A Narrative Inquiry into Iranian Expatriate English Language Teachers' Resilience and Identity Construction in Turkey

Ismail Xodabande [a, *], Sedigheh Karimpour [b]

[a] *Kharazmi University, Iran*

[b] *Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences, Iran*

A B S T R A C T

This study investigated the dynamic interplay between resilience and professional identity construction among Iranian expatriate English language teachers working in Turkey. Grounded in the theoretical framework of activity theory and employing a narrative inquiry methodology, the research examined how teachers navigated institutional, cultural, and pedagogical challenges in transnational teaching contexts. Data were collected from eight Iranian teachers through open-ended questionnaires, narrative frames, and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed four interrelated themes: negotiating institutional expectations and autonomy, navigating cultural dissonance and identity reconstruction, sustaining professional self through adaptive resilience, and re-authoring identity through connection and recognition. These themes illustrated that participants' resilience was not a fixed personal trait but a socially mediated and contextually embedded process that co-evolved with their identity construction. The study contributed to the literature by foregrounding the situated and relational dimensions of resilience and by demonstrating how expatriate teachers reconstructed their professional selves through acts of adaptation, reflection, and connection. The findings carried implications for teacher education and institutional policies that aimed to support the development and well-being of expatriate educators in culturally diverse settings.

Keywords: resilience; teacher identity; expatriate teachers; Iranian EFL teachers; activity theory; narrative inquiry; language teacher psychology

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* Corresponding author: Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran
Email address: ismail.kh.tefl@gmail.com

Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a surge of research on the professional lives of language teachers, with particular emphasis on how they negotiate and construct their identities within diverse educational landscapes (Barkhuizen, 2017; De Costa & Norton, 2017; Norton & De Costa, 2018; Pennington & Richards, 2016). Teacher identity is now widely acknowledged as a fluid, socially situated, and evolving construct that emerges through teachers' ongoing engagement with institutional structures, cultural norms, and pedagogical practices (Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Varghese et al., 2005). This body of work highlights that identity is not merely a personal attribute but rather a dynamic process mediated by teachers' emotions, agency, and professional relationships (Karimpour et al., 2023, 2024; Nazari & Karimpour, 2025; Sang, 2022). Understanding how teachers' professional selves are shaped in context is therefore essential for capturing the complex realities of language teaching in an increasingly globalized world.

Parallel to the scholarship on identity, there has been a growing interest in teacher resilience, particularly in response to the pressures, uncertainties, and systemic challenges that characterize educational work. Resilience, once framed primarily as an individual psychological trait, is now conceptualized as a situated and socially mediated process that enables teachers to navigate adversity, sustain commitment, and reframe professional challenges as opportunities for growth (Hascher et al., 2021; Vallés & Clarà, 2023). Recent studies suggest that resilience is not separate from identity but deeply intertwined with it; the ways teachers view themselves and the meanings they attach to their work significantly shape their capacity to remain adaptive and engaged (Flores, 2018; Ramakrishna & Singh, 2022). As such, identity and resilience may best be understood as co-evolving processes, each reinforcing the other through teachers' situated practices and meaning-making.

While significant advances have been made in both areas, the existing literature has primarily examined identity and resilience in domestic or national contexts, often focusing on novice or early-career teachers. These studies, though valuable, overlook the experiences of expatriate teachers, whose professional lives unfold at the intersection of multiple cultural, institutional, and linguistic environments. Expatriate teachers face challenges that surpass those of their local counterparts, including cross-cultural adjustment, shifting professional hierarchies, and navigating the process of belonging in unfamiliar educational systems (Bright & Heyting, 2024; Fang et al., 2024). For teachers working outside their home countries, resilience is not only about coping with workload or institutional demands but also about adapting to new cultural expectations, professional recognition structures, and relational dynamics (Garza, 2019; Motteram & Dawson, 2019).

The specific case of Iranian English language teachers relocating to Turkey offers an instructive example of these dynamics. Despite geographical proximity and certain cultural overlaps, the two educational systems are shaped by different institutional logics, pedagogical traditions, and sociopolitical contexts. Iranian teachers arriving in Turkey must adjust not only to new curricula and assessment practices but also to shifting classroom dynamics and altered perceptions of professional authority. Their narratives provide a valuable lens for understanding how identity and resilience are co-constructed in transnational teaching contexts, where the negotiation of selfhood is shaped simultaneously by prior professional histories and host-country realities (Nazari et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2023).

Activity theory (Engeström, 1999; Roth & Lee, 2007) provides a particularly useful framework for studying these processes, as it situates human action within socially mediated activity systems composed of subjects, tools, rules, community, and division of labor. From this perspective, teachers' professional identities are not formed in isolation but through participation in evolving systems characterized by contradictions and tensions (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Nazari & Karimpour,

2022, 2024). Similarly, resilience can be conceptualized as emerging through mediated action, as teachers draw upon resources, relationships, and tools to adapt to systemic contradictions (Ghaslani et al., 2023; Shakib Kotamjani et al., 2025). By analyzing identity and resilience together through the lens of activity theory, it becomes possible to trace how expatriate teachers transform challenges into opportunities for growth, reconstruct their professional identities, and sustain their commitment despite systemic pressures. This theoretical lens thus highlights how teachers' responses to challenges are deeply embedded in and continuously reshaped by the sociocultural and institutional contexts in which they operate. Activity theory, thus, assisted us in examining how the teachers' narratives reveal tensions and contradictions within their activity systems that challenge or reinforce their resilience and identity construction.

Despite the relevance of this perspective, relatively little research has systematically investigated the reciprocal relationship between identity and resilience in expatriate contexts. Existing studies often address one construct in isolation, neglecting the interaction between the two in shaping teachers' professional trajectories (Henry, 2019; Gao et al., 2022). Moreover, few studies have employed theoretically integrative frameworks, such as activity theory, to capture the dynamic, mediated, and relational nature of these processes. Addressing this gap is crucial, given the increasing mobility of teachers worldwide and the complex challenges they face in cross-border educational settings (Dawborn-Gundlach et al., 2025; Varghese, 2025). The present study addresses this gap by examining the interplay between resilience and identity construction among Iranian expatriate English teachers working in Turkey. Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006; Riessman, 2008) as the methodological approach and activity theory as the conceptual lens, the research explores how teachers navigate institutional demands, cultural dissonance, and relational dynamics in their host contexts. By focusing on teachers' lived narratives, the study foregrounds the storied nature of identity and the adaptive practices through which resilience is enacted. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a broader understanding of expatriate teacher psychology, offering insights relevant to both research and practice.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

Activity theory, rooted in the sociocultural tradition of Vygotskyan psychology, offers a conceptual lens for understanding how human action is embedded in broader cultural and historical systems (Engeström, 1999; Cong-Lem, 2022). Rather than treating cognition and agency as individual traits, activity theory highlights how tools, community practices, and institutional rules mediate them. This framework posits that human activity is goal-directed and socially organized, with subjects (individuals) pursuing objects (goals) through the use of mediating artifacts within socially regulated systems. The inclusion of rules, community, and division of labour highlights that learning and development occur within structured yet dynamic systems of practice (Engeström & Glăveanu, 2012; Roth & Lee, 2007). A central feature of activity theory is its attention to contradictions within activity systems. These tensions, which may emerge between tools and rules, or between individual goals and institutional mandates, are not viewed as simple disruptions but as potential sites of transformation. In educational contexts, contradictions often reveal the misalignment between teachers' professional aspirations and the institutional frameworks that govern their work. Far from being merely obstacles, such tensions can serve as catalysts for expansive learning and the reconfiguration of professional practices (Engeström, 1999; McAvinia, 2016; Tay & Lim, 2016). For teachers, these contradictions may lead to reflective adaptation, innovation, or even identity reconstruction as they negotiate competing expectations and structural constraints.

