Professional Identity and Practice of Iranian EFL Teacherpreneurs in Virtual Affinity Spaces: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

As the demand for online language education continues to grow, English teacherpreneurs play a significant role in shaping teaching practice and identity in virtual affinity spaces. This study examined the professional identity and practice of Iranian EFL teacherpreneurs in such spaces. The study adopted a qualitative approach and the data were collected through in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. The findings of this research indicated that the participants as Iranian EFL teacherpreneurs in online affinity spaces possessed a wide range of positive traits and engaged in interactive and non-traditional teaching practices going beyond EFL traditional teaching practices. They also noted challenges being online English teacherpreneurs in Iran, highlighting a lack of financial support from mainstream education system and insufficient electronic facilities to create online content among others. This study has implications for different agencies in language teaching, including teachers and policy-makers in language education, raising their awareness regarding the identity and practice of online teacherpreneurs in virtual affinity spaces.

Keywords: Teachers; Online Teaching; Identity; Teacherpreneurs; ELT; Language Teaching

1. Introduction

Electronic commerce, commonly known as e-commerce, has emerged as an integral aspect of contemporary society, revolutionizing various domains. The realm of education is no exception, as it has witnessed a significant impact, particularly on online teacherpreneurs. These individuals, as identified by Shelton and Archambault (2018), are educators who engage in the creation, marketing, and sale (or voluntary sharing) of original teaching resources to their colleagues through online platforms. This evolving trend of online teacherpreneurship predominantly involves current and former preschool to 12th- grade teachers who actively participate in virtual marketplaces, primarily driven by financial incentives (Shelton & Archambault, 2018). Davis (2006), an influential educator and blogger, was a pioneer in introducing the terminology of "teacherpreneur", describing the concept as the collaborative efforts undertaken by teachers across different classrooms to establish collectively beneficial learning opportunities for their students. In addition to fostering collaborative partnerships, online teacherpreneurship also offers distinct advantages such as increased flexibility and autonomy compared to traditional classroom teaching, as these professionals are able to allocate their time according to their availability and capacity.

Additionally, regarding teacherpreneurs and traditional teachers, the understanding of teacher identity is vital. As Fogle and Moser (2017) notes such understanding provides deeper insights into the factors influencing teachers' decision-making processes, attitudes, and beliefs. Extensive literature exists on professional identity in traditional education settings (e.g., Fallah et al., 2021, 2022), highlighting its significance in comprehending individuals' work experiences and self-identity as professionals (Smith, 2016). However, regarding teacherpreneurs, the understanding of their identities and the nature of their work in the education field remains unclear. While several studies have been conducted on teacherpreneurship in international and Iranian education contexts over the past 15 years (e.g., Keyhani & Kim, 2020; Epler, 2020; Sayehvand et al., 2022; Torphy et al., 2020), less attention has been devoted to the professional identity of Online English Teacherpreneurs (OET) (e.g., Shelton & Archambault, 2019, 2021, 2022). Furthermore, limited research has explored the professional identity of OETs within mainstream education (e.g., Lasekan & Alarcon, 2021), and no existing studies have been found on this topic in Iran.

According to Thompson (2017), the growing accessibility of resources offered by teacherpreneurs through online platforms effectively meets the needs of educators searching for current and readily available classroom-tested materials. This trend has resulted in the gradual rise of virtual leadership among these online teacherpreneurs, who utilize different digital platforms like blogs, social media, and online stores.

In contrast to conventional notions of teacher leadership, which typically involve appointment by school authorities and limit the scope of influence to local schools, online teacherpreneurs have the ability to reach a significantly larger audience without the need for official designation or endorsement from institutional leaders (Wenner & Campbell, 2016). In the specific context of this study, the term teacherpreneur refers to educators who utilize virtual affinity spaces as platforms to market, disseminate, and sell their products and services (Shelton & Archambault, 2019). This definition aligns with the concept of teacher-influencers (Hartung et al., 2023) when teachers collaborate with social media experts.

This research endeavor holds paramount importance as it seeks to elucidate the professional identity of Iranian EFL teachers who engage in the praxis of online teacherpreneurship. Utilizing a purely qualitative approach, this study strived to provide valuable insights and substantiate claims through rigorous examination of subjective experiences and narratives. Moreover, the pervasive utilization of social media platforms coupled with the meteoric rise of online education compels a comprehensive investigation into the practices and identities espoused by these successful teacherpreneurs. It is imperative to acknowledge and appreciate the indispensability of teacherpreneurship, particularly within a global milieu that increasingly embraces and relies upon digitalized educational paradigms. In this regard and within the scope of the present research, language teaching can be a viable denominator in the social spaces. The primary objectives of this research, thus, are to gain insights into the constituent elements of identity in the case of Iranian OET and their participation in virtual affinity spaces such as Facebook and Instagram.

