Exploring the Impact of Online Teaching Environment on EFL Teachers' Professional Identity

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Abstract: The impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector has extended beyond using alternative technological methods. It has also influenced the professional identities of instructors themselves. This study aims to investigate EFL instructors' perceptions of the impact of online teaching on identity transformation during the COVID-19 lockdown. It also investigates how online teaching has affected teachers' professional identity in relevant aspects. The study was conducted during the first academic semester of 2022/ 2023. The researchers adopted a mixed research methodology that involved both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. A questionnaire was distributed to (44) EFL instructors, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with (8) EFL instructors at the Department of Languages and Translation at a Palestinian University, Palestine. Appropriate quantitative and qualitative analyses were utilized to figure out participants' responses to the questionnaire and the interviews. The results of the survey revealed that online teaching positively influenced instructors' social relations with their colleagues and students, enhanced the teaching process, and promoted instructors' self-esteem. As for the interviews, the findings showed the substantial impact of online teaching on EFL instructors' identity in terms of their professional needs, self-awareness and self-esteem, relationships with learners, relationships with colleagues, and their perspectives towards their institution. Hence, some recommendations were suggested.

Key words: EFL instructors' identity, Online teaching, COVID-19, Professional identity transformation

1. Introduction

Despite its substantial importance, EFL teachers' identity transformation during COVID-19 has received less attention compared to the plethora of research conducted on technological transformation in teaching methods in the higher education sector. Over the past few years, significant developments have taken place in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly with the shift towards online teaching. Many studies have met such development and started addressing the usage of technology-based tools in EFL teaching. Tarteer, Badah, & Khlaif's (2021) study examined, for example, the usage of Google Classroom as a technology-enhanced tool in teaching English during the COVID-19 outbreak. The shift to the usage of such applications and tools have also affected the way EFL teachers perceive their own identity. These changes have reconstructed teachers' basic roles, their needs, their relationships with students, their self-esteem, and their progress at both personal and professional levels.

Teachers' identities fundamentally shape how teachers perceive their profession (Buchanan, 2015). This issue has received great attention in previous literature (Sachs, 2005; Freese, 2006). However, it has never been stable. A teacher's identity is dynamic and changeable over time, influenced by many factors (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). These factors include internal to the individual, for example, emotional or external to the individual, such as life experience and job conditions (Rodgers and Scott, 2008). Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) noted that person and context shape a teacher's identity. Teachers integrate contextual attributes in unique ways that align with the achievement of their ultimate educational goals in the profession. The same study found that there are sub-identities within the teacher's professional identity that differ in their centrality, but work in harmony to avoid any conflict among them.

Among the various significant changes that took place within the context was the transformation to online teaching with the COVID-19 outbreak. EFL teachers at schools and universities, similar to their counterparts in other disciplines, have suddenly found themselves transitioning entirely to online teaching after the pandemic outbreak. This has been considered a new change in the digital age that has never been expected by teachers or researchers (Zimmer, McTigue, & Matsuda; Kwon et al., 2021). This sudden shift in the educational sector included conducting lectures online, communicating with students remotely, assessing students online, and using many apps like Moodle, Google Meet, and Zoom to achieve the aforementioned activities. Computers

have been used in language education as an assisted tool in language learning (CALL), but they were not as dominant as they became after the COVID-19 crisis (Farrah and Al-Bakri, 2020). A great number of higher education institutions have started depending totally on online teaching. This substantial shift in the educational landscape, coupled with the consequent interaction between teachers and the new dynamic context, has affected teachers' perceptions of their profession, teaching practices, and relations with their students and colleagues.

Switching to online teaching is inseparable from changes in teachers' self-perspectives and teacher's identities. Understanding teachers' perceptions of the impact of these significant changes on EFL instructors' identity and relating this to their professional needs, self-esteem and self-awareness, relations with learners, and perspectives towards their institution is crucial to the online educational landscape. As Palestinian EFL instructors have started adopting the evolving landscape of higher education, characterized by the shift towards online teaching, a gap has emerged in understanding how these dynamics contribute to transforming their professional identities. Thus, this study explores teachers' perceptions of the impact of online teaching on their professional identity and how online teaching has affected their professional identity in relevant aspects.

In the subsequent sections of this paper, we will survey the existing literature related to the study's subject matter in order to establish the study context. Then, a detailed methodology will be outlined in the research design, instruments, and data analysis. The findings and discussions are presented in the subsequent section, shedding light on the most significant findings from the two research instruments. Finally, we will draw a conclusion, where a focus will be on the pedagogical implications as well as future studies.

2. Literature Review

Although there has been an increasing significance of professional identity transformation in the educational landscape due to the break of COVID-19, it could be argued that there is a dearth of research focusing on the experiences of EFL instructors. This review of literature aims to analyze and synthesize relevant literature thematically, providing a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge.

2.1 Teacher's Professional Identity

Vokatis and Zhang (2016) defined teacher's professional identity as "how teachers identify themselves as teachers, including who they are as professionals, and who they strive and are empowered to become in a constant process of reflecting on their practices and experiences" (p. 59).. It combines social, cultural, political, institutional, and personal interactions in various work scenarios (Day, 2013).

