

**FROM STUDENTS TO FUTURE TEACHERS: EARLY TEACHER IDENTITY
DEVELOPMENT IN AN EFL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM**

***DE ESTUDANTES A FUTUROS PROFESSORES: DESENVOLVIMENTO INICIAL DA
IDENTIDADE DOCENTE EM UM PROGRAMA DE FORMAÇÃO DE PROFESSORES
DE INGLÊS COMO LÍNGUA ESTRANGEIRA***

***DE ESTUDIANTES A FUTUROS DOCENTES: DESARROLLO INICIAL DE LA
IDENTIDAD DOCENTE EN UN PROGRAMA DE FORMACIÓN DE PROFESORES
DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA***



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ABSTRACT: This study aims to examine the early teacher identity of EFL student teachers at a Turkish state university. The research was designed as a quantitative cross-sectional survey to measure the level of early teacher identity and its sub-dimensions. The study also explored whether early teacher identity varied according to the demographic characteristics of the participants. The cohort consisted of 196 EFL student teachers enrolled in the English Language Teaching Department at a state university in Turkey. The data were collected through an online questionnaire consisting of a demographic information form and the Early Teacher Identity Measure (ETIM). Descriptive statistics, independent-samples t tests, and one-way ANOVA tests were used to analyze the data. The results indicated that the participants had a relatively high level of early teacher identity. Self-efficacy was found to be the strongest sub-dimension, while classroom responsibility and voluntary engagement with children or adolescents were less developed.

KEYWORDS: Early teacher identity. Student teacher identity. EFL student teachers. Teacher education.

RESUMO: Este estudo tem como objetivo examinar a identidade docente inicial de estudantes-professores de inglês como língua estrangeira em uma universidade estadual turca. A pesquisa foi delineada como um survey quantitativo transversal, com o objetivo de mensurar o nível de identidade docente inicial e suas subdimensões. O estudo também investigou se a identidade docente inicial variava de acordo com as características demográficas dos participantes. A amostra foi composta por 196 estudantes-professores matriculados no Departamento de Ensino de Língua Inglesa de uma universidade estadual na Turquia. Os dados foram coletados por meio de um questionário on-line composto por um formulário de informações demográficas e pela Early Teacher Identity Measure (ETIM). Para a análise dos dados, foram utilizadas estatísticas descritivas, testes t para amostras independentes e testes ANOVA unidirecionais. Os resultados indicaram que os participantes apresentavam um nível relativamente alto de identidade docente inicial. A autoeficácia foi identificada como a subdimensão mais forte, enquanto a responsabilidade em sala de aula e o engajamento voluntário com crianças ou adolescentes mostraram-se menos desenvolvidos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Identidade docente inicial. Identidade de estudantes-professores. Estudantes-professores de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira. Formação de professores.

RESUMEN: Este estudio tiene como objetivo examinar la identidad docente inicial de estudiantes-profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera en una universidad estatal turca. La investigación fue diseñada como una encuesta cuantitativa transversal, con el propósito de medir el nivel de identidad docente inicial y sus subdimensiones. El estudio también exploró si la identidad docente inicial variaba según las características demográficas de los participantes. La muestra estuvo compuesta por 196 estudiantes-profesores matriculados en el Departamento de Enseñanza de la Lengua Inglesa de una universidad estatal en Turquía. Los datos fueron recopilados mediante un cuestionario en línea compuesto por un formulario de información demográfica y la Early Teacher Identity Measure (ETIM). Para analizar los datos, se utilizaron estadísticas descriptivas, pruebas t para muestras independientes y pruebas ANOVA de una vía. Los resultados indicaron que los participantes presentaban un nivel relativamente alto de identidad docente inicial. La autoeficacia fue identificada como la subdimensión más fuerte, mientras que la responsabilidad en el aula y el compromiso voluntario con niños o adolescentes se mostraron menos desarrollados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Identidad docente inicial. Identidad de estudiantes-profesores. Estudiantes-profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera. Formación docente.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is shaped not only by pedagogical knowledge and classroom practices, but also by how teachers understand themselves and their professional role. Accordingly, teacher identity has become an important focus in teacher education research because it is closely related to teachers' beliefs, decisions, practices and professional development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Zeng & Liu, 2024).

