

REVIEW

Identity Construction of K-12 EFL Teachers in China: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Language teacher identity has garnered significant scholarly attention, given its pivotal role in shaping pedagogical practices and teacher development. This systematic review examines empirical research on the identity construction of Chinese K-12 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers since 2000. Departing from previous reviews confined to English-language databases, this study synthesises 52 empirical studies from both English and Chinese sources by thematic analysis, offering a more comprehensive analysis of the field. Findings reveal six major teacher cohorts explored in the literature: cross-border teachers/overseas returnees, novice teachers, participants in university-school collaborations, private-sector educators, second-career teachers, and rural practitioners. Two dominant research approaches emerge: one examines how teachers construct multiple identity categories to navigate diverse contexts, and the other traces the development of identity trajectories over time in response to various influencing factors. Discussion thereafter centres on these factors spanning three interrelated levels: the micro-level of individual experiences, the meso-level of institutional contexts, and the macro-level of sociocultural dynamics. To advance the field, the study advocates for identity-informed interventions in teacher education and calls for longitudinal, cross-generational research on the evolution of identity. The review concludes by urging teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers to integrate EFL teacher identity as a central consideration in future pedagogical practice, policy development, and scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: EFL Teacher Identity; Teacher Identity Construction; Language Teacher Identity; Language Teacher Development; Systematic Review; K-12; China

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1. Introduction

Teacher identity refers to “teachers’ expectations of themselves, what they perceive to be the expectations and perceptions of others”^[1]. Teacher identity has become an important component in teacher education and development^[2–4]. Specifically, scholars started exploring second/foreign language teacher identities in the late 1990s, highlighting the importance of understanding language teachers’ professional, cultural, political, and individual identities in language teaching^[5–8]. Nevertheless, the identity of Chinese EFL teachers remains underexplored as it fluctuates with the status of EFL education, thereby influencing the positioning of EFL teachers^[9], especially in the new millennium.

Since 2000, China’s ELT landscape has evolved through distinct policy phases that continue to shape teacher identity construction. In 2001, China’s Ministry of Education^[10] mandated the introduction of English instruction in primary schools, reflecting the nation’s strategic emphasis on English proficiency amid its WTO accession and the 2008 Beijing Olympics^[11]. However, in the post-Olympic era, the prioritisation of English education gradually diminished^[12]. While the Ministry of Education^[13] now stresses quality-oriented English instruction, it also prioritises integrating Chinese culture into curricula, a shift posing new challenges for teachers^[14]. These shifts occur against persistent structural challenges: urban-rural resource disparities^[15], high-stakes testing (e.g., Gaokao)^[9], and conflicting societal expectations (e.g., communicative pedagogy vs. exam preparation)^[11]. Such dynamic policy and practical realities render Chinese EFL teachers’ identity negotiations uniquely complex, yet underrepresented in global teacher identity literature. Synthesising findings on Chinese EFL teacher identity offers insights for teachers in similar contexts and transferable perspectives for other language educators (e.g., Russian, Spanish), particularly regarding how language ideologies, institutional demands, and sociopolitical factors shape professional identities. Cross-linguistic comparative research could further reveal both universal patterns and context-specific challenges, enriching global discourse on multilingual teacher identity in the 21st century.

Most previous systematic reviews, for example, that of Liu and Trent^[16] on Chinese teachers’ identities, include only literature published in English. Yuan^[17] admits that a

review of NNEST (Non-Native English-Speaking Teacher) identity with only English literature would limit the research scope and may thus mar the comprehensiveness of the review. Against this backdrop, this review serves as a starting point for researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current research on K-12 EFL teachers’ identity construction in China, laying the foundation for informed action. It aims to depict the status quo of research on Chinese EFL teachers’ identities in K-12 education, to identify major themes in the existing literature, and to find out how researchers analyse EFL teachers’ identities. It also aims to provide recommendations for future research on EFL teachers’ identity construction and professional development. In light of the above objectives, this review aims to answer the following research questions: What major themes emerge from the existing literature of empirical studies on Chinese K-12 EFL teachers’ identity construction? What research approaches have been employed by previous researchers? What are the recommendations for future research?

2. Materials and Methods

This systematic review adopts the PRISMA protocol proposed by Page, Moher, and Bossuyt, et al.^[18] combined with guidelines suggested by Paul, Lim, and O’Cass, et al.^[19] in the SPAR-4-SLR protocol. Unlike previous systematic reviews limited to English-language databases, it incorporates both Chinese and English sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Given that a significant body of empirical work on this topic is published domestically in Chinese, omitting these sources would obscure critical contextual insights and hinder accurate synthesis of the field’s current state and future directions. Thus, integrating Chinese databases is essential to mitigate linguistic bias, capture underrepresented scholarship, and maintain scholarly rigor^[20]. Databases including Web of Science and Scopus complemented by Google Scholar in the English language were selected for the pool of research conducted^[19]. China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the most authoritative and comprehensive database in China in the Chinese language^[21] and another popular database in China — “Wanfang”^[20], complemented by Baidu Scholar, Chinese equivalent of Google Scholar in the English language^[22], were selected for studies conducted in China and published in the Chinese language.

2.1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Our inclusion criteria for selected studies were as follows: empirical studies (focus on original, not synthesised studies); journal papers published either in English or Chinese (advance scholarship through rigorous peer review); research subjects of in-service Chinese EFL teachers at the K-12 level; research contexts in China since 2000; and studies focus on teacher identity construction. The exclusion criteria were as follows: studies not directly related to EFL teacher identity; review papers (non-empirical studies); studies focusing on pre-service teachers; studies focusing on teachers in tertiary education; research subjects of teachers teaching foreign languages other than English; research subjects of foreigners but not Chinese; webpages and reports (not formally a part of literature), books and book chapters (mostly explanatory rather than exploratory), conference proceedings (usually little to no peer reviews and typically research in progress), and MA and PhD dissertations (research often proves competence over originality). These criteria follow the rational expounded by Paul et al.^[19]. Additional studies were excluded from this review for the following reasons: some articles focusing on teachers did not examine identity construction as their primary focus, while others investigated learner identities rather than teacher identities.