The following research questions were explored in this study.

What are the practices of English teacherpreneurs within virtual affinity spaces in the Iranian EFL context?

What are the components constituting the identity of such teacherpreneurs?

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Overview and key concepts in Teacherpreneurship

The concept of teacherpreneurship is gradually emerging as a forward-looking model for teacher leadership, whereby educational institutions and administrators provide teacherpreneurs with the necessary resources and support to actively contribute to the development of the teaching profession and influence decision-making processes and policies (Holland et al., 2014). It is important to note that while the term "entrepreneur" forms the basis of "teacherpreneur," the practice in

question typically does not involve financial gain. Instead, the entrepreneurial aspect of teacherpreneurship primarily pertains to fostering innovation and embracing calculated risks. In addition to "teacherpreneurship," there are several related terms and identities associated with this phenomenon, including professional identity, leadership, online teacherpreneurship, and education influencers. Teacher leadership encompasses the endeavors of mainstream teachers who assume leadership positions and undertake responsibilities beyond the bounds of their classrooms, such as providing peer mentorship, engaging in peer coaching, and participating in coordination duties within the school (Wenner & Campbell, 2016). Education influencers, often abbreviated as EIs, epitomize teachers who utilize various social media platforms to disseminate informative content to students and fellow educators.

The emergence of online teacherpreneurship has been a result of several influential factors that have unfolded within the past decade. One noteworthy event that contributed to this phenomenon was the launch of teacherspayteachers.com in the United States, which quickly established itself as the most popular online educational marketplace (Gomes, 2015). Subsequently, in 2010, the advent of Pinterest provided a platform for teachers to become early adopters, utilizing its digital pinboard to compile and disseminate classroom ideas (Grote-Garcia & Vasinda, 2014). Concurrently, online teacherpreneurs leveraged Pinterest as a means to market their educational resources to fellow educators (Gallagher et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2018; Pittard, 2017; Schroeder et al., 2019). This success, however, highlights the substantial demand among educators for teacher-created curricula.

In traditional classrooms, the roles of successful teachers are multifaceted, requiring them to tackle complex tasks. However, the realm of virtual classes presents an even greater need for teachers to assume intricate roles. The competency essential for effective online L2 teaching extends beyond technical expertise. They encompass the establishment of a cohesive online learning community, the facilitation of communicative competence, the cultivation of teaching creativity, the development of a personalized teaching style, as well as the deep understanding of the affordances and limitations inherent in the specific software utilized (Stickler & Hampel, 2015).

It is important to recognize that teacher identity is not a fixed entity, but rather a malleable construct that is shaped, negotiated, and refined in response to various influences, including community values, educational policies, and cultural norms (Buchanan, 2015). Recently, there has emerged a new topic within the online education system known as "education influencers" or "social media celebrities." In the year 2023, a comprehensive scholarly investigation titled "TikTok, a Medium for Professional Identity Performance: An Exploration of Educators" authored by Hartung et al. (2023) delves into the phenomenon of Australian

teachers utilizing this innovative social media platform to disseminate their educational insights and garner a substantial following. Delineating the relevance of TikTok as a pivotal virtual realm for educators to connect and exchange pedagogical knowledge and experiences, the research findings reveal the prevailing popularity of this novel platform among teaching professionals. Consequently, the emergence of teacherpreneurs who have harnessed the potential of TikTok, repositioning themselves as influential entities in the realm of education, can be considered an intriguing outcome of this investigation.

Given that in this research highlighted the intersectionality of teacherprenuership and online affinity spaces, it is worthwhile to include the definition of such spaces. Affinity space, as articulated by Gee (2004), refers to a digital or physical environment where individuals with shared interests come together to learn and collaborate. This unique concept emphasizes the significance of social interactions and informal learning within a community-based context. By exploring the dynamics of online affinity spaces, this article aimed to highlight how these spaces can foster creativity, collaboration, and knowledge exchange among teacherpreneurs working within educational settings.