Teacher identity is not regarded as a fixed concept. Rather, it is conceptualized as a developing process that undergoes constant change and is affected by various elements such as prior learning experiences, family background, socioeconomic factors, social interactions, agency, beliefs, and attitudes over time (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Nguyen & Yang, 2018; Peker et al., 2020; Pillen et al., 2013). Influenced by these personal, social and contextual factors, teacher identity may begin to take shape even before formal teacher education and continue to develop throughout the educational trajectory (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025). The process of professional identity formation and development further evolves during the transition period of being a senior student to a novice teacher (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Pillen et al., 2013).

When it comes to the professional identity development of student teachers, the issue becomes particularly important as student teachers begin to negotiate their roles as future teachers within their discipline and educational context as soon as they enter their faculties (Nguyen & Yang, 2018; Stenberg et al., 2014). However, research on teacher identity has been mostly restricted to cohorts of senior students who have started their practicum (Nguyen & Loughland, 2018; Prabjandee, 2019), leaving relatively less attention to the early stages of identity development among students who are at the beginning of their education. Furthermore, although they provide significant insights into the field, a considerable portion of existing research has solely employed a qualitative approach because of the dynamic nature of the concept (Barahona & Toledo-Sandoval, 2025; Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Huang & Wang, 2024; Torres-Cepeda & Ramos-Holguín, 2019; Villegas et al., 2020). As a result, there is still a need for empirical research that quantitatively addresses early teacher identity development and its associated factors within pre-service teacher education programs since the body of research is quite limited in this sense (Friesen & Besley, 2013; Zeng & Liu, 2024), and quantitative measurement instruments can also be used as useful tools to understand the concept in detail more systematically (Hanna et al., 2020).

Another reason for the necessity of shedding light on initial teacher education stems from the fact that novice teachers are highly likely to experience some tensions when they start their practicum and their career (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Huang & Wang, 2024; Villegas et al., 2020; Yuan & Lee, 2015). The reason is that when they start their departments, student teachers hold certain beliefs about learning, teaching and studying. All these beliefs play a significant role in shaping their professional identities (Sang, 2023) and this might cause the tensions mentioned because of the differences between what they think and what they encounter (Stenberg et al., 2014). Therefore, examining early teacher identity before practicum becomes important as identity tensions may already be shaped by student teachers' expectations, beliefs and imagined professional roles. Research on volunteer teaching contexts further illustrates that such tensions are not only individual but also shaped by institutional and contextual constraints (Wang & Yazan, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher identity, at the core of teaching, is a significant concept that should be approached carefully as soon as student teachers start their education since it has tremendous effects on many aspects including teachers' commitment to their job, successful teaching, and teaching environments (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Stenberg et al., 2014). Apart from these effects, student teachers might experience some mismatches between reality and their ideal classroom which they imagine throughout their educational trajectory (Chang, 2018). Moreover, they either firstly recognize these tensions during their practicum or when they start their jobs as novice teachers, which might cause serious burnout at the end of their educational trajectory or at the very beginning of their careers (Barahona & Toledo-Sandoval, 2025), which makes it essential to provide the teacher candidates with the requirements of their future jobs. In short, this initial stage of professional identity development is specifically important in pre-service teacher education as the teacher candidates start the negotiation of their professional roles and expectations without real experiences (Zhao & Zhang, 2017).

Turning to the elements influencing the evolution of professional teacher identity among student teachers, in a mixed-methods study by Zhao and Zhang (2017), it is reported that practicum and mentor support play a key role in shaping the professional identities of the teacher candidates positively. In a similar vein, Prabjandee (2019) shows that practicum helps student teachers develop their professional identity in terms of emotions and practice and helps

them overcome the challenges with the help of their mentors and peers. Nguyen and Yang (2018) also point out that although there are some challenges, learning to teach during the practicum period enables student teachers to negotiate their professional identity through agentic interactions with students and mentors. It is further found that interactions with peers during the practicum sessions play a significant role in student teachers' professional identity development (Nguyen & Loughland, 2018).

In addition to the classroom interactions, Torres-Cepeda and Ramos-Holguín (2019) document that teaching practices and reflection on them are also regarded as crucial factors in the development of student teachers' professional identities. In another study, it is found out that implementations of identity-oriented tasks help the student teachers construct their professional identities by connecting their past experiences with their future aspirations (Uştuk et al., 2025). It is also now well established, based on a variety of studies, that the development of a robust teacher identity is closely associated with high self-efficacy and long-term effectiveness in the profession (Zeng & Liu, 2024).