In the existing literature, a teacher's professional identity has been characterized by dynamicity and instability. Teachers engage extensively with their surrounding environment. They are affected by their relations with their colleagues in educational work contexts, their administrative staff, their students, and other people in their work communities (Beijaard et al., 2004). Burn (2007) defined a teacher's professional identity as being related to what teachers should be and their professional roles as teachers. According to Smagorinsky et al. (2004)teacher's identity is reconstructed by interacting with others within cultural activities. Zembylas (2003) asserted the importance of teachers' emotions status in teachers' identity transformation. Canrinus et al. (2011) assured the importance of how teachers perceive their significance in shaping their professional identity when they deal with others in their professional environment. Teachers' professional identity is also impacted by the professional circumstances surrounding them, including educational policies, the curriculum, and the physical and logistical teaching environment (Vokatis and Zhang, 2016). In this regard, Song (2016) argues that teachers' identities shift due to teaching context changes. Therefore, social relations with peers and students and the surrounding physical and logistical environment are fundamental in modeling how teachers perceive themselves and their profession.

Another perspective of a teacher's identity highlights the sociocultural dimension, which perceives a teacher's identity as both a product of different effects on the teacher, and a process that is influenced by continuous changes and interactions within the teacher's professional development. A teacher's identity is viewed as a collection of influences, structures, and social contexts, which are constantly dynamic and mingled, and in which the teacher interacts and negotiates in the given contexts (Olsen, 2008). In this context, a teacher's identity is ever-changing and undergoes continued transformation based on the surrounding environment and changes in the professional landscape. These changes impose changes in the ways teachers perceive themselves within their profession.

Canrinus et al., (2011) confirm that there are many factors that contribute to shaping a teacher's professional identity. Among these are job satisfaction, self-efficacy, commitment to work, and the level of motivation as teachers. On the other hand, Nias (1989) and Day (2002) argued that a teacher's professional identity is highly relevant to how and degree teachers respond to professional and educational rehabilitation and reform. In this sense, new reforms in the professional and educational contexts should be studied in relation to teachers' identity. Similarly, any attempts to raise the quality of education and increase the efficacy and efficiency of teachers' work and their positive impacts on their students should be active and true assistance for teachers to maintain their enthusiasm for work and better investments in their emotional and cognitive selves (Day, 2000b).

Braun, Maguire, & Ball (2010) asserts that any change in the professional context of teaching is inseparable from teacher's professional lives. This includes educational changes carried out by educational institutions to enhance different teaching practices. This implies the importance of studying teacher's identity transformation in the period of educational change. In a similar sense, Canrinus et al. (2011) confirms that a teacher's professional identity can be formed and impacted by multidimensional elements including the way teachers perceive themselves, job motivation, self-esteem, and how they perceive teaching. Hence, teachers' cognition, which involves their beliefs, knowledge, and reflective practices, is related to their professional identity (Brog, 2003). William (2010) also confirmed the importance of socialization in forming teachers' professional identity, which demands collaboration and communication among teachers in the professional context.

2.2 Previous Studies on EFL Instructors' Identity Transformation

Examining the transformation of EFL instructors' identities as a result of the usage of technology-integrated tools has gained limited attention across educational research. This could be attributed to the fact that this aspect of EFL research has emerged as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019. Nonetheless, researchers have addressed other aspects of EFL instructors' professional identity. Reis (2011), for instance, explored the development of teacher's professional identity of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) and their attitudes towards themselves in comparison to the myth of native English-speaking teachers and its relation to professional identity and instructional practices. The study was based on interviews with a non-native speaker English teacher, classroom observations, and a dialogue journal. The study revealed the native-speaker English teacher myth as a professional, qualified, and competent than the non-native ESL teacher blindly adopted. The study concluded that the non-native teacher's attitudes and beliefs towards the native-speaker English teacher had impacts on his professional identity.

On the other hand, Song (2016) explored how transforming the context of teaching through globalization can create demands for English language teachers. The study also discusses teachers' emotional responses to this shift. The study was conducted by interviewing five English secondary school teachers from South Korea. Attentiveness to individual students and a lived curriculum for teachers and students were encouraged by the open vulnerability of other teachers with their confidence in personal skills. Thus, the subjectivity of English language teachers was traced in its social and institutional contexts.

As for the studies addressing the influence of online teaching on EFL instructors after the COVID-19 outbreak, many researchers have tackled this aspect from various lenses and in different educational settings. For example, Yuan & Liu (2021) examined how the identities of EFL university instructors developed during an online semester. Following the case study approach, the study targeted three Chinese EFL instructors, where all experienced nervousness in the online teaching mode. The findings demonstrated that EFL instructors lacked structured identities and roles when shifted to the online environment. The researchers recommended providing both pedagogical as well psychological support to the EFL instructors when teaching online. In a later study, El-Soussi (2022) investigated the experiences of EFL instructors at four UAE universities regarding their professional identity through semi-structured interviews. The results are somewhat similar to those of the previous study, where the EFL instructors reported instability when viewing themselves and beliefs regarding the online teaching mode. The primary challenges were associated with the instructors' pedagogical, managerial, and social practices.

Following a mixed-method approach, Celebi and Eraldemir-Tuyan (2020) examined the experiences of EFL Turkish lecturers' professional identity in online teaching. The study found that those instructors were not fully prepared for this kind of teaching mode as many challenges associated with instructional and technological aspects emerged. The study concluded by recommending implementing explanatory action research to gain more valuable insights. In a more recent study, Zhang & Hwang (2023) explored the reconstruction of the identity of eighteen Chinese university instructors and two high school teachers during the COVID-19 outbreak. The authors interviewed those instructors who did not have previous experience online before COVID-19. The

findings revealed that the EFL instructors' identities have been challenged and further influenced after the shifts to online teaching due to the changes in teaching practices and roles. Interviews reported some educational and technological difficulties that emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic, through which their identity was affected.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What are EFL instructors' perceptions towards identity transformation in online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2. How has switching to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic affected EFL instructors' professional identity according to instructors' perceptions?