2.2 *Empirical Studies on online teacherpreneurship and identity*

The field of online teacherpreneurship is an emerging area of research that explores the professional identity of teachers who engage in entrepreneurial activities in the digital realm. While this line of inquiry is relatively limited, existing literature draws upon more established fields such as entrepreneurship, intrapreneurship, education influence, and the professional responsibilities and characteristics of online English teacherpreneurs. Scholars studying the concept of teacherpreneurship have primarily focused on delineating the specific traits and qualities exhibited by teacherpreneurs. A noteworthy example is the work of Berry et al. (2013), who examined individuals who simultaneously teach students while nurturing their own innovative ideas. These tutor-teacherpreneurs were characterized by their ability to incorporate their educational practices with their entrepreneurial endeavors.

Several preliminary studies (Buckley & Nzembaye, 2016; Carpenter et al., 2016; Shelton & Archambault, 2018) have begun to shed light on the identities of online teacherpreneurs and the consequences of their endeavors. Buckley and Nzembaye (2016) conducted interviews with three online teacherpreneurs who encompassed K-12 educators undertaking entrepreneurial ventures related to e-learning, educational gaming, educational technology, or mobile learning. While limited information was available regarding their respective work environments, certain traits were identified as characteristics of online teacherpreneurs, including persistence, creativity, and a motivation to share educational resources with other teachers. Notably, one interviewee cited discontent with the

pedagogical methods employed by their school as a driving force for their involvement in online teacherpreneurship.

It is important to highlight that this particular study did not quantify the outcomes of online teacherpreneurship or employ a theoretical framework. In a separate investigation, Carpenter et al. (2016) made an unexpected observation concerning online teacherpreneurs while examining teachers' engagement with the online pin board platform, Pinterest. Analyzing the pinning activity of 50 educators over a three-month period, their findings revealed that online teacherpreneurs wielded a significant influence within the platform, with an average following of over 21,000 users. Albeit preliminary, these findings suggest that Pinterest serves as one avenue through which teacherpreneurs actively share ideas and resources both altruistically and with the potential for financial remuneration.

In a more recent study, Shelton and Archambault (2018) conducted research on the phenomenon of online teacherpreneurship within a professional learning community consisting of 40 online teacherpreneurs who specialize in teaching Spanish. The researchers discovered that this closed Facebook group served as an active community of practice wherein participants collaboratively worked towards shared goals, generated novel ideas, and achieved collective accomplishments. The online teacherpreneurs reported that their engagement in this community not only led to entrepreneurial achievements but also enhanced their teaching practices. Consequently, these findings provide valuable insights into the characteristics and behaviors of online teacherpreneurs, highlighting their proactive involvement in online networking platforms, which in turn, influence both their peers and other teachers. This evidence underscores the significance of further investigating the emerging field of online teacherpreneurship. Examining the perceptions of Iranian English language institute teachers regarding their professional identity (PI), Fallah et al. (2021) delved into the sociocultural factors and the impact of communities of practice (CoP) on their PI in the context of online classes. The study also explored the influence of adopting online solutions on teachers' performance, teaching skills, and their overall perceptions of CoPs in the online learning environment. The findings revealed four key characteristics that contributed to the (re)construction of teachers' PI in online classes: teachers' role, competency and self-effectiveness, appreciation and connection, and future plans. Additionally, streamlined communication and active participation in CoPs were found to significantly contribute to the reshaping of teachers' identities in the online teaching setting. Membership in CoPs emerged as an essential strategy to enhance teaching skills, engage in social learning, and share common experiences. Thus, these aspects hold substantial influence over the positive reconstruction of teachers' PI within language institutions.

Additionally, with a focus on education in affinity spaces, Carpenter and Krutka's (2014) examined the use of online affinity spaces by educators. Specifically, to gain a better understanding of how Twitter is utilized in education, the researchers conducted a survey of 755 K-16 educators. The survey yielded both quantitative and qualitative data, providing insights into the methods and motivations behind the use of Twitter as an educational tool. The findings revealed that educators extensively and diversely used the platform, with professional development purposes being more prevalent than interactions with students or families.

On the same note, Carpenter et al. (2020) explored how and why educators are using Instagram. The exploration of affinity spaces and teacherpreneurship concepts served as a foundational framework for the study done by Carpenter et al. Delving into this field, the investigation revolved around the intricate relationship between educators and the digital platform known as Instagram. Through thorough analysis and participant feedback, it became evident that individuals reported engaging in extensive and diverse utilization of Instagram, resulting in numerous advantageous outcomes within their professional lives. Moreover, a prevalent theme among the participants was the amalgamation of personal and professional content in their Instagram posts, highlighting the integration of their individual identities within their educational pursuits.