One consensus among scholars interested in teacher identity is that the concept is by nature highly context-sensitive and thus should be studied in different contexts to draw more insights (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Hanna et al., 2020; Sang, 2023; Yuan & Lee, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). In addition to this, in order to prevent the mismatches between the reality and the expectations of teacher candidates, teacher education programs should equip the student teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge and awareness at each stage of their education through reflective practice and engagement in teaching activities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Villegas et al., 2020; Yuan & Lee, 2015).

In the Turkish context, studies on student teacher identity have provided valuable important but still limited insights into early teacher identity development. Arpacı and Bardakçı (2015) adapted the Early Teacher Identity Measure developed by Friesen and Besley (2013) into Turkish and reported acceptable psychometric properties, providing a validated basis for quantitative research on student teacher identity in Turkey. Using this measure, Çelik and Kalkan (2019) found that early teacher identity among Turkish participants differed according to certain variables such as gender, department, faculty type, and grade level. Taşdemir and Seferoğlu (2022) showed that Turkish English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' professional identity development during practicum was shaped by language-related, personal, pedagogical and contextual dimensions while Babanoğlu and Ağçam (2019) reported high levels of early teacher identity among senior EFL student teachers. However, these studies

focused either on broad samples of teacher candidates or on senior EFL students during their practicum. Therefore, there remains a need for quantitative research examining early teacher identity among EFL student teachers across different years of undergraduate teacher education.

Building on the existing literature, the framework of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and the identified gaps, the primary aim of this paper is to gain further understanding of early teacher identity development among student teachers within the Turkish EFL context. Adopting a quantitative research design, this study attempts to provide empirical evidence on early teacher identity development as measured by a validated scale. Specifically, this study aims to (1) determine level of early teacher identity and its sub-dimensions among EFL student teachers at a Turkish state university, and (2) examine whether early teacher identity significantly differs according to selected demographic variables. By addressing these issues, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of early teacher identity development and offer implications for teacher education programs.

RQ1: What is the level of early teacher identity and its sub-dimensions among EFL student teachers at a Turkish state university?

RQ2: Does early teacher identity significantly differ according to the participants' demographic characteristics?

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methodological procedures followed in the study. The study adopted a quantitative approach to examine early teacher identity among EFL student teachers at a Turkish state university. More specifically, it aimed to determine the level of early teacher identity and its sub-dimensions and compare early teacher identity scores across selected demographic variables. Accordingly, this part includes details regarding the study in terms of its design, participants, data collection instrument, analysis of the data and ethical permission.

Research Design

This research utilized a quantitative cross-sectional survey approach to investigate early teacher identity of EFL student teachers at a Turkish state university. This approach was suitable as the study intended to describe the level of early teacher identity and its sub-dimensions and to compare early teacher identity scores across selected demographic variables. The cross-sectional nature of the study required data to be collected from participants enrolled in different

years of the same undergraduate English language teacher education program at the same time. Therefore, the research provides a context-specific snapshot of early teacher identity within one institutional setting. The data were gathered using an online questionnaire, which included Early Teacher Identity Measure (ETIM) designed by Friesen and Besley (2013) and a demographic information section.

Participants

The participants of the study were 196 EFL student teachers enrolled in the English Language Teaching department at Necmettin Erbakan University, a state university in Turkey. The sample was composed of students from all four years of the undergraduate program including 30 freshmen, 37 sophomores, 53 juniors, and 76 seniors. Of the participants, 147 were female and 49 were male. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23, with a mean of 20.6 years. The participants were selected through convenience sampling in line with the context-specific aim of the study and the voluntary basis of the participation. The data were gathered within the fall term of the 2025–2026 academic year. Table 1 provides information regarding the demographic characteristics of the study's participants.

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Female	147	75
	Male	49	25
Age	18-19	40	20,4
	20	48	24,5
	21	54	27,6
	22 and above	54	27,6
	mean±S.D. (min.-max.) 20,65±1,48 (18-23)		
Year of study (1 st –4 th)	1 st (Freshman)	30	15,3
	2 nd (Sophomore)	37	18,9
	3 rd (Junior)	53	27
	4 th (Senior)	76	38,8
Teaching experience	Yes	117	59,7
	No	79	40,3
Time of decision to become a teacher	Not planning to work as a teacher	14	7,1
	Not decided yet	22	11,2
	In high school or before	125	63,8
	Just before university	35	17,9
Influential person in choosing a teaching field	My own decision	57	29,1
	A family member	49	25
	A teacher or mentor	87	44,4

	A friend or peer	3	1,5
Family's socioeconomic status	Low	17	8,7
	Middle	164	83,7
	High	15	7,7

Note. The Authors.