3. Methodology

3.1 Integrated Research Approach

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the study problem, the current study followed the mixed method approach, where a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods was used. Creswell & Clark 2018 argue that quantitative data offer a broader understanding, while qualitative data provide an in-depth insight into the research problem. To this end, the researchers adopted a descriptive-analytical approach to explore instructors' perceptions of their professional identity transformation. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with (8) of those instructors to find out the impact of online teaching on their professional identity.

3.2 Participants

The study population consisted of all instructors in the Department of Languages and Translation at a Palestinian university, totaling (51) individuals with different academic ranks. According to Krejcie & Morgan (1970), the minimum sample size is (44). As such, an available sample of (44) instructors participated in the study. Of (44), 75.1% were females, and 47.7% had less than ten years of experience.

3.3 Research Instruments

3.3.1 The quantitative tool (questionnaire)

A 35-item questionnaire was distributed to the participants employing a four-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was derived from a previous study conducted by Zimmer et al. in 2021, where it was referred to as "The Digital Learning Identity Survey". The response options ranged from strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). The questionnaire covered four main domains: personal satisfaction toward professional and technical skills during online teaching, the effectiveness of online teaching, the impact of online teaching on professional self-awareness and self-esteem, and the impact of online teaching on social relations with colleagues and learners. Ranges of agreement with the item on the questionnaire were investigated based on the means by using the following rubric: from 1 to less than 2 showed a lower level of agreement, from 2 to less than 3 showed a medium level of agreement, and from 3 to 5 showed a high level of agreement.

Three educational and research experts were asked to read and review the appropriateness of the study instruments. Their feedback and recommendations were taken into consideration. Hence, the study instruments' validity was established

To verify the internal consistency of the performance of the study sample members on the questionnaire items, the questionnaire was piloted to a sample of (15) participants (excluded from the study sample) and re-administered after two weeks. Then, the Pearson correlation coefficient between the item and its domain, and the corrected item-total correlation between the item and its domain was extracted.

3.3.2 The qualitative tools (interviews)

The researchers composed a set of interview questions designed for the semi-structured interviews with EFL instructors at the Department of Languages and Translation at the target University. These questions were crafted in alignment with the research's primary questions. The interview consisted of six questions (Appendix 1) that all aimed to elicit in-depth qualitative responses on the EFL instructors' ideas towards professional identity transition. Following data collection, the qualitative data obtained from the interviews underwent a

thorough analysis process aimed to extract meaningful insights and patterns from the participants' responses. The analysis adhered to established qualitative research principles.

To establish the validity of the interview questions, the researchers shared them with EFL educational experts from the same university. In addition, pilot interviews were conducted with a group of volunteers to ensure clarity and uncover potential ambiguities. To ensure the reliability of the interviews, the researchers ensured that all the interviewees participated willingly in the research interviews and that the interviewees fully understood all questions. Moreover, after the interviews were conducted, the researchers summarized the interviewees' responses, and these summaries were reviewed and approved by the interviewees themselves. As for the interview questions, they included the following:

- To what extent were you ready professionally to deal with the sudden switch to online teaching during the pandemic outbreak?
- Were you satisfied with your professional abilities and skills in online teaching as an EFL instructor?
- Has shifting to online teaching impacted your self-awareness and self-esteem as an instructor of English language? In what ways?
- Has shifting to online teaching impacted your relations with learners? In what ways?
- Has shifting to online teaching impacted your relations with other colleagues? In what ways?
- To what extent has your institution responded to the sudden shift to online learning?

3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected by the questionnaire were analyzed using SPPS software, where statistical analysis was conducted to identify patterns and trends related to the study questions. Specifically, mean scores, standard deviations, and levels of agreement were computed to compare the participants' responses to the questionnaire items. On the other hand, the qualitative data generated from the interview responses were treated differently. The themes of interview questions were listed and the participants' responses were quoted and carefully discussed. The analysis involved several key steps, including data coding, thematic analysis, and interpretation. Coding involved systematically categorizing segments of the interview transcripts based on recurring themes and or ideas. Thematic analysis then included identifying overarching themes within the coded data, allowing for a deeper understanding of the participants' views on professional identity transition. The interpretation, on the other hand, involved synthesizing these themes and drawing meaningful conclusions that contribute to the overall research objectives. Such an approach allowed the researchers to investigate the participants' perspectives and experiences in-depth, contributing to a comprehensive exploration of the study's subject matter

4. Results

4.1 Results of the First Research Question

RQ1. What are EFL Instructors' perceptions towards identity transformation during online teaching?