3. Method

3.1 Design of the Study

In order to gather comprehensive insights into the constituents shaping the identity of OETs in the Iranian context, an investigation was undertaken in an authentic environment. Given the necessity to discern and describe diverse categories of information effectively, individual well as focus group interviews emerged as a critical element within the qualitative research paradigm. Hence, the chosen research design for this study rested upon qualitative methods. By procuring qualitative data through conducting interviews with proficient and accomplished OETs in the Iranian context, this study aimed to explore identity and practice of teacherpreneurs' and educational influencers across two social media platforms.

3.2 Participants

For the purpose of gaining a preliminary understanding of the professional identity of online English teacherpreneurs in Iran, a sample of five individuals has been interviewed. The participants were selected using both purposive and snowball sampling methods to ensure the inclusion of highly influential and popular individuals within the online English teaching community. Statistical

analysis of their social media activities, such as post reach, likes, and the number of followers, was used to determine their level of popularity and influence. It is worth noting that the terms "followers" and "likes" are commonly used on social media platforms to indicate the number of individuals who appreciate or express positive reactions to the shared content. Additionally, these terms could also refer to the online teacherpreneurs who have achieved the highest sales of language learning materials, courses, or packages through various social media platforms, internet programs or applications, and websites available in Iran, such as Telegram, Instagram, and educational programs developed by English teacherpreneurs. The research involved participants who identified themselves as male or female. These participants had varying levels of education, teaching experience, and lived in different parts of Iran.

The selection process involved reaching out to the potential participants directly or through private messaging on social networks. Prior to the commencement of the study, all participants were provided with verbal informed consent and were assured of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any point. The demographic characteristics and basic work-related information of the teacher participants, including gender, age, highest academic degree attained, years of experience as a teacherpreneur, and their main fields of study, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participants' Demographics

Participants	Gender	Age	Academic degree	Years working as OET	Field of study
1	Male	46	PHD	5	Language Teaching
2	Female	24	M.A.	2	Language Teaching
3	Female	37	B.A.	3	Language Teaching
4	Female	28	B.A.	3	Language Teaching
5	Female	43	M.A.	2	Mathematics

In the focus group, a group of 6 MA students (both male and female) in TEFL shared their attributes regarding the results of this study and the intersectionality of virtual affinity spaces and online teacherpreneurship.

3.3 Instruments

In an effort to gather comprehensive information on OETs' identity, qualitative semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted with Iranian online English teacherpreneurs. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with informed consent. The interview questions drew inspiration from Shelton's dissertation (2018) on online teacherpreneurship, which explored the practice itself, the individuals who pursue it, and the impacts they experience. Additionally, the questions were informed by relevant literature on English teacher professional identities, entrepreneurship, innovative teaching, and technology literacy, as well as the researchers' own inquiries aimed at achieving the research objectives. The interviews were divided into four parts and followed a general framework outlined by Shelton (2018). The first part focused on the participants' teaching backgrounds, consisting of four questions. The second part delved into the teacherpreneurs' experiences and practices, also comprising four questions. The third part explored the characteristics and components of the OETs, encompassing four questions. Finally, the fourth part addressed the challenges and obstacles faced by OETs, comprising three questions. Following the interviews, data analysis was conducted, and the findings were shared with a focus group. The focus group consisted of six M.A. students in English language teaching, three of whom had teaching experience in private and public institutes, as well as material development expertise. The other three participants in the focus group had experience in online English teacherpreneurship. This meeting, lasting over 90 minutes, took place in person, allowing for a deeper discussion and increased reliability of the findings. The participants were selected through convenience sampling.

3.4 Procedure

In this study, two research instruments were utilized, specifically interviews and a subsequent focus group discussion that followed the interview sessions. Initially, one of the authors conducted a semi-structured interviews using a standardized interview protocol (see Appendix 1) to ensure consistency across participants and to address the research questions. The interview began with demographic, teacher, and teacherpreneurs' background questions. Probes were used to encourage participants to provide comprehensive responses and ensure an understanding. The interviews were audio-recorded using cellphone recorders in Farsi to allow participants to freely express their opinions and feelings. Subsequently, the recordings were translated into English and transcribed verbatim by the author. The interviews, totaling five, were conducted between April and May 2023. The interviews were either conducted via phone call (n=1) or in person (n=4), based on participant preference. The duration of each interview ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. For qualitative data analysis, a thematic analysis approach was employed to organize and analyze the data. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the research, the authors intended to seek the assistance of two experienced qualitative researchers who specialize in teacher education and/or

educational technology. These experts reviewed the interview transcripts, analytical memos, and research findings to validate the researchers' interpretations.