A priori power analysis was conducted with G*Power 3.1.9.4 to identify whether the sample size was sufficient for the planned statistical analyses. Since one-way ANOVA was one of the main statistical procedures used to compare early teacher identity scores across year levels, it was selected as the reference test. Based on Cohen's $f = .39$, an alpha level of .05, and a statistical power of .95, the minimum required sample size was calculated as 120 participants. Therefore, the current sample size of 196 participants exceeded the minimum requirement and was considered adequate for the study.

Data Collection Tool

Data was collected through an online questionnaire consisting of two sections. The first section was a demographic information form asking for the participant's gender, age, grade level, teaching experience, time of decision to become a teacher, the influential person in choosing their field, and socioeconomic status. These variables were chosen because the study was interested in examining if early teacher identity varied with these characteristics of the participants.

The second section of the questionnaire was the ETIM provided by Friesen and Besley (2013). The ETIM was employed to measure early teacher identity of EFL student teachers through three sub-dimensions including "Self-Categorization as a Teacher" (S-Cat), "Self-Efficacy in Becoming a Teacher" (SEBT), and "Natural Inclination towards Children and Teaching" (NICT). There are 17 items evaluated on a five-point Likert-type scale in the measure. Higher scores imply a more robust early teacher identity. The participants were required to complete the scale in its original English version.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data gathered were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. Prior to the main analyses, the data were screened for normality and reliability. The normality of the ETIM and its sub-dimensions was examined through skewness and kurtosis values. As seen in Table 2, all values fell within the acceptable range of ± 1.5 , so the data were considered to meet the assumption of normality and parametric tests were used (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The

internal consistency of the ETIM and its sub-dimensions was assessed through Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. Accordingly, a Cronbach's Alpha value of .60 or higher is considered to indicate acceptable reliability for the scale or subscale (Pallant, 2020). In the current research, the reliability coefficient was .901 for the overall ETIM, .786 for S-Cat, .793 for SEBT, and .880 for NICT, indicating acceptable to high reliability for the scale and its sub-dimensions. Before calculating the total and subscale scores, the negatively worded items in the scale were reverse-coded so that higher scores consistently indicated a stronger level of early teacher identity.

Table 2.

Results of Normality and Reliability Analyses for the Scale and Its Subscales

The scale and its subscales	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's Alpha
ETIM	-0,413	0,033	0,901
S-Cat	-0,430	0,015	0,786
SEBT	-0,130	-0,780	0,793
NICT	-0,567	0,204	0,880

Note. The Authors. ETIM = Early Teacher Identity Measure, S-Cat = Self-Categorization, SEBT = Self-Efficacy in Becoming a Teacher, NICT = Natural Inclination towards Children and Teaching.

Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores were calculated to determine the level of early teacher identity and its sub-dimensions. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the participants' demographic characteristics. To examine whether early teacher identity differed according to the demographic variables, independent samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were performed. For variables with more than two groups, post-hoc comparisons were made to identify the source of significant differences. Tukey's HSD test was used when the homogeneity of variances assumption was met, whereas the Games-Howell test was used when this assumption was violated. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 and .01 levels.

Ethical Permission

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Graduate School of Educational Sciences at Hacettepe University. The study was approved at the committee meeting held on May 28, 2025, with the document number E-51944218-050-

00004267058. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they took part in the study on a voluntary basis.

FINDINGS

In this section, the findings of this current study are reported in line with the research questions. Accordingly, first, the descriptive results about the levels of early teacher identity and its sub-dimensions are provided. Then, the results of the analyses related to the group comparisons are presented to understand whether early teacher identity varied significantly according to demographic characteristics of the participants.

Findings based on RQ1

The first research question of this study aimed to measure the level of early teacher identity and its sub-dimensions among EFL student teachers at a public university in Turkey. Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the level of early teacher identity among the participants. As seen in Table 3, the mean score for the overall ETIM was 3.77 (SD = 0.65) on a five-point scale. This finding indicates that the participants reported a moderately high level of early teacher identity.