The means, standard deviations, rank, and level of agreement for the EFL instructors' perceptions about their identity transformation during online teaching were extracted to answer this question. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Instructors' Perceptions of the Impact of Online Teaching on Professional Identity Transformation

Domain	Mean	Std	Rank	Level of Agreement
The impact of online teaching on social relations with colleagues and learners.	3.14	.40	1	High
Effectiveness of online teaching.	3.04	.34	2	High
The impact of online teaching on professional self-awareness and self-esteem.	3.00	.42	3	High
Personal satisfaction toward professional and technical skills during online teaching.	2.90	.39	4	Medium
Overall	**3.00**	**.29**		**High**

Table 1 shows that Instructors' perceptions about EFL instructors' identity transformation during online teaching in the four domains ranged between (2.90–3.14), with medium to high levels of agreement (Figure 1). The domain related to the impact of online teaching on social relations with colleagues and learners ranked first, with a mean of (3.14) and a high level of agreement. However, the domain referring to personal satisfaction toward professional and technical skills during the online teaching domain ranked fourth, with a mean of (2.90) and a medium level of agreement. The average score of overall instructors" perceptions is (3.00), with a high level of agreement as depicted in Figure 1.
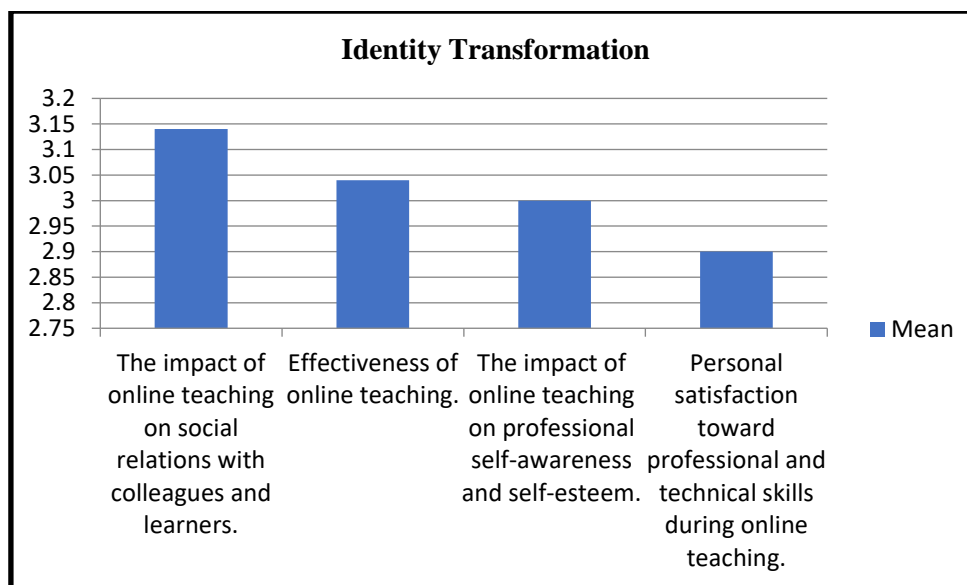

Figure 1: Means of Instructors' Perceptions on the Impact of Online Teaching on Professional Identity Transformation

Furthermore, the researchers computed the means, standard deviations, rank, and level of agreement for the instructors' perceptions concerning professional identity transformation during online teaching within the four domains. The results are presented in Tables (2-5). It is worth mentioning that the sequence of the four domains' results corresponds to the original order in which they are presented in the questionnaire.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations along "The impact of online teaching on social relations with colleagues and learners" domain

No.	Item	Mean	Std	Rank	Level of Agreement
35	I tried to actively engage myself with the technology I was using for online teaching	3.50	.51	1	High
33	I used technology to communicate with my colleagues better	3.14	.55	2	High
32	I used technology to understand my students better	3.00	.53	3	High
34	I used technology to help me better understand other people	2.91	.74	4	Medium
	Overall	**3.14**	**.40**		**High**

Table 2 shows that the mean scores of instructors' perceptions along the "The impact of online teaching on social relations with colleagues and learners" domain ranged between (2.91- 3.50) with medium to high level of agreement. Moreover, instructors reported the highest level of perceptions (Mean=3.50) on the item "I tried to actively engage myself with the technology I was using for online teaching". In contrast, they reported the lowest level of perceptions (2.91) on the item "I used technology to help me better understand other people." The participants showed a high level of agreement on the item with numbers (32, 33, 35), while they showed a medium level of agreement on the item (34) as presented in Figure 2.
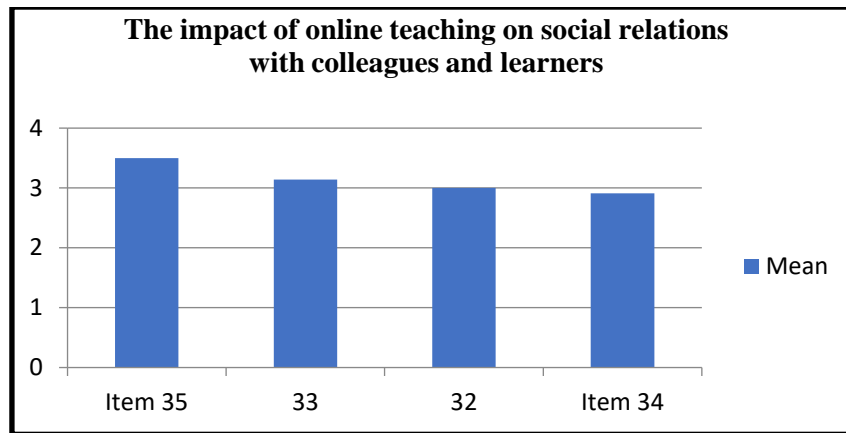
Figure 2: Means of Instructor's Perceptions along "The impact of online teaching on social relations with colleagues and learners" Domain

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations along "Effectiveness of online teaching" Domain

