


Investigating Chinese University EFL Teachers' Professional Identity and Socio-Demographic Factors

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how teacher professional identity (TPI) is associated with socio-demographic factors. A quantitative approach was employed using questionnaire as the research instrument. The participants of the main study, 331 EFL teachers working in public and private Higher Education Institutions in Central China, were recruited using snowball sampling. The English Teacher Identity Measure (ETIM) was adopted to measure TPI level. Based on independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA, the 10 demographic factors, including gender, type of institution, age, educational level, academic title, length of service, EFL course type, leadership position, monthly income, and marital status were investigated. Findings indicate that educational level and leadership position could lead to significantly different TPI levels. The change patterns of TPI based on other factors are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

EFL Teachers, Professional Identity, Socio-Demographic Factors, TPI Level

INTRODUCTION

The concept of teacher professional identity (TPI) has emerged as a useful analytical lens in teacher education, gaining increased attention in the past three decades (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Cheung et al., 2015; Gracia et al., 2021; Li & Li, 2021; Liu & Xu, 2013; Nazari et al., 2021; Noonan, 2019; Richards, 2023; Song & Wei, 2007; Varghese et al., 2005; Zhang & Sun, 2023). Studies have revealed the correlation between TPI and various aspects of teachers' personal and professional lives (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Song, 2016; Yazan, 2018), as well as the effect of TPI on learners (Yazdani & Ghasedi, 2021).

Extant literature has documented myriad definitions of TPI from different theoretical perspectives. These include perspectives such as understanding “who I am as a teacher” (Beijaard et al., 2000), a positive evaluation of the teaching profession (Wei et al., 2013), the ways in which teachers make sense of themselves and the images they present in their situated institutional and sociocultural contexts (Yuan & Zhang, 2019), and the “theories, attitudes and beliefs that teachers have about themselves which are developed through their teaching careers as they interact with others” (Carlyon, 2016, p. 99).

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In this study, TPI is defined as the extent to which a teacher identifies with the teaching profession, encompassing the teacher's perceptions of themselves as an English teacher both in the present and the future (Yan et al., 2024).

Many studies have explored the development of teachers' professional identities, delving into TPI in relation to coursework participation (Menon, 2020; Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2023), mentor support (Izadinia, 2016), visiting scholar experience (Bao & Feng, 2022; Yang & Huang, 2022), and the transition from university to the teaching post (Seyri & Nazari, 2022; Stenberg & Maaranen, 2021; Wang, 2021). Additional studies have examined the association between TPI and teacher agency (Chávez et al., 2023; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018; Rosenfeld et al., 2022), as well as teacher emotion (Nichols et al., 2017; Teng, 2017; Wolff & De Costa, 2017). These studies are qualitative in nature.

Recently, there has been a notable shift toward the evaluation of TPI using quantitative or mixed-research methods (Canrinus et al., 2012; Hanna et al., 2019; Shi & Cheng, 2020; Xun & Zheng, 2015; Yan & Bava Harji, 2023). This trend is evident by the increasing studies assessing TPI levels (Cai, 2021; Haghighi Irani et al., 2020; Liu & Cai, 2021; Pu, 2021) and exploring relationships among TPI and other constructs (Dilek & Altas, 2022; Fu & Zhou, 2019; Yu & Zhou, 2021; Zarrinabadi et al., 2023).

While certain socio-demographic factors like age, gender, length of service, and educational level have been studied in relation to TPI levels (Ambusaidi & Alhosni, 2023; Gao & Liu, 2011; Jian, 2017; Mofrad, 2016; Tang, 2015), other factors like course type, marital status, leadership position, monthly income, and type of institution have received little attention. Considering this gap, this study aims to investigate the association between TPI and the 10 socio-demographic factors, addressing the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant different difference in TPI levels based on socio-demographic factors (gender, type of institution, age, educational level, academic title, length of service, EFL course type, leadership position, monthly income, and marital status)?
2. What is the association between TPI and socio-demographic factors?

CONTEXT OF STUDY

In the context of China as an EFL setting, opportunities for language learners to use English for daily social interactions are limited. Therefore, English education in China mostly relies on classroom instruction. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country are categorized into two types: public and private. These are differentiated by their sources of funding (government vs. private). All university students, irrespective of their field of study, are required to take English courses.