2.2. Literature Search and Selection

We first conducted our search using search terms (“EFL” OR “ESL” OR “L2” OR “NNEST” OR “English”) AND “teacher identit*” AND Chin* (Topic) in Web of Science and obtained 101 search results. Applying the same search terms (“EFL” OR “ESL” OR “L2” OR “NNEST” OR “English”) AND “teacher identit*” AND “Chin*” (title, abstract or keyword) to Scopus, 304 journal papers were found. A total of 79 duplicate records were removed after cross-checking both databases. So, in the first round, 326 journal articles were ready for further scrutiny. After the initial screening of all papers by reading their titles and abstracts, 49 papers were left for full-text screening. After scrutiny, 15 papers were further excluded. To further enhance the comprehensiveness of our search, we entered the same search strings in Google Scholar, and only two more articles were included for final review, proving the exhaustiveness of our

search on the topic. Eventually, 36 English journal papers were legitimate for our final review.

Meanwhile, the search conducted in Chinese academic databases omitted the keyword “China OR Chinese” since studies within these platforms inherently focus on the Chinese context. Given that English is the predominant foreign language taught in China, the term “foreign language teachers” (外语教师) functions as a proxy for EFL teachers^[23] and was thus included as a key search term. Accordingly, we entered the search terms (主题:(外语教师 英语教师 身份认同)) (Subject: (“foreign language teachers” OR “English teachers” AND “identity”)) into CNKI, and 88 hits appeared in the search results, while in Wanfang, the number was 101, among which 46 duplicate references were discarded. Eventually, 55 in Wanfang and 88 in CNKI, altogether 143 journal articles in the Chinese databases, were left for further scrutiny. After reading their titles and abstracts, only 24 articles were left for full-text screening. Following exclusion of nine non-empirical or tertiary-focused studies, supplementary searches in Baidu Scholar yielded only one additional Chinese article, demonstrating search saturation. The final analysis comprises 52 empirical studies (36 English, 16 Chinese). The flow diagrams in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** show the detailed literature selection process, including numbers and reasons for literature exclusions in every round.

2.3. Analysis and Synthesis

The analysis began with a descriptive overview of key characteristics of the included studies, encompassing publication year, language, geographical context, and the educational levels or institutional types from which participants were drawn. It also examined the theoretical frameworks or perspectives guiding each study, followed by an evaluation of the research designs and primary data sources employed. Finally, it synthesises major themes in the current literature on EFL teachers at the K-12 level in China^[24]. Findings of similar studies were further compared and contrasted for a critical review. The first and second authors were responsible for quality assessment and data extraction of findings from Chinese databases, while the first and third authors performed these tasks for studies from English databases. The first author then synthesises all results for the final report.

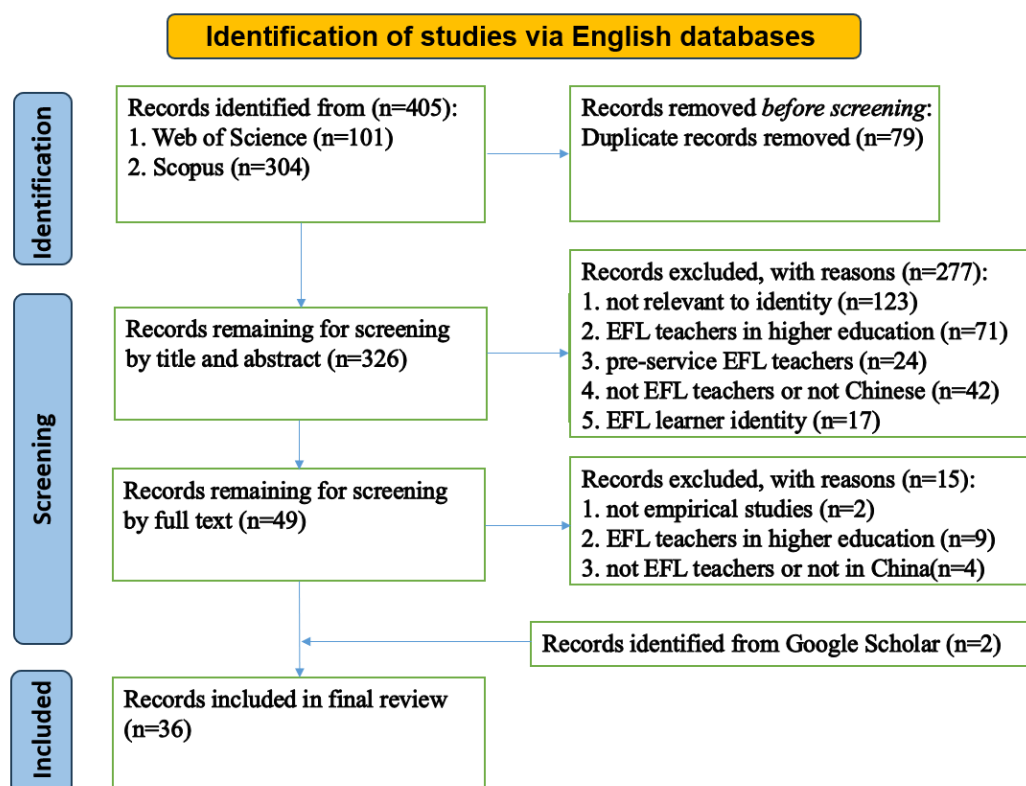


Figure 1. Flow Diagram of the English Literature Selection Process.