No.	Item	Mean	Std	Rank	Level of Agreement
21	I used technology to gain new knowledge for online teaching	3.31	.46	1	High
22	Teaching online transformed my teaching practices	3.29	.55	2	High
16	Teaching online often caused me to be personally reflective	3.25	.53	3	High
15	Some of my character was shaped by the ways I started to follow in online teaching	3.16	.37	4	High
17	Teaching online made me carefully consider changes I had to make in my teaching practices	3.11	.32	5	High
14	Using technology to teach online was stimulating	3.07	.50	6	High
25	Technology often made me want to make personal changes in the way I used to teach	3.07	.50	6	High
19	I used technology for valuable reasons	3.02	.55	8	High
20	I had a high interest in using technology to teach online	2.93	.70	9	Medium
24	I felt that teaching online with technology was exciting	2.89	.90	10	Medium
26	Now, teaching online with technology has become an important part of my life	2.89	.75	10	Medium
18	Teaching online transformed my teaching values	2.89	.58	10	Medium
23	I used technology to improve my understanding of life	2.68	.67	13	Medium
	Overall	**3.04**	**.34**		**High**

Table 3 shows that the mean scores of instructors' perceptions along the "Effectiveness of online teaching" domain ranged between (2.68-3.31) with a medium to high level of agreement. Moreover, instructors' reported the highest level of perceptions (Mean=3.31) on the item "I used technology to gain new knowledge for online teaching", while they reported the lowest level of perceptions (2.68) on the item "I used technology to improve my understanding of life" The participants showed a high level of agreement on the item with numbers (14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 25), while they showed a medium level of agreement on the items (18, 20, 23, 24, 26) as shown in Figure 3.
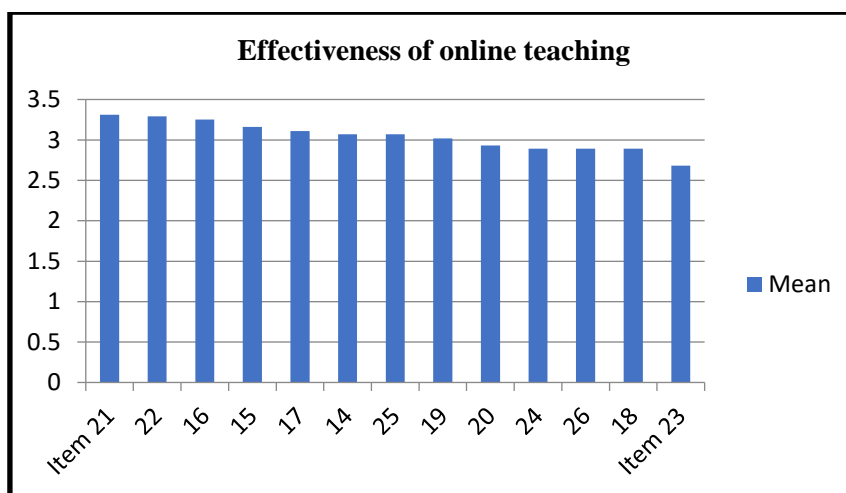
Figure 3: Means of Instructors' Perceptions of "Effectiveness of Online Teaching" Domain

Table 4: Means and Standard Deviations along "The impact of online teaching on professional self-awareness and self-esteem" Domain

No.	Item	Mean	Std	Rank	Level of Agreement
31	Technology often helped me change my perspective about things	3.16	.48	1	High
27	Teaching online transformed the way I used to perceive myself as a teacher	3.14	.55	2	High
29	I can recall instances in which I have been personally transformed from things I taught online using technology	3.00	.49	3	High
30	Teaching online made me carefully consider changes I should make in my life	3.00	.49	3	High
28	Teaching online with technology transformed my thinking	2.93	.40	5	Medium
	Overall	**3.00**	**.42**		**High**

Table 4 shows that the mean scores of instructors' perceptions along the "The impact of online teaching on professional self-awareness and self-esteem" domain ranged between (2.93-3.16) with medium to high levels of agreement. Moreover, instructors reported the highest level of perceptions (Mean=3.16) on the item "Technology often helped me change my perspective about things". In contrast, they reported the lowest level of perceptions (2.93) on the item "Teaching online with technology transformed my thinking." The participants showed a high level of agreement on the item with numbers (27, 29, 30, 31), while they showed a medium level of agreement on the item (28) as presented in Figure 4.
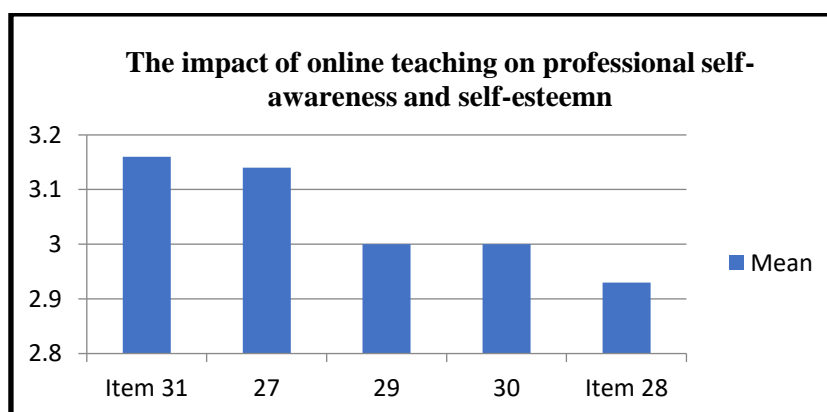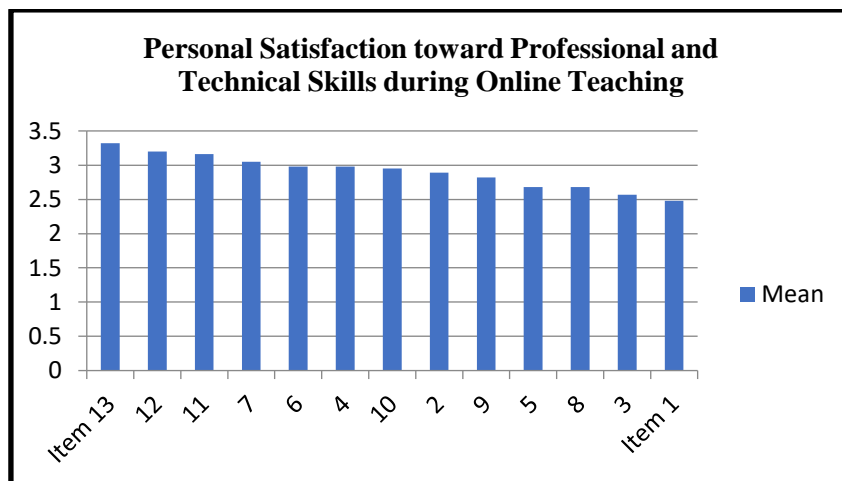