At the tertiary level, EFL courses are differentiated based on fields of study and programs, including three-year diploma programs, four-year bachelor's programs, master's programs, and PhD programs. For instance, EFL courses for English majors in undergraduate programs include courses like intensive reading, extensive reading, oral English, linguistics, literature, and translation theory and practice. In contrast, non-English majors at the undergraduate level are offered only two major courses—reading and writing, listening and speaking.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TPI is dynamic, relation-embedded, and context-dependent (Barahona & Toledo-Sandoval, 2022; Beijaard et al., 2004; Buchanan, 2015; Chen & Mensah, 2018; Day & Kington, 2008; Haghighi Irani et al., 2020; Huang & Wang, 2021). Researchers have delved into differences in TPI levels based on specific socio-demographic factors, such as gender and teaching experience. Tang (2015) revealed that the type of institution and length of service significantly impact TPI levels among Chinese

university EFL teachers, while gender, academic title, and educational level do not lead to significant differences. Doğan and Erdiller Yatmaz (2018) reported that educational level, gender, and position at work as statistically significant influencing factors for Turkish preschool teachers. In addition, Mofrad (2016) found that gender and teaching experience do not cause significant differences in Iranian English teachers' TPI levels. The mixed findings from these studies might be attributed to the various research contexts and samples.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Prior to collecting data, ethics approval was obtained from the research committee of SEGi University, Malaysia. Participants were informed that their participation in the survey was fully voluntary. In addition, participants were told that they had the right to withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, without facing any consequences. The data collection process used snowball sampling with the aid of the author's network of friends and the deans of the institution's English department.

The study involved 331 EFL teachers from HEIs in a provincial capital city in China. Of the participants, approximately 17% were male teachers, while 83% were female ($N = 276$). There were more teachers from private institutions (180) compared to public ones (151). Most of the participants (57.7%) were born in the 1980s, and a significant portion (83.4%) held a master's degree and had no leadership position (86.7%). Lecturers made up 45.9% of the population, followed by associate professors at 37.2%. More than half of the teachers (52.6%) were teaching courses for non-English majors. Most (65%) earned a monthly income between 4001 to 8000 RMB. Approximately 80% of the teachers were married with at least one child.

Instrument

The study employed a questionnaire as the primary instrument. The first section included 10 questions to elicit participants' socio-demographic information, including gender, age, educational level, academic title, length of service, EFL course type, type of institution, leadership position, monthly income, and marital status. The second section featured the English teacher identity measure (ETIM), a tool developed by Yan et al. (2024). The 19-item scale assessed four dimensions: (1) self-efficacy; (2) future perspective; (3) career perception; and (4) teacher belief. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree.

The Chinese version of ETIM was used to collect data, since Mandarin was the mother tongue for all participants. The reliability of this measuring scale was acceptable, with Cronbach alpha values of .953, .908, .899, and .798 for self-efficacy, teacher belief, career perception and future perspective. Confirmatory composite analysis was performed with 331 participants. According to Dash and Paul (2021), the model fit can be assessed using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). The achieved SRMR value of 0.139 fell within the acceptable value range of 0 to 1, indicating a favorable model fit. Convergent validity and discriminant validity were also established, with AVE > 0.5 and HTMT > 0.85. Given the results of the analyses for reliability and validity, the Chinese version of ETIM was found valid and reliable.

Results

The study's data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. The descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages of categorical variables, as well as the means and standard deviations of numeric variables, were calculated. Numerical variables were investigated using independent sample t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). When the statistically significant difference was found in one-way ANOVA, post hoc Tukey HSD or LSD tests were conducted for pairwise

comparisons. Independent sample t-tests were performed to compare TPI levels among female and male teachers, as well as teachers working in public and private universities.

TPI and Gender

Independent sample t-tests were performed to compare male and female teachers' levels of TPI. As seen in Table 1, the mean score for female teachers ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .532$) is higher than that of male teachers ($M = 3.99$, $SD = .708$), with a mean difference of 0.10. The Sig. value ($p = 0.041$) for Levene's test for equality of variances is less than 0.05, indicating that the assumption of equal variance has been violated. Thus, the second line information of the t-test table was used. The value in the Sig. (2-tailed) column ($p = 0.343$) is above 0.05, suggesting no significant difference between male and female teachers' TPI.