Within the field of language teacher education, activity theory has been widely used to examine identity development and professional learning. By conceptualizing teacher identity as situated within socially mediated systems, this framework enables researchers to examine how teachers interact with pedagogical practices, institutional demands, and professional communities (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Feryok & Askaribigdeli, 2019). Identity is not seen as a fixed trait but as an evolving process shaped by participation in overlapping and sometimes conflicting systems of activity. These include the classroom, the institution, and the wider sociocultural environment, all of which influence how teachers position themselves and interpret their roles (Nazari & Karimpour, 2022, 2023; Nazari et al., 2025). Activity theory thus captures the dialogic and evolving character of teacher identity by focusing on the ways teachers respond to tensions and affordances in their professional settings. The framework is also particularly useful for understanding the concept of resilience. Traditional views often treat resilience as an inner capacity for endurance, but activity theory reframes it as a process enacted within and through activity systems. Resilience, from this perspective, is not solely a personal resource but a mediated outcome of interactions with tools, colleagues, institutional policies, and cultural expectations (Hascher et al., 2021; Ghaslani et al., 2023). For expatriate teachers, resilience is developed in response to the contradictions between their prior experiences and the demands of the host educational system. Access to professional development, collegial support, and cultural knowledge can all serve as mediational means for sustaining resilience, while institutional rigidities or lack of recognition may undermine it (Motteram & Dawson, 2019; Vallés & Clarà, 2023).

Activity theory provides a robust framework for understanding the complex, mediated, and contextually situated nature of language teachers' resilience and identity construction in transnational settings. Central to activity theory is the concept that human actions are socially and culturally mediated through tools, rules, community, and division of labor within an activity system. For Iranian expatriate English language teachers working in Turkey, their professional identity and resilience cannot be understood as isolated psychological traits; rather, these are dynamically shaped through their engagement with institutional policies, cultural norms, pedagogical practices, and interactions with diverse stakeholders (students, colleagues, administrators). This theoretical lens thus highlights how teachers' responses to challenges are continuously reshaped by the sociocultural and institutional contexts in which they operate. Activity theory, thus, assisted us in examining how the teachers' narratives reveal tensions and contradictions within their activity systems that challenge or reinforce their resilience and identity construction. By focusing on these processes, this study aims to link the components of activity theory, such as mediating artifacts and community influences, to concrete experiences of resilience, demonstrating how teachers actively reconstruct their identities while maintaining professional efficacy in the face of transnational challenges.

Additionally, the dialectical nature of activity theory is particularly relevant for analyzing the intersection of identity and resilience. As teachers face challenges such as cultural dissonance, workload pressures, or marginalization, they must reinterpret their goals and adapt their practices. In many cases, these moments of disruption trigger shifts in professional identity, which in turn influence the forms of resilience enacted. Identity and resilience are therefore co-constitutive, each emerging through teachers' ongoing negotiation with evolving activity systems (Nazari & Karimpour, 2022; Chen et al., 2023). For example, a teacher who redefines success in terms of building rapport with students, rather than solely achieving institutional performance metrics, may simultaneously sustain resilience and re-author identity. By situating both identity and resilience within broader sociocultural activity systems, activity theory offers an integrated framework for analyzing how teachers adapt, reconstruct their professional identities, and sustain their commitment in complex contexts. This makes it particularly suitable for exploring the experiences of expatriate teachers, who frequently encounter systemic contradictions that require both adaptive resilience and identity negotiation.

Language teacher identity and resilience research

Research into language teacher identity and resilience has expanded considerably, reflecting the growing recognition that these constructs are central to teacher development and professional sustainability. The literature indicates that identity and resilience are not static traits, but rather dynamic, socially mediated processes that emerge through teachers' interactions with institutional, cultural, and interpersonal environments. Several strands of research shed light on this complexity. One line of inquiry has focused on the psychological and transitional aspects of identity and resilience, particularly during career shifts or early professional stages. For example, Kostoulas (2016) illustrated how a Greek teacher moving into a university role drew on self-efficacy and collegial support to reconstruct a more secure academic identity. Davis and Borden (2025) examined early-career Spanish teachers in the United States and demonstrated that resilience developed through mobilizing resources, such as autonomy and peer networks, which in turn influenced identity trajectories. These accounts underscore the reciprocal nature of identity and resilience: adaptive responses to professional challenges reinforce identity development, while secure identities support resilience. Another significant body of work has emphasized sociocultural and collective processes. Mercer and Kostoulas (2018), in their edited volume on teacher psychology, propose that identity is fundamentally relational, shaped through participation in communities of practice. Similarly, Garza (2019) showed how Latinx bilingual teachers in the United States drew on cultural and familial knowledge to build resilient identities in contexts of systemic marginalization. In resource-constrained environments, resilience has also been shown to emerge collectively. Motteram and Dawson (2019) documented how African English teachers utilized WhatsApp groups as communities of practice, where mutual support not only enhanced professional learning but also fostered a shared identity and collective resilience. These studies highlight the significance of community, cultural wealth, and collaboration in sustaining teachers' professional selves.

Emotional and cognitive dimensions have also been foregrounded, particularly in contexts of disruption. Gao et al. (2022) conducted a large-scale mixed-method study in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, showing how beliefs, agency, and resilience were interwoven as teachers cycled between stress, reflection, and adaptation. Henry (2019), adopting dialogical self-theory, captured the inner struggles of a pre-service English teacher as competing selves created tensions in the formation of their identity. Both studies reinforce the notion that resilience is intricately linked to affective regulation and cognitive reframing, and that identity is continually reshaped through emotional labour. Contextual and cultural specificity further complicate the picture. Strangeways and Papatraianou (2019) used arts-based approaches to document how an Arrernte teacher in Australia constructed identity and resilience through storytelling and connection to place, thereby challenging individualistic models of resilience. Brown (2017) showed how Estonian teachers' resilience was linked to language policy histories and collective memory, underscoring the political dimensions of identity work. In China, Chu and Liu (2022) found that resilience among high school EFL teachers is influenced more by contextual factors than personal demographics, while Chen, Zhang, and McNaughton (2023) advanced a model of sustainable teacher identity in higher education that connects identity dimensions to long-term pedagogical development. These studies illustrate that identity and resilience must be theorized with sensitivity to local histories and institutional contexts, as universal models often obscure cultural particularities. Pedagogical and institutional influences form another strand of inquiry. Dawborn-Gundlach et al. (2025) traced the journeys of career-change teachers in Australia, demonstrating how institutional clarity, policy support, and reflective practice facilitated the development of identity and resilience. Varghese (2025) argued that structured pedagogical tasks in teacher education allow teachers to interrogate and reshape their identity positions, often in socially and politically conscious ways. Liontas (2020) demonstrated how digital storytelling enabled doctoral students to explore emerging professional identities, highlighting the role of technology as a mediating tool. Together, these studies suggest that resilience and identity can be nurtured deliberately through institutional design, structured reflection, and dialogic inquiry.