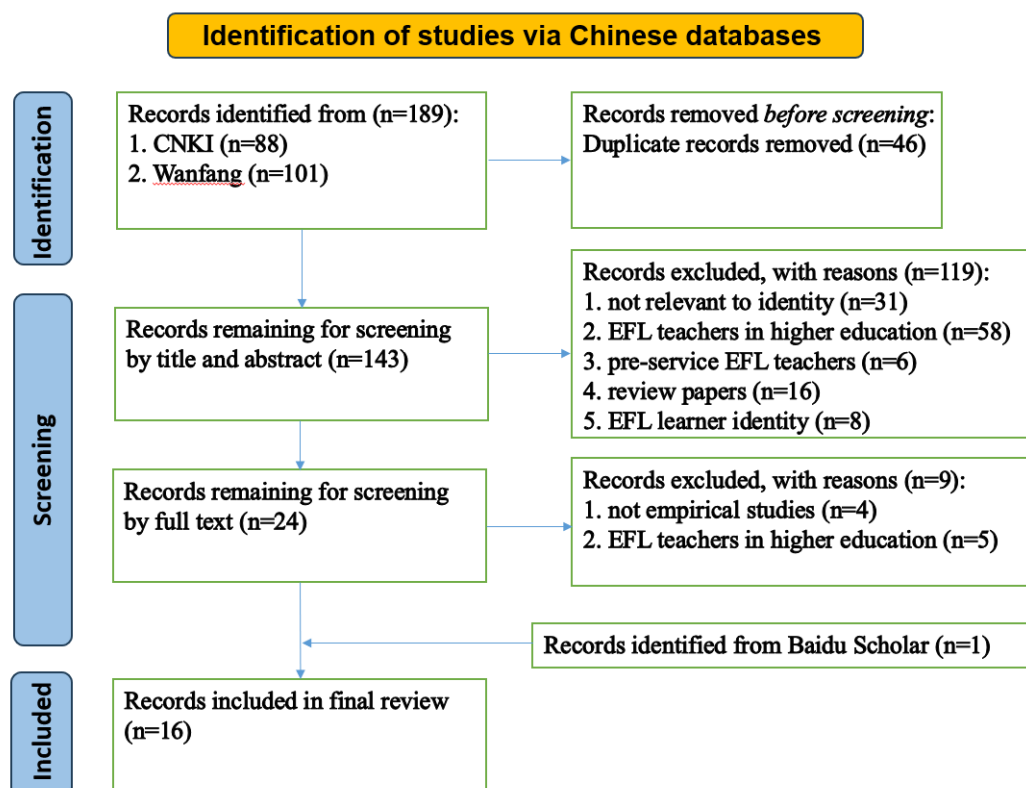


Figure 2. Flow Diagram of the Chinese Literature Selection Process.

3. Results

By engaging with a diverse range of teacher participants, researchers greatly enhanced and expanded the depth

and breadth of the research topic since its emergence. **Table 1** provides a brief overview of all the selected studies. It highlights the following features:

Table 1. Brief Overview of All the Included Empirical Studies.

Author(s) and Year	Language	Level/Type	Setting	Perspective	Design	Data
Wei ^[25]	Chinese	secondary	Zhejiang	N/A	qualitative	interview
Guan et al. ^[26]	Chinese	high	N/A	N/A	qualitative	interview
Trent and Lim ^[27]	English	secondary	Hong Kong	sociocultural poststructural	qualitative	interview
Trent and DeCoursey ^[28]	English	secondary	Hong Kong	sociocultural poststructural	qualitative	interview
Wu and Yang ^[29]	Chinese	high	N/A	N/A	qualitative	interview
Trent ^[30]	English	secondary	Hong Kong	sociocultural poststructural	qualitative	interview
Xu ^[31]	English	K-12	Beijing	sociocultural	qualitative	interview
Gu ^[32]	English	secondary	Hong Kong	sociocultural poststructural	qualitative	interview
Wang ^[33]	English	high	Henan	Zhang (2013)	quantitative	questionnaire
Xun et al. ^[34]	Chinese	high	Shandong	sociocultural	quantitative	questionnaire
Xun and Zheng ^[35]	Chinese	high	Shandong	sociocultural	mixed	questionnaire & interview
Xun ^[36]	Chinese	high	Shandong	sociocultural	mixed	questionnaire & interview
Yuan and Burns ^[37]	English	high	Beijing	sociocultural	qualitative	interview
Xiong and Xiong ^[38]	English	primary	Kaiping, Guangdong	Xun et al. (2014)	quantitative	questionnaire
Li and De Costa ^[39]	English	high & shadow	Nanchang	agency	qualitative	interview
Xu et al. ^[40]	Chinese	high	city	sociocultural	qualitative	interview
Li ^[41]	Chinese	high	Hanzhong	N/A	qualitative	interview
Li and Zou ^[42]	Chinese	high	Shanghai	Korthage (2004)	qualitative	interview
Li ^[43]	Chinese	secondary	Hubei	sociocultural	mixed	questionnaire & interview
Poole ^[44]	English	international	Shanghai	comparative framework	qualitative	interview
Trent ^[45]	English	K-12	mainland China	sociocultural poststructural	qualitative	interview
Li ^[46]	English	secondary	N/A	sociocultural poststructural	qualitative	classroom discourse
Yan and Jia ^[47]	Chinese	compulsory	Enshi, Hubei	Xun et al (2014)	mixed	questionnaire & interview
Yan and Yang ^[48]	Chinese	secondary	N/A	sociocultural	qualitative	interview
Yung and Yuan ^[49]	English	shadow	Hong Kong	Gee (2000) & MDA	qualitative	biography
Wang et al. ^[50]	English	primary, shadow	N/A	ecological	qualitative	interview
Wang et al. ^[51]	English	shadow	Xi'an	N/A	qualitative	interview
Liu and Sammons ^[52]	English	primary & shadow	Shandong	Day et al. (2007)	qualitative	interview
Huang ^[53]	English	secondary	Hong Kong	agency	qualitative	interview
Yang ^[54]	Chinese	secondary	online	Xun et al (2014)	quantitative	questionnaire
Liu ^[55]	Chinese	high	N/A	emotion	qualitative	interview
Du and Zhang ^[56]	Chinese	high	a city in North China	Complex Dynamic Systems Theory	qualitative	interview
Xiong et al. ^[57]	English	primary & shadow	Guangzhou	poststructural	qualitative	interview
Wang and He ^[58]	English	secondary	Shanghai	Activity Theory	qualitative	interview
Teng and Yip ^[59]	English	primary	Hong Kong	identity control theory	qualitative	interview
Li and Lai ^[60]	English	international	Hong Kong	sociocultural	qualitative	interview
Li ^[61]	English	high&shadow	Nanchang	belief/emotion	qualitative	interview
Zhang and Hwang ^[62]	English	high	N/A	poststructural sociocultural	qualitative	interview
Xiong et al. ^[63]	English	high & international	Shenzhen	agency, trans-perspective	qualitative	interview
Shao ^[64]	English	K-12	Shanghai	TALiP Modal	qualitative	interview
Liyanage and Walker ^[65]	English	high	Beijing	temporal agency	qualitative	interview
Lee ^[66]	English	primary	Hong Kong	born-again	qualitative	interview
Dong ^[67]	Chinese	secondary	N/A	emotion	qualitative	interview
Wang and Derakhshan ^[68]	English	K-12	China	psychosocial	quantitative	questionnaire
Lo ^[69]	English	secondary	Hong Kong, mainland	sociocultural	qualitative	meeting & interview
Kong et al. ^[70]	English	primary & middle	rural village	pedagogy of the rural	qualitative	interview
Guo ^[71]	English	middle	City S	investment	qualitative	interview
Ye ^[72]	English	high	Beijing	investment	qualitative	interview
Luo and Zou ^[73]	English	K-12	China	psycho-emotional	mixed	interview & questionnaire
Wang and Yazan ^[74]	English	primary	rural village	sociocultural	qualitative	interview
Yao and Slater ^[75]	English	teenagers	Guangdong	sociocultural	qualitative	interview
Shi et al. ^[76]	English	K-12	China	sociocultural	qualitative	interview