Figure 4: Means of Instructors' Perceptions of "The impact of online teaching on professional self-awareness and self-esteem" Domain

Table 5: Means and standard deviations along "personal satisfaction toward professional and technical skills during online teaching" domain

No.	Item	Mean	Std	Rank	Level of Agreement
13	Now, I frequently use technology to teach online when it is needed	3.32	.47	1	High
12	Now, I am interested in many aspects of using technology for teaching online	3.20	.59	2	High
11	Now, I use technology extensively to teach about different skills in English	3.16	.57	3	High
7	I didn't mind demonstrating technology I used in online teaching for others	3.05	.68	4	High
6	If my technological abilities were assessed, I would show good basic technological ability	2.98	.63	5	Medium
4	I used many different types of technology for online teaching	2.98	.66	5	Medium
10	I enjoyed using technology to teach online	2.95	.81	7	Medium
2	At first, I faced many technical problems	2.89	.78	8	Medium
9	I used technology proficiently while teaching online	2.82	.54	9	Medium
5	I was comfortable with my technological ability in teaching online	2.68	.60	10	Medium
8	I felt like I used technology efficiently when I started to teach online	2.68	.67	10	Medium
3	I was fluent in using technology for online teaching purposes	2.57	.66	12	Medium
1	At first, I was ready for the switch to online teaching	2.48	.63	13	Medium
	Overall	**2.90**	**.39**		**Medium**

Table 5 shows that the mean scores of instructors' perceptions along the "Personal satisfaction toward professional and technical skills during online teaching" domain ranged between (2.48-3.32) with medium to high levels of agreement. Moreover, instructors reported the highest level of perceptions (Mean=3.32) on the item "Now, I frequently use technology to teach online when it is needed", while they reported the lowest level of perceptions (2.48) on the item "At first, I was ready for the switch to online teaching." The participants showed a high level of agreement on the item with numbers (7, 11, 12, 13), while they showed a medium level of agreement on the items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10) as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Means of Instructors' Perceptions of "Personal Satisfaction toward Professional and Technical Skills during Online Teaching" Domain

4.2 Results of the Second Study Question

RQ2. How has switching to online teaching affected EFL instructors' professional identity according to instructors' perceptions*?*

To enhance readability, we present the theme of each interview question along with the results, quoting some participants' responses.

4.2.1 The degree of professional readiness to online teaching

Most respondents asserted that they were not ready at all for the sudden shift caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. However, they started learning once the switch took place. The majority confirmed that their previous knowledge about online teaching was mainly theoretical and shallow. They had no practical knowledge of designing or delivering online teaching material. One of the interviewees said, "*To be honest, I had a lot of theoretical background based on many readings related to online teaching. Nevertheless, I had minimal experience in doing real teaching online*". However, only one instructor indicated her readiness to do online teaching based on her previous work, which was basically online in nature. She said, "*Given my previous experience with online teaching, the sudden transition to distance learning platforms didn't affect my career. I was already using online platforms such as Google Meets, Zoom, Kahoot, etc.*"

4.2.2 Personal satisfaction with personal professional and technical skills to deal with online teaching as an EFL instructor

Most of the interviewees confirmed that during the initial stage of the virus outbreak, they experienced a lack of satisfaction with their professional skills in dealing with the sudden shift to online teaching. They thought that their technical skills were insufficient to adapt fully to the sudden shift to online teaching. One instructor stated, "*we had to start from scratch, finding an application that fills the need for online classes and grants access to audio and visual aids*". Another instructor observed, "*I did my best to be well prepared to deal with all obstacles to be able to deliver a satisfactory lecture. However, I met many challenges*". Nonetheless, this abrupt condition has caused them to work harder to adapt to the requirements of the new circumstances.