Other scholars have examined less conventional but equally influential factors. Phillips (2021) showed, for instance, that teachers' personal faith provided interpretive frameworks that buffered their identity during emotional crises, illustrating how spirituality may function as a resilience resource. This finding highlights broader ecological approaches to resilience, which encompass emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions alongside institutional and pedagogical ones. Across these diverse strands, a consistent picture emerges: identity is not a fixed or individual possession but a process enacted through ongoing negotiation with social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Resilience, likewise, is best understood not as innate toughness but as a socially co-constructed capacity that enables teachers to sustain their professional selves amid adversity. Studies have drawn on theoretical perspectives including sociocultural theory (Gao et al., 2022), dialogical self-theory (Henry, 2019), ecological frameworks (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018), and cultural wealth models (Garza, 2019), reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Yet despite this richness, important gaps remain. Much of the existing research has focused on teachers in familiar contexts, such as their home countries or training institutions, with less attention paid to expatriate teachers navigating transnational systems. Few studies have systematically explored how resilience and identity mutually reinforce each other in expatriate settings, where teachers must navigate both professional adaptation and cultural integration. Furthermore, while a variety of theoretical lenses have been applied, relatively little work has used activity theory to integrate identity and resilience as mutually constitutive processes embedded in activity systems (Karimpour et al., 2023, 2024; Nazari & Karimpour, 2022, 2023; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). These gaps highlight the need for studies that investigate how expatriate teachers, such as Iranian teachers working in Turkey, reconstruct their professional identities and maintain resilience through engagement with institutional contradictions, cultural dissonance, and relational dynamics.

The body of knowledge above indicates that language teachers' resilience and identity construction are deeply interconnected, as the ability to adapt and persevere through challenges plays a crucial role in shaping both their professional and personal identities. Previous research highlighted that resilience enables teachers to navigate the complexities of the classroom, cope with setbacks, and maintain motivation, which in turn reinforces their sense of competence and self-efficacy. This ongoing process of overcoming obstacles reveals the evolving construction of their teacher identity, as they reflect on their experiences, values, and beliefs about teaching. In addition, a strong, flexible identity supports resilience by providing a stable foundation from which teachers can draw strength during times of stress or change. In this way, resilience and identity mutually influence each other, fostering continuous growth and development in language educators.

The present study

Although scholarship on language teacher identity and resilience has grown substantially, several gaps continue to limit our understanding of these constructs. Much of the existing work has focused on teachers situated in their home contexts, often examining pre-service or novice educators as they transition into the profession (Davis & Borden, 2025; Kostoulas, 2016). While these studies illuminate important aspects of teacher development, they provide only a partial view, since expatriate teachers operate within transnational spaces shaped by new institutional rules, cultural expectations, and professional hierarchies (Bright & Heyting, 2024; Fang et al., 2024). The professional lives of expatriate teachers are characterized by tensions that extend beyond classroom management or curriculum delivery, encompassing challenges of cultural adjustment, status negotiation, and recognition in host institutions (Garza, 2019; Motteram & Dawson, 2019). Moreover, the relationship between identity and resilience has often been explored separately, with relatively few empirical studies addressing how these two constructs intersect and co-evolve. Research has shown that resilience enables teachers to sustain commitment and adaptability, while identity provides a sense of professional coherence and belonging (Hascher et al., 2021; Flores, 2018). Yet how resilience and identity interact in expatriate contexts remains under-examined. In addition, only limited work has adopted activity theory as an integrative framework for analyzing

identity and resilience together, despite its strength in conceptualizing human action as situated within historically and socially mediated systems (Engeström, 1999; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Nazari & Karimpour, 2022).

Although language teachers' resilience and identity construction have been examined in various educational contexts, a notable gap remains in research specifically focusing on expatriate language teachers. In particular, the complex experiences of these teachers who navigate not only professional challenges but also cultural adaptation and displacement have received limited attention. Furthermore, resilience and identity construction among expatriate language teachers have rarely been explored through the lens of **AT**. This theoretical perspective, which emphasizes the dynamic interaction between individuals, their community, and tools within a cultural-historical context, offers a promising approach to uncovering the nuanced processes that shape expatriate teachers' resilience and identity; yet, it remains underutilized in this field. To address these gaps, the present study investigates the interplay between resilience and professional identity among Iranian expatriate English language teachers working in Turkey. Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006; Riessman, 2008) and guided by activity theory, the study examines how teachers navigate institutional constraints, cultural dissonance, and professional challenges, and how these experiences shape both their resilience and identity construction. The following questions guide the research:

1. How do Iranian expatriate English language teachers narrate and interpret their professional identity construction while teaching in Turkey?

2. In what ways do these teachers enact and sustain resilience in response to cultural, institutional, and pedagogical challenges?

Methodology

Context and participants

The study was conducted with eight Iranian English language teachers who had relocated to Turkey to pursue professional opportunities. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants' experiences aligned with the research focus on identity and resilience in expatriate contexts. All participants possessed advanced academic qualifications in English language teaching: six held master's degrees in TEFL, and two had completed doctoral studies in the same field. In addition, each participant had obtained the CELTA certificate, reflecting a shared foundation in internationally recognized teacher education. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 45 years, and their length of residence in Turkey varied from 2 to 12 years. Their teaching positions were distributed across private language institutes, which catered primarily to adult learners of general English, and university preparatory programs for international students. Five participants worked in private institutes and three in university programs, allowing the study to capture experiences across two prominent institutional contexts. All were fluent in both Persian and English, and unlike participants in some government-sponsored exchange programs, they had independently arranged their relocation to Turkey. The study complied with established ethical standards for qualitative research. Participants were informed of the study's objectives and procedures and provided consent for their narratives to be used for academic purposes. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms and anonymization of contextual identifiers. Table 1 summarizes the demographic and professional characteristics of the participants.