Table 3.
Descriptive Statistics for ETIM and Its Subscales

The scale and its subscales	M	SD
ETIM	3.77	0.65
S-Cat	3.78	0.75
SEBT	3.82	0.73
NICT	3.71	0.84

Note. The Authors. ETIM = Early Teacher Identity Measure, S-Cat = Self-Categorization, SEBT = Self-Efficacy in Becoming a Teacher, NICT = Natural Inclination towards Children and Teaching.

Regarding the sub-categories of the measure, the highest mean score was obtained from SEBT (M = 3.82, SD = 0.73). This finding indicates that the participants generally felt confident about their ability to become competent teachers in the future. This was followed by S-Cat (M = 3.78, SD = 0.75), suggesting that the participants tended to see themselves as current or future members of the teaching profession. The lowest mean score was observed in NICT (M = 3.71, SD = 0.84). Although this was the lowest sub-dimension, the mean score still remained above

the midpoint of the scale, indicating a generally positive orientation toward teaching and working with children.

Overall, these findings show that EFL student teachers in this single institutional context demonstrated a relatively positive level of early teacher identity. Of the three sub-dimensions, confidence in becoming a teacher emerged as the comparatively stronger dimension, while self-categorization as teachers and inclination toward children and teaching were slightly lower.

To provide a more detailed picture of the participants' early teacher identity, item-level mean scores were also examined. Among all ETIM items, the highest mean score was observed for Item 9, "I have no idea what it means to be a good teacher" ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.90$), which was reverse-coded. It can be inferred from this finding that the participants mostly had a clear understanding of what it means to be a good teacher. The other highly acknowledged item was Item 17, "Helping a child learn something new is very rewarding" ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.01$), suggesting that the rewarding nature of teaching was strongly recognized by the participants.

On the other hand, the lowest mean scores were for Item 5, "I find it difficult to see myself in charge of teaching a group of children/adolescents" ($M=3.35$, $SD=1.16$) and Item 12, "I look for opportunities to work with children/adolescents in my own time" ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.11$) Since Item 5 was reverse-coded, this finding implies that classroom authority may be a relatively less developed component of early teacher identity. Similarly, the lower average score for Item 12 shows that participants were less willing to actively pursue opportunities to work with children or adolescents outside of the context of formal education.

In short, the item-level findings suggest that although participants generally reported a positive sense of early teacher identity, their identity scores appeared stronger at the level of professional understanding and future-oriented confidence than at the level of practical classroom responsibility and voluntary engagement with learners.

Findings based on RQ2

The second research question focused on whether there were significant differences in early teacher identity based on participants' demographic characteristics. Accordingly, independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA tests were conducted on the overall ETIM score as well as its three sub-dimensions.

The results, presented in Table 4, indicate that gender, year of study, and the time of decision to become a teacher were significant factors associated with teacher identity

development, while other variables such as age, influential person and socioeconomic status showed no statistically significant effects.

A significant gender difference was observed in the overall ETIM score, $t = 2.151$, $p = .033$, and the NICT subscale, $t = 2.365$, $p = .019$. Female student teachers (ETIM: $M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.64$; NICT: $M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.83$) reported higher levels of overall teacher identity and natural inclination compared to their male counterparts (ETIM: $M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.65$; NICT: $M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.84$). However, no significant gender differences were found in the sub-categories of S-Cat and SEBT. This suggests that the gender-based difference was more visible in participants' overall early teacher identity and their inclination toward children and teaching rather than in all dimensions of the construct.

With regard to year of study, the overall ETIM score did not differ significantly across grade levels. However, there was a significant difference in the NICT, $F(3, 192) = 2.866$, $p = .038$. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that sophomore students had significantly higher scores than freshman students in this sub-dimension. No other significant pairwise differences were observed across grade levels.

The most pronounced differences were found for the time of decision to become a teacher. The ANOVA results showed statistically significant differences in the overall ETIM score and all three sub-dimensions according to this variable, with all p values below .01. Participants who decided to become teachers in high school or earlier reported the highest levels of early teacher identity, while those who were undecided or not planning to work as teachers had the lowest scores. Participants who decided just before university generally fell between these two groups. This pattern might point out that earlier commitment to the teaching profession was linked to a stronger early teacher identity.

However, there were no statistically significant differences in the other demographic variables including age ($p = 0.610$), teaching experience ($p = 0.131$), influential person in career choice ($p = 0.866$), and family socioeconomic status ($p = 0.745$).