4.2.3 The impact of online teaching on self-awareness and self-esteem

The majority of the interviewees asserted the impact of shifting to online teaching on their self-esteem and self-awareness in different ways. On the one hand, they confessed that the new condition has made them more aware of their technical and professional needs. They realized their imperious deficiency in most technical and e-learning skills. One instructor reflected "*It was a very challenging experience that made me want to learn more, achieve more and be able to deliver the content in an interesting and professional way. It surely affected me as I was doubtful whether my students were actually understanding and benefiting from this experience. I was an ongoing state of "doubt" whether I was doing the right thing the way it should be done*". On the other hand, having to working hard to improve their technical skills and acquainting new methods of online teaching have impacted their self-esteem positively. One instructor stated "*the sudden move to online teaching did actually affect my self-esteem as an EFL instructor because I was able to develop different methods that I could implement in my classroom whether online or face-to-face. I have also encouraged myself to research more and find out about successful teaching methods online. I could use different programs that I have never used before*". Another instructor added, "*I learn new things after every class I teach, whether online or in person. Online teaching has significantly contributed to my career and helped me maintain a good and effective teaching process with the students*". Another instructor reflected on the positive impact of online teaching on teaching English as a foreign language by stating, "*I am constantly aware of the fact that I teach English as a non-native speaker. That is why I continually try to improve my delivery and skills. I would say that the teaching material I found online has aided my presentation and complimented the content of my classes. This integration of sources gave me a boost of confidence in the way I handle the material delivery*".

4.2.4 The impact of online teaching on social relations with learners

There was a consensus among the interviewees that the period of online teaching has negatively affected personal relationships, honesty, and trust between students and their instructors. Most instructors confirmed that their students preferred to keep their cameras off, which made the term 'remote' very applicable in this situation. One instructor reflected "*It was challenging to create a relationship with my students. Students were not required to open cameras, meaning I spoke to black Zoom boxes. Many students did not present original*

work, so it was challenging to know their level and assess their learning experiences. When we returned to face-to-face learning, I was shocked at how difficult it was to recollect a student's name or remember that they took a class with me. I had a difficult time synthesizing names with faces. Moments of sadness and confusion colored my first weeks of being back on campus after two years of online teaching!". Another instructor observed, "*when we returned back to the conventional mode of teaching (face-to-face), I started to cherish the emotional factor of teaching more (i.e., student's facial expressions, laughter, jokes, group-work…etc.), which was a bit missed during the remote teaching, especially when students resisted opening their cameras*". However, two instructors reflected on the unexpected positive impact of online period on their relations with learners. The first one said enthusiastically "*Online teaching and learning impacted our learning environment positively. Students gained more self-confidence. In online classes, they participated more often and express themselves more comfortably*". The other instructor confirmed that "*E-learning period impacted my relations with my students in a very positive way as we were reflecting all the time to make sure that I am able to reach out to them despite the challenges they encountered during Covid period*".

4.2.5   The impact of online teaching on social relations with other colleagues

Most EFL instructors reflected on the negative part of not being able to meet their colleagues and see them as often as they used to, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic. They would not meet physically as before, which might have negatively impacted some social relations. On the other hand, this period of time has contributed significantly to flourishing cooperative and supportive working groups. Many instructors asserted that this was an excellent opportunity to create a community of learners and practitioners. For most of them, this was a time of bonding and sharing experience. One instructor said, "*we shared insights about different issues and tried to help tackle the problems we faced*". Another instructor added, "*it was an inspiring period to think of and develop new projects and exchange experiences*". Interestingly, one instructor reflected on the social ethics during online teaching "*it has not always been a smooth ride as online teaching blurred the already eroded lines between personal life and work in academia. I had moments when I felt my privacy was violated, and colleagues could send me work emails without respect for breaks or time limits!*".

4.2.6   How the institution responded to the sudden shift of online teaching and learning

The interviewees showed general positive attitudes about their institution's reaction and response to the sudden shift to online teaching and learning. They indicated that their university was among the first Palestinian and Arab universities to react actively to the lockdown and the eventual distant teaching and learning as it invited all its staff members to attend free sessions and training workshops to get them acquainted with the technological needs of online teaching mode. The university also made its IT staff always ready to support the instructors. One instructor said "*I would say that we were very lucky to have dedicated support from our IT team at the university who did an amazing task of helping and solving all the technical issues that hindered our progress. We had exceptional support from our department in organizing and managing the course content to meet our students' needs without affecting their progress*". Another instructor reflected "*The university and the IT department have done the best they can to assure that classes and exams could go according to plan*". Some instructors thought that the university should have provided more support during that time. One of these instructors observed "*I noticed that the university tried to be prompt in its response to the shift to the online realm and dedicated sources to accomplish this task. However, the lack of orientation and mentorship meant a gap in fully utilizing the sources and keeping up with updates. Not all instructors are tech-savvy, and not all of them know how to use the ITC and other online platforms. The university did not offer hotlines for inquiries or technical aid*". The way the university has responded to instructors' professional needs during the crisis was also critical for teachers and instructors. In fact, it has impacted how they perceived it. The positive attitudes most instructors have had towards their institution have created a strong sense of belonging which is an essential component of their professional identity. The critical conditions the university went through, yet its support to its staff, the dedication it showed to solve any technical issues and the help it provided to instructors to manage their courses well and meet students' needs without affecting their progress, all this have contributed to creating a robust connection with their institution.

5.   Discussion

The first study question examined EFL instructors' perceptions toward the impact of online teaching on the transformation of their professional identity in terms of the four domains: the impact of online teaching on social relations with colleagues and learners, the effectiveness of online teaching, the impact of online teaching on professional self-awareness and self-esteem, and personal satisfaction toward professional and technical skills

during online teaching. The significant changes in the way EFL instructors had to deliver the learned material, the new way of communicating with each other and with learners, the new professional and technological needs that appeared with the new style of teaching and learning, and the impact of online teaching on their professional self-awareness and self-esteem, all of these have contributed significantly to changes in their perceptions on the effectiveness online teaching has had on their professional identity.