Notes:

1. "Interview" is used as a shortened form of "semi-structured interview" for brevity in the table.
2. In the "Level/Type" column, referring to the school level or type in which teacher participants are engaged, terms are abbreviated as follows: "secondary" includes both middle and high schools; "middle" refers to middle schools; "high" to high schools; "primary" to primary schools; "K-12" encompasses primary and secondary education; "international" to international schools; "shadow" to shadow schools or private training institutions; and "compulsory" to compulsory education (primary and middle schools).

3.1. Publication Trend

Although language teacher identity became a research topic around 2000^[8], it specifically emerged as a focus in China around 2010 and attained growing interest among re-

searchers, particularly in recent years, with an increase in the number of publications (see **Figure 3**). To ensure data completeness, the year 2025 is not included in the figure, as full-year publication data were not yet accessible.

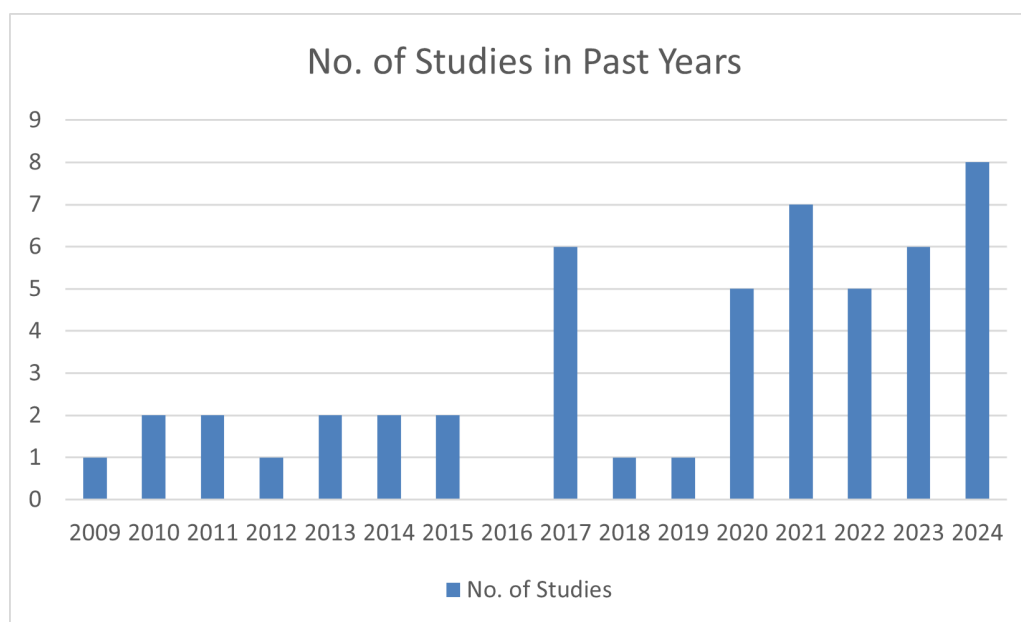


Figure 3. Number of Publications in the Past Years.

3.2. Theoretical Perspectives

The sociocultural perspective dominated current research, with Wenger's^[77] framework being most influential. His concepts of "community of practice" (or summarised as "identity-in-practice" by Varghese et al.^[5]) as well as "engagement, imagination, and alignment" have been widely applied since Tsui's (2007) seminal study on EFL teacher identity construction. Hong Kong scholars particularly embraced this framework, recently expanding their analyses to include Wenger's other concepts like "brokering"^[37,60].

Furthermore, researchers also reached a consensus that discourse plays a significant role in constructing EFL teachers' identities. Discourse analysis or critical discourse analysis from a poststructural perspective was employed as another theoretical basis for data analysis, among which Fairclough (2003) is most cited for his concepts of "modality" and "evaluation" as well as his strategies of "legitimation" and "authorisation", which Varghese et al.^[5] summarise as "identity-in-discourse". They therefore combined sociocultural with poststructural theoretical traditions, symbolised, respectively, by "identity-in-practice" and "identity-in-discourse," to provide multiple perspectives in language teacher identity research, which have been largely embraced in many studies^[27,32,46].

Recently, researchers started to unfold EFL teachers' identity formation in terms of ecological perspective^[50,78]. Besides, some studies also resort to the economic perspective

by investigating the interrelationship between teacher identity and teacher investment^[71,72]. On the other hand, Du and Zhang^[56] study EFL teachers' professional identity under the framework of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory. Overall, researchers are proactive in trying new theoretical frameworks to depict different scopes of EFL teachers' identity formation.