TPI and Type of Institution

Table 2 displays the TPI levels of teachers from private and public HEIs. The analysis revealed no significant difference in scores between teachers from public ($M = 4.06$, $SD = .563$) and private HEIs ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .569$; $t(329) = -.407$, $p = .684$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the mean (mean difference = $-.0254$, 95% CI : $-.148$ to $.975$) was very small (eta squared = $.0005$).

TPI and Age

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore the influence of age on TPI levels. As seen in Table 3, the summary table of the ANOVA output indicates that the Sig. value for Levene's test, based on the mean, is greater than 0.05 ($p = .992$), suggesting that the homogeneity of variance assumption has not been violated. The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in TPI levels for the five age groups: $F(4,326) = 1.418$, $p = .228$.

The mean TPI scores, listed in descending order, indicate that the teachers born in the 1950s scored the highest mean ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .560$), followed by the 1990s generation ($M = 4.14$, $SD = .608$), and the 1960s generation ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .540$). The 1970s generation recorded the lowest mean ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .536$). Notably, both the scores for the 1970s ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .536$) and 1980s ($M = 4.05$, $SD = .562$) were lower than the total mean score ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .566$).

Table 1. Comparison of TPI levels by gender

Gender	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Difference	95% <i>CI</i>	
									Lower	Upper
				.041	-.955	66.709	.343	-.096	-.297	.105
Male	55	3.99	.708							
Female	276	4.09	.532							

Note: The *t* and *df* were adjusted because variances were not equal (Leven's test for equality of variances ($p = .041$) was less than 0.05).

Table 2. Comparison of TPI levels by type of institution

Gender	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Difference	95% <i>CI</i>	
									Lower	Upper
				.409	-.407	329	.684	-.0254	-.148	.975
Public	151	4.06	.563							
Private	180	4.09	.569							

Table 3. ANOVA summary table for comparing TPI levels by age

Year of Birth	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>df</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
					<i>Between Groups</i>	<i>Within Groups</i>		
TPI				.992	4	326	1.418	.228
1950s	6	4.53	.560					
1990s	55	4.14	.608					
1960s	23	4.13	.540					
1980s	191	4.05	.562					
1970s	56	4.02	.536					
Total	331	4.08	.566					

TPI and Educational Level

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of educational level on levels of TPI. As seen in Table 4, the Sig. value for Levene's test based on mean was greater than 0.05 ($p = .603$), showing that the homogeneity of variance assumption has not been violated. There was a statistically significant difference in TPI levels among the three groups: $F(1.334, .314) = 4.252, p = .015$.

As seen in Table 5, the Tukey HSD test results indicate a significant difference in TPI levels between the master's and PhD groups ($p = .011$). However, no significant difference was observed

Table 4. ANOVA summary table for educational level

Educational Level	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>df</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
					<i>Between Groups</i>	<i>Within Groups</i>		
				.603	1.334	.314	4.252	.015
PhD	27	4.37	.560					
Bachelor's	28	4.10	.477					
Master's	276	4.04	.568					
Total	331	4.08	.566					

Table 5. Post hoc test results for different educational levels

Tukey HSD		Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% CI	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Bachelor's	Master's	0.6057	.11110	.849	-.2010	.3222
	PhD	-.26728	.15109	.182	-.6230	.0885
Master's	Bachelor's	-.06057	.11110	.849	-.3222	.2010
	PhD	-.32785*	.11296	.011	-.5938	-.0619
PhD	Bachelor's	.26728	.15109	.182	-.0885	.6230
	Master's	.32785*	.11296	.011	.0619	.5938

Note: The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

between the bachelor's and PhD groups ($p = .182$) or between the bachelor's and master's groups ($p = .849$).

TPI and Academic Title

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of academic title on TPI levels. Participants were divided into four groups: Group 1 (teaching assistant); Group 2 (lecturer); Group 3 (associate professor); and Group 4 (professor). Table 6 shows the summary of the ANOVA output, revealing that the Sig. value for Levene's test, based on the mean, is greater than 0.05 ($p = .946$), suggesting that the homogeneity of variance assumption has not been violated. The analysis indicates no statistically significant difference in TPI levels among the four groups: $F(3, 327) = 1.536, p = .205$.

Professors scored the highest TPI score ($M = 4.35, SD = .458$), followed by teaching assistants ($M = 4.10, SD = .583$), and associate professors ($M = 4.08, SD = .593$). Lecturers recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 4.04, SD = .545$), which was also lower than the overall mean score ($M = 4.076, SD = .566$).