The most prominent finding of the current study is that the new experience in online teaching has impacted EFL instructors' social relations with colleagues and learners. This domain ranked the highest among other aspects. Being in the same boat and facing the same professional and technical challenges had positively impacted EFL instructors' relations and emotional feelings towards their colleagues. They had to learn to be more cooperative and attentive. Although they were not able to meet physically as before, they were able to create a new virtual working environment where they shared their teaching experience, resources, and even some funny stories. As for their social relations with learners, EFL instructors' relations were also affected during online teaching, impacting their professional identity in this regard. They realized how important it was to establish rapport with learners. Maintaining a good relationship with learners was really essential, and it might be even more fundamental in online classes. Such a result contradicts what El-Soussi (2022) found, where EFL instructors reported that online has negatively affected their social roles. The participants claimed that the virtual environment limited the human interaction between the instructors and students. A similar pattern of results was obtained in Cain and colleagues' (2023) study, where instructors reported negative feedback toward online teaching due to a lack of body language and nonverbal cues. One study participant clearly declared that teaching is about building relationships, and such connections can not be established virtually. Likewise, Algrani's (2023) study concluded that lack of in-person interaction is among the three disadvantages of online teaching as perceived by most EFL instructors. Zhang & Hwang (2023) found that communicating with students is also the greatest difficulty for language teachers in virtual classes.

The sudden shift to online teaching and learning and the subsequent change in how instructors delivered the study material had many implications. Instructors suddenly found themselves in front of a new reform in their profession. They had to start learning and adopting new strategies to teach, to communicate, and to assess. For instructors, this was not a smooth shift or an easy change. It has made them aware of their professional needs in terms of dealing with technology and integrating it to a wide extent in their virtual classrooms. Furthermore, they had to capture any opportunity that might help them prove their abilities as instructors who can adapt to the new changes in the context of their profession. This shift to online teaching has undoubtedly made instructors think about the "effectiveness of online teaching" and to what extent this new mode can have long-term effects on their professional identity.

EFL instructors' identities also transformed in terms of their self-esteem and self-awareness as they had to develop different methods to be implemented in their virtual classes. They had to encourage themselves to research more and find out more about successful online teaching methods. They found themselves stimulated to try and use different programs they had never utilized before. This made them more acquainted with strategies, software programs, and online applications to get students excited about virtual meetings and classes. This in return has affected their motivation and passion for online teaching. Hence, it has also improved their self-awareness and self-esteem.

Unsurprisingly, EFL instructors rated their personal satisfaction toward professional and technical skills during online teaching at the lowest level compared with other aspects, although this aspect was assessed at a medium level. This can be attributed to the challenges instructors face at the beginning of the online endeavor. Most instructors expressed how challenging the beginning was. Most instructors were not well-acquainted with the new ways of online teaching and essential technical skills. Further, the rabid shift to online teaching left EFL university instructors feeling less confident in those skills. This result confirms Cain et al.'s (2022) study, where the authors state that teachers' lack of readiness to instruct through digital tools has been a dominant concern in the existing literature. This finding is directly in line with Cain and colleagues' (2023) study, where technological challenges emerged as a major theme in the participants' qualitative responses. Participants showed high concerns toward the passivity and unfamiliarity of the technology-based mediums in the online environment.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate Palestinian EFL instructors' perceptions of the impact of online teaching on professional identity transformation. It also investigated how online teaching affected instructors' professional identity in some aspects. Thus, it contributed to a nuanced understanding of the intelligible impact of online teaching on instructors' professional identity. As it was shown, the study revealed that EFL instructors' perceptions of the impact of online teaching on their professional identity ranged between high and medium ranks. It also revealed how EFL instructors' professional identity was influenced in terms of professional needs, self-awareness and self-esteem, social relations with colleagues and learners, and instructors' perspectives towards their institution.

6.2 Pedagogical Implications

Some important implications can be drawn based on what was revealed in this study. As it was found, the shift to online teaching has impacted the way EFL instructors perceived their professional needs, their social relations in the context of their career, how they perceived themselves, and their perspectives towards their institution. Hence, it is essential to be aware of these changes in the professional context by adapting to new transformations and creating a professional environment where EFL instructors can learn new technical skills. It is also recommended that educational institutions foster a virtual social network in such cases to intensify the positive outcomes of professional groups in a social and friendly mold, where EFL instructors can circulate their expertise and success stories in online teaching. Finally, educational institutions are also recommended to adapt their educational policies and teaching requirements in the light of any educational change, which can help EFL instructors cope with new changes in the professional context successfully. This can include allowing EFL instructors more flexibility in how they deliver their classes and evaluate their students.

6.3 Study Limitations and Future Studies

Although the study has successfully met its objectives and contributed to the existing body of literature in the field, two limitations might be acknowledged in this study. First, the research was limited to a specific context which is mainly related to one Palestinian university with certain participants. This may limit the generalizability of the results to other educational settings. Secondly, the current study mainly relied on self-reported responses for the quantitative and qualitative data which can cause potential bias, particularly given the resemblance between the aspects of the questionnaire and the themes of the interview questions.

Future studies may follow the same methodology and apply it to other educational institutions where a more in-depth understanding of how online teaching impacts EFL instructors' professional identities could be achieved. Besides, researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies in hybrid learning environments in the higher education sector. It would be interesting to observe how the professional identity of EFL instructors might be shaped in such a context.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethical Approvals: No ethical approval was required from the institution.

Data availability: Data will be made available upon request.

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