3.3. Methodological Preferences

The overwhelming majority of research adopted a qualitative approach, usually in the form of case studies. Most researchers employed semi-structured interviews (very often consisting of three rounds) as the main instrument to collect data, though usually supplemented by one or several of the following data sources for triangulation such as classroom observation^[25,26,31,36,39,41,42,56,61], classroom discourse^[46], email correspondence^[25], field notes^[31,37,63], reflective journals^[29,50,51,56,63], diaries/blogs^[61], autobiographies^[53], social media posts^[25,39,48] and related documents^[37,56,63] e.g., teaching syllabus, policy documents, teachers' reports or even blackboard writing. Sometimes, additional interviews with stakeholders such as students^[39], scholar administrators^[43,66], or university researchers^[58] were also conducted to triangulate the study.

Researchers also addressed this issue using quantitative data in addition to qualitative data. For example, Xun et

al.^[34] elaborated on the design, validation, and analysis of a survey questionnaire to measure the overall level of the professional identity construction of China's high school EFL teachers ($n = 283$) in Shandong Province. Several empirical studies are linked to the application of the questionnaire designed by Xun et al.^[34]. Among others, Xiong and Xiong^[38] compared the statistical differences in professional identity perceptions between rural primary school EFL teachers who have taught English all of their careers ($n = 121$) and those who transfer to teach English in the middle of their careers ($n = 61$) in Kaiping county, Guangdong Province, China. Yan and Jia^[47] also looked at the construction of professional identities by rural EFL teachers in Enshi, Hubei Province, China ($n = 116$). In contrast, Yang^[54] examined how junior middle school EFL teachers ($n = 32$) perceive their professional identities when teaching online. More recently, Luo and Zou^[73] tackled English teachers' ($n = 233$) professional identity in the flipped class teaching context by measuring their perceived anxiety level from the psycho-emotional perspective in the questionnaire. Wang and Derakhshan^[68] explored how contextual factors such as school climate and leader behaviour in EFL teaching context in China may shape Chinese EFL teachers' ($n = 375$) professional identities using questionnaire data. The above studies, which embodied a quantitative element, were confined to a relatively small scale. Future research can recruit large-scale participants to enhance the generalisability of the research findings.

This study revealed two persistent methodological constraints in the literature: quantitatively, studies predominantly employed small-scale researcher-led surveys that compromised generalisability; qualitatively, an overreliance on individual case studies privileged serendipitous discoveries at the expense of systematic investigations into collective identity formation processes.

3.4. Sample/Context Preferences

Through iterative reading and thematic analysis of the selected studies, we identified and synthesised the following teacher participants that recur across the existing literature.

3.4.1. Cross-border/Overseas Returnees EFL teachers

EFL teachers in Hong Kong, especially those with cross-border experiences, have been widely examined.

Among the 52 studies, nine were situated in Hong Kong^[28,30,32,45,49,53,59,60,66]. Teng and Yip^[59] found that mainland teachers in Hong Kong primary schools faced professional isolation, cultural barriers, and students' language deficits that hindered identity formation, compounded by negative emotional impacts. Lee's^[66] case study of a Hong Kong primary teacher further illustrated identity dilemmas through "born-again Chinese" dynamics when Mandarin replaced Cantonese as the instructional medium for English teaching.

Returnee teachers from English-speaking countries have recently emerged as a growing research focus in China. Unlike the challenges faced by cross-border EFL teachers in Hong Kong, Yan and Yang^[48] found that UK study-abroad experiences positively influenced teachers' professional identities by enhancing their roles as language educators, researchers, and cultural mediators.

3.4.2. Novice EFL Teachers

Identity formation of novice teachers^[28,30–32,46,51,53,57], especially during the transition from pre-service to in-service phases, was often studied. For instance, Gu^[32] found that novice teachers had to negotiate their identities to balance ideal and reality in real teaching practice, which is similar to how novice teachers in Xu's^[31] study experienced the shift from imagined to practised identities. The identity transition was so crucial that it could influence novice teachers' decision on whether to continue their teaching career, as observed by Trent^[30], they were influenced by their involvement in teaching practice, their relationships with colleagues, and their positioning within schools as well as by the larger educational environment.

3.4.3. EFL Teachers in University-School Cooperation

University-school cooperation (USC) as a new form of community of practice for in-service EFL school teachers' identity cultivation, drew researchers' attention^[27,37,58]. For instance, Trent and Lim^[27] employed a cross-case study of USC in Hong Kong to reveal divergent impacts on EFL teachers' identities: while one school's teachers benefited from a "doctor-patient consultation" dynamic, while in another, teacher resisted it as a marginalising "challenge." The study highlighted how unequal power relations in USCs could impede teacher identity development and called for

context-sensitive approaches.

In mainland China, Yuan and Burns^[37] showcased a university-school collaborative project in Beijing in which high school EFL teachers developed their teacher identity through action research facilitated by university researchers. Wang and He^[58] examined three middle school EFL teachers in Shanghai as they constructed researcher identities within a university—school community. Their transition from practitioners to researchers followed a spiral cycle, shaped by internal factors (e.g., research experience, career stage) and external influences (e.g., curriculum reform, community collaboration).

3.4.4. EFL Teachers in Private Sectors

The private sector of EFL teaching in China's K-12 educational system has enchanted researchers. EFL teachers working in international schools^[44,60,63], or in private training institutions (also called shadow schools)^[39,49,51,52,57,61] and self-employed EFL tutors^[61], faced institutional cultures different from those working in public schools. As such, their identity formation may generate distinct patterns and trajectories. For instance, Poole (2019) explored how Daisy, a Chinese EFL teacher at a Shanghai international school, actively exercised her agency as she constructed an “internationalising” teacher identity within a predominantly Western, constructivist framework of international education.

Unlike international schools, researchers found that private tutoring institutions (PTIs) hinder EFL teachers' identity development. For instance, four private English tutors in Xiong et al.'s^[57] study formed an identity complex of “tutors as exam experts, tutors as salespeople, and tutors as underdogs” influenced by the exam-oriented education culture, profit-making and competition-driven market logic prevalent in English PTIs.

