pronouns (e.g., "I must") versus passive constructions, or asymmetrical turn-taking during post-observation feedback meetings, reveal how institutional authority is either asserted by supervisors or contested by educators attempting to claim professional competence.

Furthermore, understanding identity as a fluid trajectory of "becoming" necessitates longitudinal research designs that trace educators over several years. The reviewed literature highlights the effectiveness of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) and "restorying cycles" in mapping how identities evolve in response to emotionally charged, agency-altering events. By combining longitudinal tracking with fine-grained discursive analysis, future research can more accurately document how early-career educators transition from passive compliance to proactive, dialogic enactment, and how they continuously recalibrate their identities in response to shifting institutional expectations.

Charting the Future: Unpacking Digital Selves and Sociocultural Nuances in Identity Construction

As the educational landscape undergoes unprecedented digital disruption, the boundaries between the traditional classroom educator and online domains are rapidly blurring. The integration of emerging technologies, particularly Generative AI (GenAI) and digital broadcasting platforms, functions as a new discursive space that fundamentally threatens traditional teacher epistemology. Algorithms and instant AI-generated feedback challenge the traditional classroom hierarchy, stripping educators of their exclusive knowledge-provider capital and forcing an identity bifurcation: educators must now evolve into either tech-resistant "worriers" or adaptive "warriors" who rely on emotional care to prove their irreplaceable human value.

Concurrently, the rise of the online ELT marketplace compels educators to construct digital personas heavily influenced by linguistic entrepreneurship and raciolinguistic ideologies. Online educators must strategically navigate the intersection of a professional teaching identity with a "micro-celebrity" persona, self-branding themselves to maintain visibility and attract a global audience. As the field looks toward the future, research must critically examine how immigrant and non-native educators navigate these new digital and entrepreneurial spaces to assert their legitimacy. The future of ESL teacher identity research lies in promoting plurilingual, cosmopolitan educator models that can challenge systemic discrimination and native-speakerist biases across both physical classrooms and virtual learning environments.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review synthesised global research on the discursive construction of professional identities among ESL educators between 2016 and 2026. By rigorously examining 30 peer-reviewed articles, this study established that professional identity is not a fixed personal attribute, but rather a dynamic, negotiated process of "identity work" situated at the intersection of five emerging pillars: *Teacher Education & Development*, *Institutional Power & Constraints*, *Emotional Labour & Well-being*, *Linguistic Ideology & Marginalisation*, and *Digital Pedagogy & Technology*. The findings reveal that ESL educators operate in a state of perpetual negotiation, constantly balancing individual agency against the structural and ideological pressures of their specific local contexts. While higher education and tertiary settings currently constitute a major portion of the reviewed literature, the synthesis highlights a significant need to move beyond descriptive, thematic accounts of these environments toward more granular, interactional analyses of how professional identities are constructed in daily practice among ESL educators.

Despite its comprehensive scope, this review is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the search protocol was confined to the Scopus and Web of Science databases, which restricted the inclusion of some potentially relevant empirical studies indexed in other scholarly databases or published in regional journals, particularly those representing underexplored educational contexts. As a result, the selection of 30 articles from 210 records may limit the overall breadth of geographical and socio-political perspectives represented in the synthesis. Furthermore, although this review identifies Southeast Asia as a significant research gap, it provides limited comparative discussion on how existing identity negotiation differs across geographical regions, institutional settings, and sociopolitical contexts.

To address these limitations, future research should prioritise three critical advancements: first, future reviews must broaden database coverage by incorporating additional academic sources and regional publications to capture a wider, more diverse array of perspectives on ESL professional identity. Second, empirical studies focusing specifically on Southeast Asian tertiary institutions are highly valuable. Such research is needed to explore how unique institutional structures, deep-seated linguistic hierarchies, and precarious employment conditions discursively influence teacher identity negotiation and agency in these stratified, multicultural settings. Finally, researchers should adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how professional identities dynamically evolve over time. Tracing educators' trajectories over extended periods will enable a richer understanding of how identity work responds to macro-level policy changes, rapid technological developments (such as generative AI), and critical career transitions. By prioritising this comparative, localized, and temporal lenses, the field can transition toward a more comprehensive, globally inclusive, and nuanced understanding of professional practice across both physical and virtual learning environments.

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) utilised Google Gemini 3.1 Pro and Notebook LLM to assist in the analysis of research data. Specifically, the tool was used to [e.g., identify patterns within large datasets / perform initial thematic coding]. Following the use of this technology, the author(s) manually reviewed, verified, and validated all outputs against primary data sources. The author(s) take full responsibility for the integrity of the data analysis and the final interpretation presented in this work.

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