Table 4.

Comparisons of ETIM and Its Subscales by Participants' Demographics

Variables	Category	f	ETIM	S-Cat.	SEBT	NICT
			Mean±S.D.	Mean±S.D.	Mean±S.D.	Mean±S.D.
Gender	Female	147	3,83±0,64	3,83±0,72	3,86±0,73	3,79±0,83
	Male	49	3,6±0,65	3,61±0,81	3,72±0,73	3,46±0,84
	T		2,151	1,79	1,157	2,365
	P		0,033*	0,075	0,249	0,019*
Age	18-19 age group	40	3,74±0,69	3,78±0,82	3,8±0,77	3,64±0,85

	Age 20	48	3,75±0,56	3,73±0,72	3,8±0,65	3,71±0,8
	Age 21	54	3,71±0,67	3,72±0,74	3,73±0,78	3,68±0,82
	Aged 22 and above	54	3,87±0,69	3,87±0,75	3,95±0,72	3,78±0,91
	F		0,608	0,425	0,845	0,257
	P		0,61	0,735	0,471	0,856
Year of study (1 st –4 th)	1 st (Freshman)	30	3,51±0,7	3,5±0,85	3,68±0,74	3,34±0,84 ^A
	2 nd (Sophomore)	37	3,89±0,58	3,89±0,71	3,89±0,67	3,9±0,86 ^B
	3 rd (Junior)	53	3,82±0,58	3,78±0,72	3,86±0,68	3,8±0,77 ^{AB}
	4 th (Senior)	76	3,78±0,69	3,83±0,73	3,82±0,79	3,69±0,86 ^{AB}
	F		2,187	1,794	0,516	2,866
	P		0,091	0,15	0,672	0,038*
Teaching experience	No	79	3,68±0,57	3,67±0,71	3,72±0,67	3,65±0,74
	Yes	117	3,83±0,7	3,85±0,77	3,89±0,77	3,75±0,91
	T		-1,516	-1,603	-1,557	-0,774
	P		0,131	0,111	0,121	0,44
Time of decision to become a teacher	Not planning to work as a teacher/Not decided yet	36	3,2±0,61 ^A	3,04±0,75 ^A	3,29±0,74 ^A	3,24±0,8 ^A
	In high school or before	125	3,96±0,57 ^C	4,02±0,62 ^C	3,99±0,66 ^B	3,88±0,8 ^B
	Just before university	35	3,67±0,6 ^B	3,67±0,67 ^B	3,77±0,7 ^B	3,56±0,86 ^{AB}
	F		24,14	31,557	14,604	9,429
	P		<0,01**	<0,01**	<0,01**	<0,01**
Influential person in choosing a teaching field	My own decision	57	3,79±0,74	3,82±0,83	3,92±0,74	3,64±0,93
	A family member	49	3,73±0,56	3,77±0,72	3,67±0,64	3,74±0,83
	A teacher/mentor/a friend/peer	90	3,78±0,64	3,76±0,72	3,84±0,77	3,73±0,8
	F		0,144	0,116	1,547	0,233
	P		0,866	0,891	0,216	0,793
Family's socioeconomic status	Low	17	3,7±0,76	3,66±0,93	3,85±0,88	3,58±0,83
	Middle	164	3,77±0,63	3,78±0,72	3,81±0,72	3,71±0,84
	High	15	3,87±0,78	3,91±0,86	3,92±0,77	3,8±0,98
	F		0,295	0,432	0,177	0,288
	P		0,745	0,65	0,838	0,75

Note. The Authors. **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, ETIM= Early Teacher Identity Measure, S-Cat= Self-Categorization, SEBT = Self-Efficacy in Becoming a Teacher, NICT = Natural Inclination towards Children and Teaching, † = The results of the post-hoc Tukey's HSD test are denoted with upper-case letters in the tables.

Some demographic variables did not reach statistical significance, but there were trends in mean scores that suggest patterns that are worth noting. In terms of age, the oldest group (22 and above) tended to score higher in all scales compared to the younger age groups. Previous teaching experience was also associated with a tendency to have higher mean scores on all scales than those with no previous teaching experience. The variable of influential person in choosing the teaching field displayed very small differences. However, a very slight tendency was found for those who decided to be a teacher “themselves” or were influenced by “A teacher/mentor/friend” to score higher on some subscales than those influenced by “A family

member”. Finally, there was a small gradient for socioeconomic status, with increasing mean scores from the “Low” to the “High” socioeconomic groups across the scales measured.