Another special group of EFL teachers are those who are self-employed. Li^[61] depicted how a male self-employed English tutor who targeted low-achievers in high school survived and thrived in the competitive Jiang Hu (“a world that exists outside of government control and protection”), though he did not receive any professional EFL teacher education and just wanted to be an EFL teacher out of interest. Teacher belief and teacher emotion contributed to his successful identity enactment as a qualified EFL teacher.

3.4.5. Second Career EFL Teachers

Apart from the aforementioned themes, the unique cohort of “zhuangang” or “transferring post” teachers in the shift of teaching courses has intrigued researchers^[38,60]. In light of Wenger's^[77] concept of “brokering”, Li and Lai^[60] investigated three language teachers who transferred from teaching EFL to teaching Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). Findings revealed that trans-professional identity formation involved brokering activities negotiating meanings across distinct CFL and EFL contexts. By redefining teacher-student relationships, authority, and language practices, teachers reconstructed their professional identities, establishing themselves as core community members. Xiong and Xiong^[38] examined “Zhuangang” EFL teachers—educators who transitioned from teaching other subjects to English in response to a shortage of qualified English teachers—a widespread practice in rural primary schools following the government's 2001 initiative to introduce English instruction at the primary level. Notably, now EFL teachers are increasingly reassigned as reduced English class hours create surpluses, a trend that demands further research.

3.4.6. Rural EFL Teachers

EFL teachers' identity dilemmas in rural areas^[38,47] began to catch researchers' attention. Both applying Xun et al.'s^[34] questionnaire, Xiong and Xiong^[38] surveyed on primary school EFL teachers' level of professional identity in Kaiping County, Guangdong Province, as did Yan and Jia's^[47], who surveyed village EFL teachers in compulsory education in Enshi, also a county-level city in Hubei Province. Findings showed that the overall professional competence of English teachers in the rural areas' compulsory education stage is not high, with a lack of language knowledge and English skills, which could not meet the demands of curriculum reform and would inevitably affect the professional identity of teachers themselves. Future research efforts should address the issue by delving deeper into the lived experiences of rural EFL teachers through in-depth interviews in a qualitative design to explore the challenges and struggles they face in their identity construction and offer implications to help them out of their identity dilemma or identity crisis, as recruiting and retaining rural teachers has long been a serious problem in China's educational system.

In sum, the identities of EFL teachers in Hong Kong and major cities in China have been extensively explored in existing research. However, the context of Macau, with Portuguese contributing to the diversity of its multilingual landscapes, has yet to receive scholarly attention, and the identity construction of EFL teachers working in China's vast rural areas remains an underexplored area that warrants further investigation. While the identities of secondary school EFL teachers, particularly those in high schools, dominate the literature, primary school EFL teachers have been notably overlooked, receiving significantly less attention in comparison. Additionally, there is a disproportionate focus on novice EFL teachers, with significant attention given to the transitional phases between pre-service and in-service stages. In contrast, the experiences of in-service or veteran teachers remain relatively unexplored. Future research can also examine returnees from understudied EMI contexts like France, Germany, or Southeast Asia.

3.5. Research Approaches to EFL Teachers' Identities: Categories or Trajectories

In the selected studies we reviewed, we observed that researchers tackle the investigations of EFL teacher identities primarily from two approaches: EFL teachers may encompass numerous identities simultaneously to accommodate various contexts or develop diversified trajectories of identities in different phases of their teaching careers due to ever-shifting internal and external mediating factors.

EFL teachers need to navigate and negotiate their personal, professional, linguistic, social, cultural, or national identities to adjust to diversified institutional, political, social, cultural, and historical contexts. Li^[46], for example, demonstrated how novice secondary school EFL teachers discursively constructed their situated identities in classrooms by drawing from classroom discourse as the data for conversation analysis. Depending on the interactions with students and pedagogical strategies, EFL teachers may, in a moment-by-moment manner, act as experts in guiding students to complete tasks, authorities in English learning, teachers to fulfil learning objectives, excellent language teachers, multilingual speakers, and literature lovers in EFL classroom teaching. **Table 2** offers more examples from the selected studies for reference.

In the other line of studies, researchers provide a nuanced understanding of EFL teachers' identity transformation through narrative inquiry, usually from in-depth semi-structured interviews, by identifying the milestones or critical incidents in participants' teaching careers or lived experiences and reorganising the storyline more coherently. In particular, Liu^[55] showed the identity development of a veteran EFL teacher across the following stages: his identity as an enthusiastic teacher in the survival period, a novice research-oriented teacher in the growth period and a pioneer of English teachers in the maturity period. **Table 3** summarises the trajectories of some EFL teachers' identities in the included studies.

Table 2. Multiple Categories of EFL Teachers' Identities.

Studies	Identity Categories
Guo ^[71]	• an English teacher to teach English not just as a test tool but as a communication tool • a student inspirer who exposes students to diverse cultures • a peer mentor on how to effectively integrate GE into ELT
Yao and Slater ^[75]	• teachers as advocates of learner autonomy • struggling teachers for higher-level students • teachers as sources of students' learning motivation
Xiong et al. ^[63]	• translanguagers orchestrate different languages and meaning-making resources • jugglers of the roles of both content teachers and L2 teachers • multilingual educators negotiate the international curriculum to accommodate local educational and cultural mandates
Shao ^[64]	• positive negotiator adopting new online formative assessments by communicating with stakeholders and seeking help from external resources • flexible facilitator employing various assessment practices to facilitate online teaching • struggling follower suspicious of the effectiveness of assessment-related online teaching
Xiong et al. ^[57]	• tutors as exam experts to improve students' performance on tests • tutors as salespeople to recruit as many students as they can • tutors as underdogs with lower status and higher instability than public school teachers

Table 2. Cont.