Table 1
Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Degree	Teaching Context	Years in Turkey
P1	27	Female	MA (TEFL)	Private Institute	3
P2	34	Female	MA (TEFL)	University Prep	7
P3	30	Female	PhD (TEFL)	University Prep	5
P4	41	Male	MA (TEFL)	Private Institute	10
P5	25	Male	MA (TEFL)	Private Institute	2
P6	45	Male	PhD (TEFL)	University Prep	12
P7	38	Female	MA (TEFL)	Private Institute	6
P8	29	Male	MA (TEFL)	Private Institute	4

Data collection

Data were generated through a multi-stage process designed to capture participants' professional trajectories and adaptive practices in depth. Over a ten-week period, three complementary instruments were employed: open-ended questionnaires, narrative frames, and semi-structured interviews. This sequencing allowed for both breadth and depth of reflection while providing opportunities for triangulation. The first stage involved the electronic distribution of an open-ended questionnaire. This instrument gathered background information on participants' academic and professional histories, their motivations for relocating, and their initial impressions of teaching in Turkey. The questions of the questionnaire were informed by the literature on expatriate teacher identities (Bright & Heyting, 2024) and teacher resilience (Gao et al., 2022). The questions also encouraged participants to reflect on early identity shifts and moments where resilience was required (Appendix B). The second stage used narrative frames (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). These templates prompted participants to construct short written accounts of particular incidents that shaped their professional self-perceptions. As a useful technique for exploring language teachers' experiences from personal, institutional, and sociocultural dimensions (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Kayi-Aydar, 2021), the narrative frame helped us to uncover teachers' experiences regarding their resilience and identity.

Additionally, our understanding of narrative frames aligned with examining the critical role of context in shaping teachers' identity development and resilience (see Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Kayi-Aydar, 2021; Zembylas, 2003). Narrative frames guided participants to focus on experiences of institutional constraints, cultural adjustments, or pedagogical challenges, while leaving space for their own interpretations. This approach helped surface concrete examples of identity negotiation and resilience without imposing rigid structures (Appendix A).

The final and most detailed stage consisted of semi-structured interviews. Conducted in English, either in person or online, depending on the participant's preference, each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The questions were designed based on the AT perspective adopted as the

theoretical underpinning of the study and informed by the literature. Questions built on earlier responses, inviting participants to elaborate on tensions, strategies of adaptation, and sources of support or recognition (Appendix C). The interview functioned as a retrospective-introspective source (Mann, 2016) in that we aimed to obtain detailed responses from the teachers regarding their experiences with the previous research methods. To ensure the content validity of the semi-structured interview protocol, the items were reviewed by a panel of five experts in applied linguistics and qualitative research methodology. Each expert rated the essentiality of the interview items based on Lawshe's (1975) framework. The Content Validity Ratio (CVR) values for all items ranged from 0.80 to 1.00, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.78 for five experts, thereby confirming the adequacy of the interview items. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback to enhance clarity and alignment with the study's objectives.

The interview aimed to illuminate the complex interplay between in-class dynamics, institutional policies, and broader sociopolitical forces, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these elements collectively shape resilience and identities of language teachers. Interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. By combining written and oral narratives across multiple stages, the study was able to capture both broad professional trajectories and fine-grained accounts of specific experiences. This design also offered temporal layering, enabling participants to reflect on identity construction and resilience over different moments in their expatriate teaching careers. Measures of ensuring data trustworthiness were met by running member-checking, peer coding, and analysis based on the literature.

Data analysis

The dual commitments of narrative inquiry and activity theory guided the analytic process. All data sources, including questionnaire responses, narrative frames, and interview transcripts, were transcribed, organized, and uploaded into NVivo to facilitate systematic coding and interpretation. The first stage of analysis involved narrative coding, in which each participant's dataset was read holistically to identify key episodes, turning points, and claims about professional identity. Following Riessman (2008), both thematic and structural aspects were taken into consideration. Thematic analysis focused on recurring issues across narratives, such as institutional constraints, cultural negotiation, and coping strategies, while structural analysis examined how participants positioned themselves and others in their stories, as well as how they organized the temporal sequences of their experiences. This dual perspective enabled attention to both the content of narratives and how participants constructed meaning through storytelling. The second stage applied the principles of activity theory (Engeström, 1999; Engeström & Glăveanu, 2012). Each account was mapped onto the core components of the activity system: subjects, objects, mediating tools, community, rules, and division of labour. This mapping highlighted contradictions, for example, between pedagogical expertise and managerial oversight, or between cultural expectations and classroom practices. These sites of tension were analyzed as potential triggers of both resilience and identity transformation. By linking participants' narratives to systemic structures, the analysis moved beyond individual accounts to situate professional experiences within broader social and institutional ecologies.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was carried out with five participants, who reviewed and commented on preliminary interpretations of their narratives. Peer debriefing was also conducted with two experienced qualitative researchers, who provided critical feedback on the coding scheme and the development of themes. These steps helped ensure reflexivity, reduce potential bias, and strengthen the trustworthiness of the study.

Findings

The analysis of participants' narratives elicited through open-ended questionnaires, narrative frames, and semi-structured interviews revealed four interrelated themes that illuminate how Iranian expatriate English language teachers constructed their professional identities and sustained resilience while teaching in Turkey. These themes emerged from participants' storied experiences of navigating institutional constraints, cultural adaptation, professional challenges, and personal transformation in their transnational teaching contexts. Drawing on activity theory as the guiding analytical lens, each theme is understood not merely as an individual experience but as a reflection of participants' engagement with socially mediated activity systems, comprising dynamic interactions among subjects (teachers), objects (goals), tools (pedagogical knowledge, certifications), rules (institutional norms), communities (students, colleagues), and divisions of labor (hierarchies, recognition structures). Contradictions within and across these components frequently surfaced in participants' accounts, generating sites of tension that called for adaptive strategies and critical reflection.

The four themes (1) negotiating institutional expectations and autonomy, (2) navigating cultural dissonance and identity reconstruction, (3) sustaining professional self through adaptive resilience, and (4) re-authoring identity through connection and recognition reflect the complex, relational, and contextually embedded processes through which these teachers sustained their commitment and redefined their professional identities. In what follows, each theme is presented with illustrative excerpts from participant narratives to demonstrate how identity construction and resilience co-evolved through situated action and mediated adaptation.

Negotiating institutional expectations and autonomy

One prominent theme emerging from the data concerned the tension participants experienced between institutional expectations and their sense of professional autonomy. Although many teachers entered the Turkish context with strong pedagogical backgrounds and internationally recognized certifications, they encountered rigid curricula, standardized assessment regimes, and administrative micromanagement that constrained their instructional freedom and professional judgment. This prominent theme emerging from the data highlights the contradictions experienced by expatriate language teachers between institutional expectations and their professional autonomy, reflecting a key tension within their activity systems. Despite entering the Turkish educational context with strong pedagogical backgrounds and internationally recognized certifications—acting as mediating tools that shape their teaching practices—participants faced rigid institutional rules embodied in prescriptive curricula, standardized assessments, and administrative micromanagement. These rules constrained their instructional freedom and professional judgment, creating a conflict between the teachers' individual goals and the broader institutional demands. Furthermore, the division of labor within the educational community often positioned teachers in subordinate roles with limited decision-making power, intensifying these contradictions. This misalignment between the teachers' professional identities and the institutional activity system underscores how tensions within the community, rules, and tools mediate teachers' capacity to exercise agency, ultimately challenging their resilience and identity construction.