Overall, the results for the second research question suggest that early teacher identity was not impacted equally by all demographic variables. The differences among the studied variables were most pronounced in the time of decision to become a teacher, followed by gender and year of study to a smaller extent.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined early teacher identity of EFL student teachers at a Turkish state university in terms of the level of early teacher identity and its sub-dimensions, and its variation across certain demographic variables. The results showed three main points. First, EFL student teachers perceived a moderately high level of early teacher identity with the highest mean score obtained in SEBT. Second, results at the item level indicated that participants felt more confident in their understanding of what good teaching required than in taking on the responsibility of the classroom or engaging voluntarily proactively with children and adolescents. Thirdly, as far as demographic variables are concerned, gender, year of study and especially the time of the decision to become a teacher were found to be significant differentiating factors.

The moderately high level of early teacher identity in this study indicates that EFL student teachers had already formed a relatively positive self-image as future teachers. This finding is consistent with the view that professional identity formation starts before or during initial teacher education rather than only after student teachers enter the practicum or begin teaching professionally. Friesen and Besley (2013), for example, argue that student teachers may enter teacher education with pre-existing beliefs about what it means to be a teacher, shaped by earlier educational and life-course experiences, and that these initial understandings continue to develop through coursework and teaching practice. In this respect, the present finding supports the idea that early teacher identity can be empirically observed even before full professional entry into teaching. It also aligns with Stenberg et al. (2014), whose findings showed that beginning student teachers already held emerging teacher identities shaped by their beliefs about good teaching, pedagogical interaction and the orchestration of pupils’ learning processes.

The highest mean score in this research was observed in the SEBT sub-dimension, which indicates that participants' early teacher identity was particularly strong in terms of their confidence in becoming competent teachers. This finding is meaningful because self-efficacy is frequently treated as one of the central elements of teacher identity in quantitative studies. In their review of instruments measuring teacher identity, Hanna et al. (2019) identified self-efficacy as one of the major domains through which teacher identity has been operationalized, along with self-image, motivation, commitment, task perception, and job satisfaction. Similarly, Zeng and Liu (2024) included professional self-efficacy as one of the key dimensions of their teacher professional identity scale developed for pre-service teachers in English language education. Therefore, the relatively high self-efficacy score in the present study suggests that participants' early teacher identity was closely connected to their belief in their future professional competence. In the EFL teacher education context, this confidence may be particularly important, as becoming an English teacher requires not only pedagogical preparation but also confidence in language-related, classroom-related, and learner-oriented competencies (Taşdemir & Seferoğlu, 2022). This interpretation is also supported by Iwai (2025), who found that student teachers developed stronger teacher identity and self-efficacy through early field experience, particularly by gaining confidence in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management.

The item level finding added further depth to this interpretation. The participants' strongest endorsement was related to having a clear understanding of what being a good teacher means, while they also reported a strong sense of reward in helping children learn. This suggests that their early teacher identity was closely associated with a positive professional image and an affective appreciation of teaching (Friesen & Besley, 2013). This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that beginning student teachers' identities were shaped by beliefs about good teaching, pedagogical values, and supporting pupils' learning processes (Can & Karacan, 2021; Stenberg et al., 2014). However, the relatively lower scores on seeing oneself responsible for a group of children or adolescents and looking for opportunities to work with them suggest that the practical implementation of the teacher role may be less developed than the conceptual or affective dimensions of early teacher identity. This distinction is important because thinking of oneself as a teacher does not necessarily mean feeling fully prepared to assume authority and responsibility in the classroom. This finding aligns with Pillen et al. (2013) who point out that the transition from student to teacher can involve some tensions

related to responsibility, particularly when beginning teachers are expected to behave like professionals while negotiating their own competence and authority.

Turning to the demographic factors, the most pronounced differences were observed in relation to the time of decision to become a teacher. Participants who had decided to become teachers in high school or earlier reported the highest scores in the overall ETIM and all three sub-dimensions, whereas those who were undecided or not planning to work as teachers had the lowest scores. This finding suggests that early commitment to teaching may be closely associated with a stronger sense of early teacher identity. This can be explained by the possibility that students who make an earlier career decision may enter teacher education with more established images of themselves as future teachers and with stronger personal meanings attached to the profession (Friesen & Besley, 2013). In a similar vein, this finding of the present study also aligns with the literature in that early teacher identity is not formed only through university-based teacher education, but it may also be rooted in earlier career orientations and long-standing aspirations to teach (Stenberg et al., 2014).