Studies	Identity Categories
Wang et al. ^[51]	• an attendant who is anxious about early student leavers • a firefighter with a heavy workload and fluid working schedule • a coolie with endless non-teaching-related commitments • a tramp lack of career prospects
Yan and Yang ^[48]	• strengthened identity of language educators • reconstructed identity of educational researchers • developed identity of cultural disseminators
Yung and Yuan ^[49]	• an authoritative exam expert • a popular star • a well-qualified English language teacher
Li ^[46]	• an expert in guiding students through the task • an authority in English learning • a teacher with a strong agenda to fulfil the learning objectives • a good English language teacher with high language proficiency • a multilingual speaker teaching with translanguaging practice • a literature lover with a strong interest in literature and knowledge of literature works
Trent ^[45]	• transformative teachers who are conforming • disseminating teachers who are silent • integrative teachers who are separated
Poole ^[44]	• “an internationalising teacher” challenging the western-centric international education • being constructed as an international teacher as constructivist, and western-centric
Xu ^[31]	• a practical language attrition sufferer instead of an imagined language expert • a practical routine performer instead of an imagined learning facilitator • a practical problem analyser instead of an imagined spiritual guide
Wu and Yang ^[29]	• an exam-oriented teacher using grammar translation teaching method • a “poor” teacher teaching “poor” students in a “poor” private school • a tool for transmitting knowledge to students • a lonely teacher with competition but without collaboration between colleagues

Table 3. Diversified Trajectories of EFL Teachers’ Identity Construction.

Studies	Identity Trajectories
Shi et al. ^[76]	the initial stage: idealised and flat enthusiast → the exploratory stage: unstable and insufficient victim but explorer → the renewal stage: thoughtful and far-sighted aspirant
Kong et al. ^[70]	the sun → a fighter for girls’ rights in rural communities a helper → both a helper in children’s English learning and a consoler that provides emotional support a free dancer → a dancer in chains a lay Buddhist tolling the bell → a cautious Buddhist to toll the bell well a trainee → an exam expert trainee an educated youth → a rooted educated youth a gardener → a gardener and a watcher a contemporary Matteo Ricci in the countryside → a small potato
Wang and Yazan ^[74]	a student-centred face-to-face urban high school EFL teacher → a teacher-centred online rural primary school EFL teacher
Zhang and Hwang ^[62]	“problem finder” → “solution seeker”; “passive adapter” → “positive learner”; “uneasy layperson” → “confident professional”
Li and Lai ^[60]	Shufen: traditional authority-based ESL teacher in mainland China → Western-liberal CSL teacher in Hong Kong more as a friend, not as a teacher Raoli: exam-oriented ESL teacher in a Chinese authority-based school → student-oriented CSL teacher in Hong Kong international school Lingling: an unconscious university ESL instructor in China → a conscious CSL teacher in Australia and then in Hong Kong schools
Wang and He ^[58]	school teachers’ researcher identity in a spiral form: practitioner → researcher → practitioner → researcher...

Table 3. *Cont.*

Studies	Identity Trajectories
Li ^[61]	NNEST with self-deprecation → NNEST pursuing native-like English → NNEST seeking recognition from native speakers
Liu ^[55]	enthusiastic teacher in the survival period → novice research-oriented teacher in the growth period → pioneer of English teachers in the maturity period
Wang et al. ^[50]	teacher as a container of knowledge → teacher as a facilitator or negotiator of knowledge → a more professional, adaptive and realistic teacher
Huang ^[53]	becoming : enter to be a full-time teacher → being : “insulting” classroom experience → unbecoming : resign and work in an NGO for recovery → to be or not to be : “leaver” or “stayer” in teaching
Yuan and Burns ^[37]	‘fisherman’ → ‘fishing coach’ ‘craftsman’ → ‘teacher researcher’ ‘lonely fighter’ → ‘collaborator’ ‘housekeeper’ → ‘change agent’

4. Discussion

In depicting the rich spectrum of categories and trajectories exhibited in EFL teachers’ identities, researchers delve into complex and diverse internal and external factors influencing EFL teachers’ identity construction. Some factors may serve as catalysts for identity development, while others may act as constraints. Importantly, these factors often collectively interact in complex and nuanced ways, shaping teachers’ identity formation through dynamic interrelations. These factors can be categorised according to their respective levels of influence: individual experiences at the micro level, institutional contexts at the meso level, and broader social dynamics and discourses at the macro level.

4.1. Personal Experiences at the Micro Level

Situated at the micro level and originating from teachers’ lived experiences and professional engagement, the most direct influences on EFL teachers’ identity construction arise from their personal experiences. These include, but are not limited to, individual developmental trajectories, prior experiences as EFL learners, classroom teaching practices, and participation in teacher training or research. For instance, Shi et al.^[76] demonstrated that positive personal experiences in EFL learning served as a primary motivator for individuals to pursue a teaching career and remain in the profession despite challenges related to identity tensions and dilemmas.

Scholars have increasingly recognised the transformative role of professional development initiatives, particularly

teacher training programs and action research experiences, in fundamentally reshaping the professional identity formation of in-service EFL teachers. For instance, divergent findings across studies underscore the complexity of teacher identity development in university-school partnerships where university researchers were invited to guide school teachers in their teaching research. While some collaborations^[37,58] provide meaningful opportunities for identity enrichment, others may reinforce existing hierarchies and constrain teachers’ professional growth^[27]. These contradictions suggest the need for further research to examine how teacher training can be more effectively leveraged as a resource for identity construction, ensuring that EFL teachers can engage in meaningful, sustainable professional development.

Notably, identity construction among EFL teachers is influenced not only by experiences directly related to their professional training but also by seemingly unrelated personal experiences. For instance, motherhood can provide female teachers with deeper insights into child behaviour, improving their classroom management^[74]. Such findings demonstrate how non-professional experiences meaningfully inform professional identity development.

4.2. Institutional Contexts at the Meso Level

At the meso level, institutional contexts critically shape the professional identity construction of EFL teachers through multifaceted structural and systemic influences. Research underscores those organisational policies, including school management practices and teacher evaluation

frameworks, directly mediate educators' perceptions of professional efficacy and self-worth, thereby reinforcing or destabilising their occupational commitment^[54,68]. For instance, Wang^[33] identified compounding institutional barriers, such as excessive workloads, inadequate compensation, and limited research support, that systematically impeded high school teachers' identity development. These structural constraints intersected with broader systemic pressures, such as national curriculum reforms (e.g., revisions to the Gaokao) and shifting assessment paradigms, which imposed new pedagogical expectations and compelled teachers to recalibrate their instructional strategies^[79,80].