> *At the institute where I work, we are given a pre-set syllabus with fixed page numbers for each session. Sometimes I feel like I'm not in control at all…I'm just flipping through the book. (P4, Interview)*

This excerpt illustrates the dissonance between participants' professional identity (as a professional language teacher) and the rules and hierarchies imposed by the institutional structure. While

teachers saw themselves as qualified professionals, they were often positioned as mere deliverers of a prescribed syllabus. This *contradiction* frequently evoked feelings of frustration and misrecognition.

Despite the prevalence of these constraints, some participants described developing micro-strategies which allowed them to reclaim a sense of agency without directly challenging authority. These subtle forms of resistance helped them preserve their identity as autonomous educators.

> *I don't have much say in what to teach, but I create my own supplementary tasks for both in-class and out-of-class activities. For example, I design quick speaking activities related to the topic (converting a reading task into a speaking activity) that take just five minutes. (P2, Narrative Frame)*

Here, the teacher exercised discretion within institutional boundaries, reframing the constraints as opportunities for pedagogical creativity. The act of integrating small modifications into lessons served as an expression of resilience and identity preservation.

Other participants working in university contexts reported similar tensions, particularly around assessment policies. One participant described how she attempted to introduce more dialogic learning, even within the limitations of a test-driven curriculum:

> *They want us to prepare students only for the institutional exam and follow-up courses. I find this limiting because language learning is much more than test-taking. Despite a time shortage, I allocate some class time for open discussions. (P6, Interview)*

The inclusion of open discussions reflects the teacher's attempt to preserve her vision of meaningful teaching. This was not just a coping strategy but an act of alignment between her goals and the lived realities of her classroom, an effort to sustain identity in the face of institutional demands. While many participants found adaptive ways to assert their professional values, others expressed a sense of emotional depletion, especially when these constraints persisted over time. For some, the lack of autonomy led to broader questions about the decision to work abroad in the first place.

> *Sometimes I wonder why I left Iran. I thought I'd have more freedom abroad, but it feels similar, just with a different face. There are the same observers and controlling mechanisms as back home. It affects my motivation. (P5, Open-ended Questionnaire)*

In this account, institutional surveillance not only diminished the teacher's motivation but also disrupted her assumptions about professional mobility and autonomy in transnational contexts. Yet even amid these disappointments, some participants reflected on how they transformed these tensions into opportunities for personal and professional learning.

> *At first, I used to complain a lot about the rules. But then I realized that I can't change the whole system. What I can do is change how I react to it. Now, I try to treat it like a challenge. I experiment within the existing and emerging limits, learn from what works, and share with colleagues. (P1, Interview)*

This reflection highlights a shift from resistance to reflective adaptation, demonstrating that resilience was not merely reactive but also generative. By adjusting expectations and engaging peers in collaborative learning, the teacher reconfigured her relationship with institutional structures while reaffirming her identity. Taken together, participants' narratives revealed that institutional constraints, though often demotivating, also served as sites for reflection, strategy-making, and identity negotiation. Through subtle acts of resistance, small-scale innovations, and reoriented

professional goals, teachers sustained a sense of instructional agency. They reaffirmed their professional identities in the face of externally imposed norms. Rather than succumbing to structural limitations, they found ways to navigate, adapt, and endure, demonstrating that autonomy, even in constrained systems, could be reconstituted through everyday pedagogical practice.

Cultural dissonance and identity (re)construction

Another main theme emerging from the data involved participants' encounters with cultural dissonance and how these experiences shaped the (re)construction and negotiation of their professional identities. The transition to teaching in Turkey required not only pedagogical adaptation but also negotiation of unfamiliar cultural expectations, social dynamics, and student–teacher relationships. These cross-cultural tensions often led to moments of self-doubt, discomfort, and identity destabilization. However, they also prompted critical reflection and, in many cases, the emergence of restructured, context-responsive teacher identities.

The findings revealed participant teachers' encounters with cultural dissonance, which played a critical role in the (re)construction and negotiation of their professional identities within their activity systems. Transitioning to the Turkish educational context required expatriate teachers to navigate not only pedagogical adjustments but also the complex rules and norms governing social interactions, cultural expectations, and student–teacher relationships. These culturally specific rules, embedded within the broader community, often conflicted with the teachers' prior experiences and professional identities, generating contradictions that led to moments of self-doubt and identity destabilization. Mediating tools such as language, communication styles, and culturally grounded pedagogical practices became sites of tension but also opportunities for critical reflection. Through engaging with these contradictions, expatriate teachers began to renegotiate their roles within the community's division of labour, gradually constructing more context-responsive identities. This dynamic process highlights how activity systems, shaped by interrelated components of community, rules, tools, and division of labor, mediate identity development and resilience in cross-cultural teaching environments.

Several participants described feeling disoriented by student behaviors and classroom interactions that diverged significantly from their prior experiences in Iran. This dissonance was particularly pronounced in relation to teacher authority and student formality.

> *In my first few months, I was surprised by how casually students interact with teachers here. In Iran, there's a sense of distance and respect. Here, students sometimes call you by your first name and interrupt while you're talking. It felt like I wasn't being taken seriously. (P3, Interview)*

The participant's narrative reflects the emotional dislocation that arises when previously held norms of teacher–student interaction are challenged. What had been markers of professional legitimacy in one cultural context no longer applied, prompting confusion about role positioning and authority. In some cases, these cultural shifts led to deeper questioning of one's status and value as a professional. One teacher, formerly a university lecturer in Iran, recounted a sense of erasure in her new teaching context:

> *Back home, I was addressed as 'doctor' and both students and fellow teachers valued my opinions. Here, I sometimes feel invisible; I am just another foreign teacher who has no say. (P6, Narrative Frame)*

Such reflections suggest a rupture in professional identity resulting from a perceived loss of recognition. The teacher no longer occupied the authoritative subject position she had in Iran, and the disjuncture between her self-image and social positioning led to identity unsettlement.