In this study, gender produced a significant difference only in the overall ETIM scores and the NICT. This suggests the gender related difference in this sample was limited rather than consistent across all aspects of early teacher identity. The findings may be interpreted cautiously in relation to the social and affective dimensions of teaching, as teacher identity is shaped not only by professional knowledge but also by emotions, values and socially constructed expectations of the teaching role (Yuan & Lee, 2015). Similarly, it is argued that identity work of student teachers is closely related to emotions and agency, suggesting that affective orientations toward teaching may play an important role in how student teachers position themselves within the profession (Uştuk et al., 2025).

As another demographic variable, year of study showed a significant difference only in the NICT sub-dimension. This limited difference suggests that early teacher identity may not develop in a strictly linear way across grade levels. Rather than increasing steadily from the first year to the final year, identity development may depend more on the quality and type of experience student teachers encounter during teacher education. This interpretation is in line with a study in which EFL student teachers' identity development is described as a slow and recursive process shaped by interactions, conflicts and emotions in practice (Barahona & Toledo-Sandoval, 2025). Similarly, grade level alone may not be sufficient to explain differences in early teacher identity without considering the experiences offered within the teacher education program (Çelik et al., 2021).

Age, teaching experience, influential person on career choice and socioeconomic status did not produce statistically significant differences in early teacher identity. Among these variables, the non-significant result for teaching experience is noteworthy, as previous studies have emphasized the role of practicum and field-based experiences in shaping student teachers' professional identity (Iwai, 2025; Prabjandee, 2019; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). In the present study, however, teaching experience was broadly defined and included different forms such as private tutoring. Therefore, the quality and depth of experience, rather than its presence, may be more influential in early teacher identity development. These findings together indicate that compared to the broader background characteristics, early teacher identity was differentiated more clearly by students' professional orientation toward teaching.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This current study attempted to measure the early teacher identity level of the EFL student teachers at a Turkish state university. Also, the study investigated whether the early teacher identity differs according to the demographic variables of the participating students. Results indicated that students reported moderate to high levels of early teacher identity. With regard to the sub-dimensions, the mean score for SEBT was the highest, indicating that the participants were generally confident about their future ability to be teachers. The item-level findings further revealed that participants were aware of the characteristics of an effective teacher and viewed helping children learn as a rewarding experience. However, relatively lower scores on items related to classroom management and voluntary engagement with children or adolescents showed that some practical aspects of early teacher identity may still require further support.

The findings further revealed that early teacher identity varied significantly according to gender, year of study and especially the time of decision to become a teacher. The most significant differences were observed among participants who had decided to become teachers in high school or earlier, indicating that early professional commitment may be closely related to stronger early teacher identity. In contrast, no significant difference was observed based on the demographic characteristics including age, teaching experience, influential person in career choice and socioeconomic status. In short, the results suggest that early teacher identity is shaped not only by some demographic background but also by students' orientation toward teaching.

Based on these findings, teacher education programs may benefit from providing student teachers with structured opportunities to reflect on their developing teacher identities from the early years of undergraduate education. Since some participants appeared less confident regarding classroom responsibility and active engagement with children or adolescents, courses and field-based activities may include more guided experiences that help student teachers connect their future-oriented teacher selves with the practical realities of teaching. In addition, reflective tasks, early school observations, peer discussions, and voluntary teaching activities may support students in clarifying their professional goals and strengthening their sense of belonging to the teaching profession.

This study is not free from its limitations. Firstly, it was carried out in a single state university; thus, the results should be interpreted in the context of this institution and should not be generalized to all EFL student teachers in Türkiye. Next, the study used a cross-sectional survey design, which captures the picture of early teacher identity at one point in time but fails to show how identity changes longitudinally. Third, the data was based on self-reported responses, which may be influenced by participants' perceptions and social desirability bias. Future research may use longitudinal designs to shed light on the development of early teacher identity throughout teacher education trajectory of teacher candidates. Further studies may also use both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a better understanding of how EFL student teachers interpret their experiences, negotiate professional tensions and construct their identities as future teachers.

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