4. Results

This study sought to investigate the professional identities and practices of Iranian OET within virtual and social affinity spaces. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, a focus group discussion and interviews were conducted with a sample of five OETs, and the themes that emerged from their responses were identified guided by Shelton's framework (2018). The findings are presented across two main constructs: characteristics of OETs and practices employed by OETs.

4.1 Characteristics

In the interviews, Iranian OETs discussed several personal characteristics that they believed represented central traits of being defined as an OET. However, for the purposes of this study, only the most salient and higher-level themes were selected and mentioned in this paper. Table 2 presents these themes, along with anchor quotes and evidence from the interviews associated with each characteristic. Among the characteristics consistently described by OETs themselves, the most significant were being helpful, perseverant, creative, professional, risk-taking, and confident.

Table 2

Characteristics of Iranian OETs *noted by all participants*

Themes	Anchors quote	Evidence from the interviews
Helpful	If an OET says, they are willing to help students, teachers and learning community	**"I prepare materials for students to help them in learning new vocabulary. Developing teaching materials can motivate other teachers to do so, I develop educational files to encourage students. I think my prepared content could be educational assistance for novice teachers."**
Perseverant	If an OET says, they make their efforts to develop new materials	**"I try to keep on schedule in different situations. I have to use my free time for this. With no financial support I started, just personal facilities should be used. Despite all difficulties I enjoy it."**
Creative	If an OET says, they try to be creative in developing materials and language teaching approaches	**"I produce an educational video with my presence. According to cultural elements, power points are generated. Thinking about unique ways all the time is my habit. With the help of my child, I prepare daily conversation content."**
Professional	If an OET says, they are dedicated to delivering high-quality materials and excellent teaching services to both students and teachers.	**"I think I am good at planning. I definitely set my monthly goals. Learning new skills is my power. Materials have to be prepared according to the lesson plans. I need to master computer programs to reduce the cost."**

Risk-taking and Confident	If an OET says, they are eager to take risks and show resilience.	**"I am not afraid of new things and try to take a risk. My goal is not to have financial risk. Although my colleagues do not take it seriously, I continue to do this. I enjoy presenting new content. Generating and sharing new ideas makes me feel powerful."**

As indicated in Table 2, the paramount trait exhibited by all OETs was their helpful nature, as they enthusiastically supported students, teachers, and the learning community. Their assistance encompassed the introduction of innovative teaching methodologies aimed at enhancing the education system, the creation of tailored learning materials to facilitate accelerated and effortless learning, the development of instructional resources to inspire fellow educators, and the formulation of educational content as guidance specifically targeted at novice teachers. It is noteworthy that three of the aforementioned individuals expressed their conviction that their efficacy in aiding others extended solely to their immediate colleagues and students within traditional classrooms. Consequently, their contentment and sense of fulfillment stemmed from the favorable circumstances in which they operated.

One of the participants explained*: I do not like to teach the same lessons over and over again in the same way, it makes my students and me bored so with the available online methods and facilities I try my best to present the teaching creatively and entertainingly.*

Being perseverant was the second theme which all of them mentioned. OETs viewed themselves as teachers who make their efforts to develop new materials and said they show their severance in trying to keep on present schedule in different situations and difficulties and allocating their free time (mentioned by four teachers), starting without any financial support and just personal facilities (noted by all of them*). One noted: although the school and institute do not support this integrated education, I enjoy developing online content and working on them with my students out of school hours or in social media groups.*

In addition, the OETs described themselves as being creative, and they all expressed that possessing creativity is one of the crucial personal prerequisites for this profession. Their creativity manifests in various ways, such as independently producing short videos (two respondents), creating culturally infused PowerPoint presentations (three respondents), consistently brainstorming innovative approaches (all participants), and collaborating with their families to develop content (two respondents).One individual stated*: for producing a video,*

I check the contents of our course books and find an interesting topic then write a short scenario for that and try to play in that.

The fourth theme revolved around professionalism and it can be affirmed that all participants acknowledged the commitment of OETs to delivering high-quality materials and providing excellent teaching services to both students and teachers. OETs underscored that they can epitomize professionalism through various means, including maintaining a consistent lesson plan and setting time-bound goals for all participants, continuously acquiring new skills collectively, and mastering online programs and applications, as demonstrated by four individuals. One participant commented*: I know both English and Persian very well and computer soft wares as well and I taught in private schools and institutes inside and outside of Iran and I do believe that teachers especially language teachers need to integrate their skills and find their own way of teaching.*

Risk taking and being confident were important characteristics of interest as well. In general, all of OETs claimed that they are not afraid of new things and taking risks is their power to progress. Despite their colleagues' lack of seriousness towards this method, they display a strong determination to persist in it, consistently producing fresh content and fostering the generation and dissemination of novel ideas. This resilience empowers all participants involved.