Concurrently, institutional climates, particularly leadership behaviours and administrative support, serve as pivotal determinants of professional growth. Supportive management practices foster self-efficacy and job satisfaction, whereas restrictive policies exacerbate role ambiguity and diminish engagement^[47,52,59]. Furthermore, external societal demands, including student/parent expectations for academic outcomes, necessitate continuous adaptation of teaching methodologies, requiring teachers to reconcile their professional identity with evolving stakeholder priorities^[49,54,72]. Collectively, these institutional dynamics highlight the interplay between structural constraints, systemic reforms, and localised leadership practices in shaping the trajectory of EFL teachers' professional identities.

4.3. Social Dynamics at the Macro Level

Alongside examining micro-level individual experiences and meso-level institutional influences, previous research has also situated teacher identity construction within broader social and historical contexts. Increasingly, scholars have turned their attention to macro-level social events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, globalisation, and the spread of neoliberal discourse, as critical forces shaping the teaching profession. The following studies discuss how such social events at the macro level contribute to the ongoing negotiation and reconfiguration of teacher identity. Shao^[64], for instance, delved into EFL teachers' newly assigned identities as online assessors, a role that emerged in response to the sudden shift to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Li and De Costa^[39] showcased how an EFL teacher working in a private school survived in the backdrop of neoliberalism, where English was commodified by exerting her agency to

erect her desired professional identity. Lee^[66] placed Hong Kong's handover to China as the research background and explored how an EFL teacher experienced a sense of being "born-again" as a Hong Kong Chinese in teaching practice, especially when Mandarin began to replace Cantonese as the medium to facilitate English teaching and learning.

Taken together, these studies illustrate that macro-level disruptions serve as powerful catalysts for the reconfiguration of teacher identity. Such developments reshape not only the external teaching environment but also the internal processes through which teachers interpret, negotiate, and re-construct their professional roles, rendering teacher identity an increasingly dynamic and contested construct.

4.4. Limitations

This review's exclusive focus on Chinese K-12 EFL teachers may overlook relevant theories, methods, and findings from research on other EFL populations (e.g., teacher educators, pre-service teachers). Future studies should incorporate these broader perspectives. Moreover, empirical studies published in Chinese remain scarce. To address this imbalance, we included as many Chinese-language papers as possible, even shorter ones, though this may have compromised quality, highlighting the need for further research on this topic.

5. Conclusions

This review highlights the growing scholarly interest in EFL teacher identity research, yet reveals a predominant reliance on sociocultural perspectives and qualitative methodologies. The extant literature primarily examines six key teacher cohorts: cross-border/overseas returnees, novices, university-school collaborators, private-sector educators, second-career teachers, and rural practitioners, adopting two dominant analytical approaches: the negotiation of multiple identity categories across diverse contexts, and the longitudinal evolution of identity trajectories. These processes are shaped by interdependent micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors, encompassing individual experiences, institutional milieus, and broader sociocultural forces. The synthesised findings on Chinese EFL teacher identity provide transferable insights for language educators in comparable contexts (e.g., CFL), particularly in understanding how lan-

guage ideologies, institutional pressures, and sociopolitical forces collectively shape professional identities, while highlighting the need for cross-linguistic/intercultural/transnational comparative research to distinguish universal patterns from localised manifestations in global teacher identity discourse. Specifically, it offers practical value by (a) informing teacher education programs to better address identity negotiation in exam-driven contexts through reflective pedagogy, (b) guiding institutional policies to balance top-down reforms with teacher agency, particularly for novice and rural educators, and (c) facilitating cross-cultural dialogue by revealing how sociopolitical factors uniquely shape Chinese teachers' professional identities compared to other educational systems. The synthesised findings equip practitioners and policymakers with evidence-based strategies to support teacher development while acknowledging contextual constraints, ultimately contributing to more sustainable EFL teaching practices in China and comparable settings worldwide.

Given the constraint of localised, small-N survey designs that limit broader applicability in current quantitative research on the topic, we recommend employing large-scale national surveys (c.f., OECD's TALIS^[81]) to systematically investigate K-12 EFL teacher identity across diverse contexts. While existing research on teacher identity relies mainly on case studies and semi-structured interviews, future studies could investigate collective, discursive identity construction using diverse methods like focus group discussions. Besides, existing research on teacher identity in China has focused largely on Hong Kong and urban areas. Future studies should expand to Macau, comparing it with Hong Kong, to uncover shared and divergent identity constructions. Furthermore, rural regions remain understudied, requiring further attention to capture identity diversity across different sociocultural and educational contexts. Researchers can also test whether an identity-based pedagogical intervention in both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs might be effective in teacher identity development, as it has already been proven effective for language learners^[82]. Additionally, longitudinal studies comparing teacher identity construction across generations could reveal its historical evolution. Future research may also examine how AI technologies influence EFL teacher identity construction.

Undoubtedly, researchers endeavour to enrich and

broaden the research scope by targeting a versatile spectrum of K-12 EFL teacher participants. However, there is a noticeable gap in studies focusing on school-based participants compared to EFL teachers and pre-service teachers at the tertiary level, who are either university teacher educators or university students. But K-12 schools are the frontline and primary site of EFL teaching, and K-12 EFL teachers are the main force of fieldwork practitioners. Since Henrich et al.^[83] questioned the representativeness of samples in behavioural sciences where a select few subjects from Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (W. E. I. R. D.) society, usually university students, represent the whole population or human society, such practice is still rife in scientific research in almost all domains, including linguistics^[84,85]. In pursuit of equitable multilingual research^[84] and to mitigate sampling bias in applied linguistics^[85], university researchers should step beyond the confines of academia, engage with non-WEIRD, real-world contexts, and prioritise the exploration of K-12 EFL teachers' identity construction—an imperative for the advancement of EFL education in China.

Author Contributions

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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