Despite initial difficulties, many participants reported that these dissonant experiences ultimately became catalysts for professional growth. By reflecting on the cultural logic underlying less familiar behaviors, teachers began to adapt their expectations and reconfigure their teaching styles. For instance, one participant noted how her perception of informality shifted from frustration to pedagogical opportunity:

> *At first, I resisted the way students joked around and talked to the teacher, just like friends. In fact, some of my students also helped a lot in finding a new place to live. Now I try to embrace this intimacy more. I've learned to be less formal, more approachable. (P1, Interview)*

This account demonstrates a reworking of identity through a reframing of cultural values. Rather than viewing informality as a sign of disrespect, the teacher came to see it as a relational affordance, something that allowed for a more emotionally connected classroom dynamic (and beyond the classroom). For others, cultural adjustment was accompanied by increased self-awareness and critical reflection on previously unexamined pedagogical assumptions. One teacher expressed how being immersed in a new sociocultural setting helped her decenter her own values:

> *Living here made me question what I had always taken for granted. I used to think my way of teaching was among the best ways, but now I see it's just one way. There are many teachers who excel in their roles. (P8, Interview)*

This reflective stance points to the internalization of a more dialogic and context-sensitive professional identity. Rather than simply adjusting surface behaviors, the teacher engaged in a deeper process of epistemological reorientation, one that foregrounded openness, humility, and relational attunement. Taken together, these narratives reveal that cultural dissonance, though often destabilizing, played a pivotal role in shaping participants' evolving professional identities. The contradictions participants encountered between familiar cultural norms and the sociocultural ecology of Turkish institutions became sites of both disruption and transformation. Through acts of reflection, adaptation, and re-positioning, participants were able to re-author their teacher identities in ways that were more responsive to the values and dynamics of their host context. This identity work, grounded in emotional labor and intercultural negotiation, was central to their broader process of professional resilience.

Sustaining professional self through adaptive resilience

A further theme emerging from the data concerned the ways participants actively sustained their sense of professional self despite the emotional and structural challenges they encountered. More specifically, data analysis showed that the experience of teaching in an unfamiliar institutional and sociocultural setting placed considerable pressure on participants' sense of competence, motivation, and continuity. However, resilience was not described as an internal disposition but as an adaptive and socially situated process. In this regard, teachers recounted how they restructured their routines, reframed challenges, and managed emotional responses in order to maintain a coherent professional identity across time.

Teaching in an unfamiliar institutional and sociocultural context introduced contradictions between the teachers' existing professional practices and the new rules, community expectations, and division of labor within the Turkish educational setting. These tensions placed considerable pressure on participants' sense of competence, motivation, and continuity. However, rather than

viewing resilience as a fixed internal trait, participants described it as an adaptive process mediated through tools such as reflective practices, peer interactions, and culturally responsive pedagogical strategies. By restructuring their daily routines and reframing challenges, teachers navigated these contradictions. They negotiated their roles within the community, enabling them to manage emotional responses and sustain a coherent professional identity over time. This process highlights how resilience develops through the interplay of individual agency and the mediating influence of the activity system's components, including rules, community, and division of labour.

Some participants recalled periods of emotional and physical exhaustion, especially in their first year of teaching in Turkey. Heavy workloads, lack of curricular autonomy, and feelings of marginalization led to experiences of burnout and professional fatigue. Yet these difficult moments often prompted intentional coping strategies that helped participants protect their sense of self.

> *I recall a term when I had back-to-back classes for weeks, with no breaks and little control over what I was teaching. I started to feel like I was losing myself and burning out very quickly. Then I started saying no to extra hours, and I created a weekly routine for planning and rest. (P2, Interview)*

This account highlights how resilience was enacted through concrete decisions and boundary-setting behaviors, allowing the teacher to exert agency over her time and mental energy. The reorganization of workload and prioritization of rest were not only coping mechanisms but also acts of identity preservation. Participants also described developing new ways of interpreting classroom challenges in order to protect themselves from feelings of inadequacy or failure. Rather than internalizing student disengagement or institutional criticism, some teachers reported learning to separate their self-worth from external indicators of success.

> *Some of my students were completely unmotivated. They didn't even bring their books. Before, I used to take it personally, and I felt I wasn't a good teacher, and I wasn't able to have control. (P5, Narrative Frame)*

Here, resilience took the form of a cognitive reappraisal, enabling the teacher to maintain her professional confidence and emotional balance. By adjusting the meaning of negative classroom encounters, she preserved her sense of competence and avoided emotional depletion. In addition to reframing negative experiences, many participants reported adjusting their expectations and redefining what success looked like in their new contexts. This realignment of professional goals allowed teachers to find meaning in smaller achievements and continue to feel effective despite constraints.

> *When I first arrived, I wanted to introduce task-based, project-based learning. However, the context is similar to Iran; there's less support and less time. I had to let go of some ideals. Now, if I see one student improve their confidence or ask a question they wouldn't have asked before, I count that as an improvement. (P6, Open-ended Questionnaire)*

This redefinition of pedagogical success illustrates a shift from idealism to pragmatism—not in a defeatist sense, but as a strategic recalibration of what is achievable and meaningful in the host environment. It also reflects a form of identity continuity, as the teacher retained her commitment to student growth while adapting her metrics for evaluating impact. Another key source of resilience was informal social support, particularly from colleagues who shared similar backgrounds or experiences. In the absence of formal institutional support, these connections served as emotional anchors and practical resources.

> *There's one Iranian colleague I talk to regularly. We have tea after class and just vent. Sometimes we discuss our work, and other times we simply talk and laugh. These moments are small, but they give me the energy to keep going. (P7, Interview)*

This narrative emphasizes that resilience was often socially mediated. Small moments of solidarity created spaces for emotional release, mutual recognition, and reaffirmation of shared professional identities—offering both comfort and continuity. Taken together, participants' accounts showed that sustaining a professional identity in the face of adversity required deliberate and often creative responses. Resilience emerged not as resistance to difficulty, but as a process of adjustment, reinterpretation, and relational engagement. Through setting boundaries, shifting mindsets, and leveraging peer connections, teachers protected their professional selves and sustained their long-term commitment to the field. These adaptive practices not only supported emotional wellbeing but also reinforced a sense of purpose and continuity amid the fluctuating demands of expatriate teaching.

Re-authoring identity through connection and recognition

The last theme emerging from the data concerned the central role of interpersonal connection and recognition in participants' efforts to re-author and sustain their professional identities. While institutional structures often failed to acknowledge teachers' expertise or contribution, participants consistently pointed to moments of relational affirmation, particularly with students and colleagues, as critical sources of validation. These encounters not only supported emotional resilience but also served as narrative anchors through which teachers reconstructed more agentic and meaningful professional selves.

While institutional rules and structures often neglected to acknowledge teachers' expertise or contributions, participants identified moments of relational affirmation, especially through interactions with students and colleagues within the community, as vital mediating tools that provided emotional support and professional validation. These instances of recognition helped to resolve contradictions between the teachers' individual agency and the institutional division of labor, where their roles were frequently undervalued or constrained. Such relational exchanges functioned as narrative anchors, enabling teachers to reconstruct more agentic and meaningful professional identities. This dynamic illustrates how the components of the activity system —rules, community, tools, and division of labour—interact to influence identity construction and resilience, highlighting the essential social and dialogic nature of these processes.

For many, student appreciation became the most powerful and consistent form of recognition, compensating for the lack of institutional acknowledgment. In emotionally difficult periods, even small moments of student engagement or gratitude held significant meaning.

> *One day after class, a student stayed back and said, 'You're the first teacher who listens to us like we matter.' It reminded me that I'm not just surviving here and working so hard to earn some money; I'm doing something that matters to these students. (P4, Interview)*

This reflection highlights how recognition from students functioned not only as a morale boost but also as a reaffirmation of professional worth. The participant's narrative suggests a movement from invisibility within institutional hierarchies to visibility through relational affirmation, enabling a more coherent and purposeful sense of self. In other cases, student–teacher relationships became a primary axis around which identity reconstruction occurred. When formal structures failed to provide validation, emotional connection with learners offered an alternative framework for measuring success and belonging.