4.2 Practices

The second construct in the conceptual model was OETs' practices or activities in which they engage. Participation of OETs in a series of practices can be summarized in these steps: developing online materials, characteristics of the audience, teacher leadership, collaboration with teachers and teacherpreneurs, language skills priority, life-time learning. Table 3 displays described themes, anchors quotes, and evidence from the interviews.

Table 3

Practices of Iranian OETs noted by all participants

Themes	Anchors quote	Evidence from the interview
Developing online content	If an OET says, they develop different online content and materials	" In order **to sell, I create new resources**. **Developing students` materials** is my first priority. Having **online group with other teachers** is a good way to hear their points. My **classroom experiences help me** to generate ideas. I try to bring **multiple approaches and topics together** to develop novel online content. All the materials produced by them **do not have the same and/or reliable quality**."
Characteristics of the audience	An OET says, their audiences are at different levels or focusing on one proficiency level.	" My audiences are usually **from pre-intermediate and higher**. Because it is related to everyday conversations, it is **applicable to any level** of English language. They are at the **secondary school level. Young learners to adults. Regardless of the learners` proficiency levels**."
Teacher leadership	If an OET says, they pose leadership characteristics	"We try to market our online content in an effort **to grow our business**. I think **luck and business sense** are important. **Team working** with different specialties has a preference. We need to **have business skills in goal setting and data management**. I **usually attend career management courses**."

Collaboration with teacherpreneurs and teachers	If an OET says, they cooperate with colleagues in school and out of school.	"**Team teaching** is my priority. My colleagues **prefer traditional classrooms**. They have **expectations in case of cooperation**. My school environment **is not supportive enough**. I **prefer to work alone**."
Language skills priority	If an OET says, they prefer one language skill to teach over another.	"**Speaking and daily** conversations. **Listening and speaking**. **Reading** and learning vocabulary. **Speaking** and everyday relationships. **Listening**."

The primary and foremost practice of an OET, which was unanimously accepted by all participants due to its financial and/or business benefits and entrepreneurial objectives, entails the development of online content and materials. To validate this notion, OETs elaborated on several aspects: creating new resources with a priority focus on student development (mentioned by three respondents), participation in online groups to gain insights from other educators (mentioned by two respondents), recognition of the positive impact of classroom experiences (mentioned by all participants), and the inclination towards creating integrated online content such as music with subtitles and short videos pertaining to predetermined topics (mentioned by all participants). It is crucial to acknowledge that this concern has persisted over time: not all materials produced by OETs possess the same level of reliability and quality, and it should be noted that the number of likes and followers does not necessarily indicate acceptable quality. On the subject of audience characteristics in terms of proficiency levels, a majority of OETs highlighted that the content generated by Iranian OETs primarily revolves around daily conversations and general English. As a result, individuals ranging from young learners to adults with at least a pre-intermediate level of English language knowledge can benefit from these materials. Nevertheless, one participant argued, "I produce materials that I believe are worthwhile regardless of the learners' proficiency levels."

Posing the sense of teacher leadership was the third theme that all OETs considered an essential one. To illustrate these practices, they declared that OETs are going to market their content to grow their businesses and one respondent said: *I think luck and business sense play an important role but, another one believed in team working with different specialties*. While most of them pointed out that OETs need to have business skills and data management. One of the female teachers remarked that*: I usually attend career management and ICDL courses.*

The process of collaboration with teacherpreneurs and other teachers emerged as the fourth theme that appealed to the OETs. This approach can be

implemented effectively both within and outside the school setting. The majority of OETs acknowledged that team teaching is favored by them, despite the preference of their colleagues for traditional classes. Moreover, expectations come into play when considering cooperation. Conversely, three participants expressed a preference for working alone due to inadequate support from the school environment. Furthermore, one participant mentioned that in cases of limited cooperation, there is an expectation of compensation, possibly in the form of financial return. The fifth theme that OETs emphasized is prioritizing different language skills for instruction. Most participants favored emphasizing speaking skills and daily conversations, although two participants believed that these online materials facilitate the development of students' listening skills. One participant mentioned utilizing PowerPoint presentations to teach vocabulary and its roots. Lastly, OETs highlighted lifelong learning as a theme that holds great significance, signifying their belief in the continual importance of acquiring knowledge. Their efforts encompass various aspects, such as seeking new marketing approaches (mentioned by three participants), learning new online technologies and creating educational resources (mentioned by all participants), exploring new opportunities for collaboration (mentioned by four individuals), obtaining customer feedback, and investing time into supporting teachers and students who utilize the resources. One respondent mentioned forming a social media group for users of the materials to discuss the quality and effectiveness of the content.

4.3 Focus Group Results

The data collected from the focus group discussion were analyzed, and thematic analysis was carried out. This allowed the researchers to share the results with a focus group consisting of M.A. students in English Language Teaching. The students in the focus group had diverse teaching backgrounds both within and outside of Iran. Upon recognizing the significance of teacherpreneurship, the majority of the focus group members agreed with and endorsed the opinions and criticisms put forth by the OETs. However, they also emphasized that, based on their teaching experiences, they could provide additional comments. These comments encompassed various aspects: the need for the Iranian education system to transition towards integrated education and team teaching, the restriction faced by teachers in private institutes regarding the use of L1 and translanguaging, the necessity for adapting course books to align with Iranian culture and students' needs, as well as the provision of facilities and equipment for utilizing online materials. Additionally, the focus group participants insisted on the existence of a distinct definition of OET in Iran, diverging from its global understanding as previously mentioned. They proposed that the term "education influencers" might be a more appropriate designation. This could be because many Iranian OETs tend to replicate foreign content and then localize the materials to attract customers.

One of the most experienced online teachers in this field noted that: "*Instagram has more of an entertainment aspect of language learning and less educational aspect, in comparison with OETs in the world, Iranian OETs prefer to copy many materials with external resources so, they usually do not have the desirable quality for the audience*".

Most of them noted that in case of having financial support and investors they do prefer to establish an institute based on integrated education and interactive teaching so that they are able to implement their desired teaching methods for students and training methods for pre-service and novice teachers.

5. Discussion

The present study was one of the pioneering scholarly explorations in the education system in Iran. It focused on identity construction and practice of OETs in Iran. The findings of the study revealed that Iranian OETs were not solely motivated by financial gain but also actively engage and collaborate with both teachers and other teacherpreneurs. They preferred team teaching through entrepreneurial activities, while also demonstrating a strong desire to assist students in virtual communities and a passion for teaching English as a second language. These characteristics align with previous studies conducted by Shelton and Archambault (2018) and Sayehvand et al. (2022) in the Iranian context.

Additionally, the study highlighted that Iranian OETs perceive online teacherpreneurship as a novel approach to enhancing their teaching practices. The majority of participants emphasized the positive effects of incorporating new technologies in content delivery and employing unique teaching strategies in the classroom. The study also suggests that participating in online teachers' groups on social networks expose teachers to the latest educational trends and fosters beneficial exchanges of ideas, particularly when teachers with different specialties are part of the same group, as observed by Shelton (2018).

However, contrary to prior research that suggested virtual collaboration among online teacherpreneurs, this study's findings indicate that Iranian participants, despite preferring teamwork, reported a sense of competition rather than cooperation among colleagues and other OETs. Many participants expressed a lack of hope for adequate support from school and institutional environments, which contradicts existing literature reviews.

In comparing the definition of online teacherpreneurs in other studies, Iranian respondents noted that their characteristics and practices align more closely with education influencers rather than traditional teachers. These education influencers, as discussed by Carpenter et al. (2022) and Carpenter and Shelton (2021), are experts in content creation but may not necessarily possess teaching qualifications,

as they primarily seek individual benefits in their endeavors. The study cites an example of a 13-year-old girl among Iranian OETs who, despite lacking formal teaching qualifications, offers English courses due to her fluency in conversational English. By previous definitions in the field, this girl would be considered an education influencer.

Another notable finding is the controversial issue of some Iranian OETs copying foreign materials and making minimal changes using their native language (L1) or computer effects. This behavior contradicts the perception of OETs as creative and innovative individuals, as discussed by Shelton and Archambault (2019).

In addition to these findings, two noteworthy themes emerged from participant responses: the use of L1 in teaching and the challenges faced by OETs in Iran. Overall, most participants believed that incorporating L1 and translanguaging techniques during instruction can facilitate language learning, particularly in teaching grammar and explaining idioms. The most significant challenges reported by participants included a lack of financial and job support from teacher educators and the mainstream education system, insufficient electronic facilities to create online content, a mismatch between course book content and student needs for integrated education, and a general lack of acceptance of the importance of online teacherpreneurship by administrators, parents, and students due to cultural factors.