> *There were weeks when I felt invisible in the institute. No one asked for my opinion, nor did anyone acknowledge my experience. But the students, when they came to class excited, or asked for extra help, or laughed with me, that kept me going. (P1, Narrative Frame)*

Here, identity was not grounded in institutional status but in the affective feedback loop between teacher and student. The participant interpreted these micro-encounters as evidence of impact, which in turn sustained her professional commitment and narrative continuity.

Recognition from peers also played an important role in restoring a sense of legitimacy and belonging. Especially among fellow expatriate teachers, participants found emotional resonance, shared understanding, and professional solidarity.

> *I met another Iranian teacher during a training session. We started chatting about how things are run in these institutes, and I realized I wasn't alone. We still check in every week and find time to meet. Sometimes it really helps to talk to someone who is in the same condition and facing the same problems. (P8, Interview)*

This sense of mutual validation provided a relational buffer against feelings of marginalization. Peer support also became a site of identity co-construction, where teachers could narrate themselves not as isolated individuals struggling against structural forces, but as members of a shared professional community navigating similar tensions. Several participants shared stories in which specific student comments or gestures helped shift internalized narratives of inadequacy. These moments often disrupted negative self-talk and facilitated more empowering storylines.

> *At one point, I began to doubt everything: my education and my teaching style. But after a lesson, a student told me: 'You explain things in a way that helps us learn better.' That moment stayed with me until today. (P6, Open-ended Questionnaire)*

This quote illustrates the transformative potential of recognition. A single interaction reoriented the teacher's self-perception, enabling her to challenge internalized doubt and reframe her professional narrative in a more agentic and affirming light. Taken together, these narratives reveal that connection and recognition were not peripheral but central to participants' identity work. In contexts where formal validation was inconsistent or absent, teachers turned to the relational spaces of classrooms and collegial networks to find affirmation, meaning, and narrative coherence. Through emotional resonance, shared struggle, and moments of acknowledgment, they re-authored themselves as capable, valued, and resilient professionals. These relationally grounded identities provided not only a buffer against burnout and marginalization but also a foundation for long-term engagement in the profession.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the identity construction and resilience of Iranian expatriate English language teachers were shaped through a dynamic interplay of cultural, institutional, and interpersonal factors, all of which were embedded in socially mediated activity systems. In line with activity theory (Engeström, 1999; Roth & Lee, 2007), these systems consisted of interacting components, including rules, tools, communities, and divisions of labour, whose contradictions often served as sites of emotional tension, identity disruption, and ultimately, transformation. The teachers' experiences illustrated that resilience was not a stable psychological trait but a relational and context-sensitive process of adaptation and meaning-making, often enacted through negotiating contradictions within and across activity systems. The following discussion interprets

these findings by revisiting the key themes and connecting them to the broader literature on teacher identity, resilience, and sociocultural learning.

Concerning the first research question, our findings indicated that a major source of tension, as seen in participants' accounts, was the clash between institutional expectations and their desire for professional autonomy. Despite their pedagogical expertise and international certifications, many teachers found themselves positioned as implementers of rigid curricula and subjects to top-down managerial oversight. This structural positioning limited their agency and challenged their self-perception as competent professionals, consistent with prior research showing that institutional rules and division of labor can constrain identity enactment (Nazari & Karimpour, 2022; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). However, rather than being passive recipients of these constraints, teachers developed subtle forms of resistance—designing supplementary tasks, initiating informal classroom discussions, or redefining their teaching goals. These micro-level adaptations represent what Engeström (1999) referred to as expansive agency, where individuals reconfigure their engagement within the system rather than exit it. In doing so, teachers not only preserved a sense of instructional agency but also enacted resilience through situated, strategic negotiation with the system's rules and hierarchies. These findings reaffirm that identity and resilience co-emerge through contradictions within institutional activity systems, an insight supported by previous studies emphasizing identity shifts under institutional tension (Nazari et al., 2025; Hascher et al., 2021). Cultural dissonance was another major theme that impacted identity work and emotional wellbeing. Participants experienced discomfort when norms governing teacher–student relationships in Turkey diverged from those in Iran. Cultural expectations regarding formality, teacher authority, and communication styles led to initial feelings of marginalization or loss of status. Such disruptions, however, also acted as developmental contradictions (Engeström & Glăveanu, 2012), prompting teachers to reflect on their assumptions, decenter their previous beliefs, and reconstruct their identities in more culturally responsive ways. Similar to the findings by Gao et al. (2022), who demonstrated that sociocultural dislocation can lead to professional growth when accompanied by reflective adaptation, our participants gradually came to embrace intimacy, informality, and emotional connection as valuable pedagogical tools. These adaptations were not merely behavioral; they involved epistemological and affective recalibrations that reoriented teachers' engagement with the object of their professional activity i.e., meaningful language instruction. From an activity-theoretical perspective, such changes signal a shift in the mediational means and rules of the activity system, leading to new forms of identity enactment aligned with the host culture's expectations.

Concerning the second research question, our findings highlighted that participants' accounts also underscored the processual nature of resilience as they navigated exhaustion, self-doubt, and emotional strain in their transnational teaching contexts. Rather than viewing resilience as a fixed psychological resource, the findings align with conceptualizations of resilience as a socially mediated and contextually responsive process (Vallés & Clarà, 2023; Ghaslani et al., 2023). Teachers actively engaged in meaning-making practices to sustain their professional selves by reframing setbacks, setting boundaries, and redefining success in more localized terms. These acts can be understood as attempts to stabilize the subject–object relationship within disrupted or contradictory activity systems. For example, when institutional demands clashed with their pedagogical ideals, teachers recalibrated their object of activity to include smaller, incremental achievements, thus maintaining coherence in their professional identity. Such realignments were mediated by both internal tools (e.g., emotional regulation, self-reflection) and external ones (e.g., peer support), highlighting the multilevel mediation that characterizes expansive learning processes within activity systems (Engeström, 1999; Roth & Lee, 2007). This reinforces prior findings in the literature, which show that resilience is sustained through continuous reengagement with evolving practice ecologies (Motteram & Dawson, 2019; Henry, 2019). In addition, connection and recognition emerged as vital relational mechanisms through which teachers re-authored their professional identities. The lack of formal acknowledgment from institutions was partially offset by affective validation from students and peers. These micro-affirmations, such as a student's appreciation or collegial solidarity,

acted as emotionally potent mediational artifacts that restored participants' sense of competence and belonging. Within the activity theory framework, these interactions can be viewed as shifts in the community and division of labour components, where affective bonds and mutual recognition redistribute emotional and epistemic resources within the system. This finding aligns with research indicating that collective recognition, even in informal settings, can enhance identity stability and emotional resilience (Garza, 2019; Chen et al., 2023). The relational orientation of these findings further highlights the ecological and dialogic models of identity construction (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018), emphasizing that teacher identity is never constructed in isolation but emerges through reciprocal social participation.

Overall, these findings highlight that expatriate teachers' identity construction and resilience are not linear or individually driven processes, but rather relationally and structurally mediated acts negotiated within overlapping and evolving activity systems. By engaging with contradictions — whether institutional, cultural, or emotional —teachers in this study enacted expansive learning processes that led to renewed forms of agency and self-understanding. In doing so, they demonstrated that identity and resilience are co-constitutive, context-responsive, and deeply embedded in the socio-material conditions of teaching. The findings offer several important implications for policy and practice. First, teacher education programs both in home and host countries should incorporate training on identity negotiation and cross-cultural adaptation, especially for teachers entering transnational contexts. Programs informed by activity theory can help educators anticipate systemic contradictions and develop strategies for reflective, adaptive practice. Second, Institutions employing expatriate language teachers should move beyond the constraints of prescriptive curricula and instead cultivate a culture of trust that actively supports, rather than restricts, professional autonomy. By creating an environment that encourages bottom-up pedagogical innovation, institutions can assist teachers to have greater agency, which in turn may contribute to enhanced instructional effectiveness and professional fulfillment. Third, peer networks and mentoring systems should be intentionally developed, as they offer critical emotional and epistemic support for expatriate teachers navigating complex professional and cultural landscapes. Given the emotionally demanding nature of expatriate teaching, institutions must also establish relational support structures that extend beyond formal appraisal mechanisms to provide recognition, affirmation, and a sense of belonging. Finally, facilitating the re-authoring of professional identities and the cultivation of resilience within activity systems necessitates an institutional commitment to context-sensitive, dialogic, and relational models of professional support.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on language teacher identity and resilience by providing a nuanced, theoretically informed account of how Iranian expatriate English language teachers working in Turkey construct their professional identities and sustain resilience in the face of institutional constraints and cultural dissonance. Framed within activity theory, the findings underscore that identity and resilience are not static or individually contained but dynamically constructed through teachers' participation in socially mediated activity systems. By exploring teachers' narratives across themes such as institutional expectations, cultural negotiation, adaptive strategies, and relational recognition, the study foregrounds the situated and dialogic processes through which professional selfhood is enacted and preserved. These insights hold important implications for teacher educators and institutional stakeholders, particularly in designing support systems that recognize the sociocultural and emotional complexities of expatriate teaching.

However, the study is not without limitations. First, although all participants were expatriate teachers in Turkey, their teaching contexts varied; some taught in universities, while others taught

in private institutes, which may have influenced their experiences of resilience and identity in different ways. Future research may wish to adopt a more context-specific comparative design to examine how institutional type mediates these constructs. Second, although the study included both male and female participants, the relatively small sample size limits the scope for analyzing gendered patterns in depth. Larger, more diverse samples could further unpack how identity and resilience are shaped across intersecting axes of gender, nationality, and institutional affiliation. Third, given the study's qualitative and cross-sectional design, longitudinal studies are needed to trace how identity and resilience evolve as teachers adapt to or resist systemic contradictions in host environments. The study employed a cross-sectional design, as it provides a clear picture of participants' thoughts, feelings, or behaviours at a specific moment, which is particularly useful when the focus is on understanding the present situation, especially its contextual particularities. Moreover, it would be valuable to explore how the prior professional histories and ideological stances of expatriate teachers interact with new cultural and institutional contexts to shape their identity trajectories. Finally, as participants often referenced their comparisons between the Iranian and Turkish education systems, future research might adopt a comparative transnational approach to better illuminate how cross-border professional migration reshapes language teacher identity, emotional labor, and resilience. By situating expatriate teachers' lived experiences within the broader socio-institutional ecologies of language education, such research could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers navigate, reconstruct, and sustain their professional selves in increasingly globalized yet locally distinct teaching environments.

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Appendix A: Narrative Frame

Please complete the following reflective prompts. Feel free to elaborate as much as you need.

One significant experience that influenced my professional identity while teaching in Turkey occurred when
....
....
....

This experience was shaped by the following factors (e.g., institutional, cultural, pedagogical)
....
....
....

In response to this situation, I attempted to adapt or remain resilient by
....
....
....

The tools, strategies, or support systems that helped me during this time included
....
....
....

Looking back, this experience made me
....
....
....

This event affected the way I see myself professionally, especially in relation to
....
....
....

If I were to face a similar situation again, I would
....
....
....

Appendix B

Open-Ended Questionnaire: Iranian Expatriate English Language Teachers' Identity and Resilience

Instructions: Please respond to the following open-ended questions as fully and honestly as possible. Your answers will remain confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

1. Can you describe your main motivations for moving to Turkey to teach English?
   ....
   ....

2. How would you describe your initial experiences of teaching in Turkey—both inside and outside the classroom?
   ....
   ....

3. What challenges have you encountered in adapting to your teaching context in Turkey (e.g., institutional, cultural, or pedagogical)?
   ....
   ....

4. In what ways have you noticed changes in your sense of professional identity since relocating to Turkey?
    ....
    ....

5. What does the concept of "resilience" mean to you in your professional life?
    ....
    ....

6. Can you think of a time when you needed to be resilient in your work? What happened, and how did you respond?
    ....
    ....

7. What types of support—formal or informal—have helped you manage professional or personal challenges in this context?
    ....
    ....

8. How do you see your current role and identity as a teacher in comparison with before your move abroad?
    ....
    ....

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Iranian Expatriate Teachers' Identity Construction and Resilience

1- Could you tell me a bit about your teaching background and what led you to come to Turkey?

2- What were your expectations before arriving, and how have those expectations compared to reality?

3- How would you describe your identity as a teacher before coming to Turkey?

4- Have there been moments or experiences that made you rethink or reshape your professional identity?

5- How do you perceive your current professional role within your institution and the broader educational community in Turkey?

6- How have cultural or institutional norms in Turkey influenced your teaching identity?

7- Have you faced any significant challenges—emotional, institutional, or cultural—since moving?

8- How did you respond to these challenges, and what helped you get through them?

9- What strategies or resources have you developed to maintain your commitment to teaching during difficult times?

10- In what ways do you think your resilience has shaped your identity as a teacher?

11- Conversely, do you think your sense of professional identity has helped you become more resilient?

12- Can you describe a specific event that reflects how your identity and resilience evolved together?

13- What do you see as your future in this profession, either in Turkey or elsewhere?

14- What advice would you offer to other teachers who may be considering a similar expatriate path?

Ismail Xodabande holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran. His research focuses on mobile assisted language learning, academic vocabulary development, teacher wellbeing, and corpus informed approaches to language teaching. His work also addresses teacher psychology with attention to wellbeing, identity, and emotions.

Sedigheh Karimpour is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of English Language at Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences, Sari, Iran. Her area of interests are second language teacher education and English for academic purposes.