Surprisingly, the current study's results align with those of Shelton and Archambault (2019), who emphasized the importance of teacher education in supporting teachers' efforts to find, select, and implement materials effectively. It highlights the need for teacher education to consider teachers' interests and recognize the value that online teacherpreneurs can bring to the teaching community. The findings also resonate with Lasekan and Alarcon (2021), who argue that encouraging teacherpreneurship among educators can lead to sustainable innovation, addressing challenges in the educational sector and improving teaching practices in both mainstream and non-mainstream education. Contrary to research findings on identity in formal TEFL education in Iran (e.g., Eslamdoost et al., 2020), this study also highlighted that identity is subject to changes and can be shaped beyond policy-making contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the characteristics and practices of Iranian online teacherpreneurs through interviews. The findings of the study revealed several significant conclusions. Firstly, online teacherpreneurship extends beyond the mere selling and development of online materials. It is about enhancing motivation for both students and teachers in the context of learning and teaching

English language, promoting integrated education, and engaging in entrepreneurial activities. Secondly, the study indicated that teacherpreneurship activities and experiences have a positive impact on the traditional teaching quality of English teachers, providing more job opportunities and increasing career satisfaction. Thirdly, while concerns were raised about the quality of online teacherpreneurs' materials, it was evident that online teacherpreneurship offers a valuable platform for creating research-based and innovative resources to support diverse learners. However, it is essential for this emerging field to be officially recognized and accompanied by criteria that establish the reliability and benefits of educational online materials created by teacherpreneurs. The scope of this study was limited due to the relatively small number of participants, focusing specifically on English online teacherpreneurs and utilizing qualitative data from foreign social networks. Future research should expand the investigation by exploring different components of teachers with varying specialties, examining online teacherpreneurship activities within internal social networks, and comparing the facilities available in foreign contexts. Additionally, future studies could delve into the concept of educator-influencers as defined by Carpenter and Shelton (2021), who are non-traditional language teachers but possess significant impact and influence in the field. By conducting further research in Iran and abroad, a better understanding of online teacherpreneurship and its potential benefits can be gained. After all, it is imperative to recognize that the invaluable support of educational institutions and comprehensive research in this domain will undeniably pave the way for the rise of proficient virtual teacher leaders and influential figures in education. By delineating the extent of assistance required and fostering a conducive environment, we can empower and propel these individuals to achieve remarkable feats in shaping the future of education.

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Appendix 1

Components of Iranian Online English Teacherpreneurs` Professional Identity

Background:

1- What is your main field of study?

2- How old are you? And how many years have you been working as an English teacherpreneur? What was the reason for your decision?

3- Briefly explain about your career background, education, teaching experience in the classroom and in the traditional way or other jobs related to this field.

4- At what level of English are your contacts most of the time, and at which level do you prefer to present content? What kind of online materials do you upload?

Description of experiences as an online English teacherpreneur:

5- How important is the role of the first language and the use of technology in your teaching?

6- To select the audience and present the materials, do you assess the level of English before the start or get feedback after the training course?

7- Please briefly explain what activities you currently have as an English teacherpreneur?

8- If you are currently teaching in a traditional way, what is your opinion about the effects of teacherpreneurship on the quality of teaching in the classroom?

Characteristics of Online English Teacherpreneurs (OETs)

9- Which personality traits do you think made you successful in this job?

10- Which of your personality traits do you think has hindered your further progress or success?

11-Research shows that entrepreneurs and teacherpreneurs have common and similar personality traits. Please determine which of the mentioned traits represent your personal characteristics.

A- The power of risk-taking

B-Creativity

P- Hardworking

T-Interested in cooperation and interaction

D- Respecting colleagues

C- Experienced and professional

12- Which of the skills do you think made you successful as an OET? This skill can be in different fields such as technology, entrepreneurship, leadership and management or creativity and innovation.

Challenges and obstacles:

13- What is your opinion about this sentence? Some believe that materials prepared and compiled by the teacherpreneurs lack good quality and coherence.

14- What is your opinion about this sentence? Some believe that the success of teacherpreneurs is due to the support of other colleagues and teachers.

15- Can you tell us about the level of cooperation or competition between you and other OETs? What are your challenges working as an OET in Iran?

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