TPI and Length of Service

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore the influence of length of service on TPI levels. Participants were divided into nine groups according to their length of service. As presented in Table 7, the summary table of the ANOVA output shows that the Sig. value for Levene's test, based on the mean, was greater than 0.05 ($p = .315$), suggesting that the homogeneity of variance assumption has not been violated. The analysis indicates there was no statistically significant difference in TPI levels for the nine groups: $F(8, 322) = 1.449, p = .175$.

The mean TPI scores for teachers with varying length of service were listed in descending order. Specifically, teachers who served between 19 to 21 years registered the highest mean ($M = 4.25, SD = .538$). Teachers who served less than one year ($M = 3.93, SD = .835$) and teachers who served 16 to 18 years ($M = 3.88, SD = .738$) recorded the lowest score.

TPI and EFL Course Type

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore the association of EFL course type with TPI levels. Participants were divided into seven groups according to the major courses they were teaching. As shown in Table 8, the summary table of the ANOVA output reveals that the Sig. value for Levene's test, based on the mean, was greater than 0.05 ($p = .951$), suggesting that the homogeneity of variance assumption has not been violated. The analysis indicates there was no statistically significant difference in TPI levels for the seven groups: $F(6, 324) = .558, p = .764$.

Table 6. ANOVA summary table for academic title

Academic Title	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>df</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
					<i>Between Groups</i>	<i>Within Groups</i>		
				.946	3	327	1.536	.205
Professor	16	4.35	.458					
Teaching Assistant	40	4.10	.583					
Assoc. Prof.	123	4.08	.593					
Lecturer	152	4.04	.545					
Total	331	4.076	.566					

Table 7. ANOVA summary table for length of service

Length of Service	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>df</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
					<i>Between Groups</i>	<i>Within Groups</i>		
				.315	8	322	1.449	.175
19-21 years	25	4.25	.538					
4-6 years	45	4.18	.459					
1-3 years	24	4.16	.599					
10-12 years	52	4.14	.417					
13-15 years	46	4.07	.540					
Over 21 years	47	4.04	.520					
7-9 years	32	4.03	.539					
Within 1 year	17	3.93	.835					
16-18 years	43	3.88	.738					
Total	331	4.08	.566					

Table 8. ANOVA summary table for EFL course type

EFL Course Type	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>df</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
					<i>Between Groups</i>	<i>Within Groups</i>		
Training Course	6	4.33	.573	.951	6	324	.558	.764
English Majors (Postgraduate)	7	4.32	.631					
English Majors (Bachelor's)	93	4.11	.580					
Non-English Majors (Bachelor's)	174	4.052	.558					
ESP Course	24	4.051	.528					
3-Year Diploma Course	15	4.04	.555					
Other	12	4.03	.673					
Total	331	4.08	.566					

Teachers who were teaching English training courses scored the highest mean ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .573$), while teachers who taught three-year diploma courses ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .555$) and teachers who taught other courses ($M = 4.03$, $SD = .673$) recorded the lowest score. Notably, the scores for ESP teachers ($M = 4.052$, $SD = .528$) was slightly higher than those teaching non-English majors ($M = 4.051$, $SD = .558$). With a mean difference of only .001, both were below the mean total score ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .566$).

TPI and Leadership Position

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether teachers with senior, medium, and no leadership positions displayed significantly different TPI levels.

Table 9 presents the summary table of the ANOVA output. The Sig. value for Levene's test, based on the mean, was greater than 0.05 ($p = .558$), suggesting that the homogeneity of variance assumption has not been violated. The analysis indicates a statistically significant difference in TPI levels among the three groups: $F(2, 328) = 3.876$, $p = .022$.

Table 9. ANOVA summary table for comparing TPI levels by leadership position

Leadership Position	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>df</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
					<i>Between Groups</i>	<i>Within Groups</i>		
				.558	2	328	3.876	.022
Senior Leader	7	4.43	.487					
Mid-Level Leader	37	4.26	.695					
Teachers Without Position	287	4.04	.543					
Total	331	4.08	.566					

Table 10 shows the outcomes of the post hoc test using the LSD test. A significant difference was observed ($p = .026$) between teachers with no leadership position ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .543$) and middle-level leaders ($M = 4.26$, $SD = .695$).

TPI and Monthly Income

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate the link between monthly income and TPI levels, with participants divided into five groups. As seen in Table 11, the Sig. value for Levene's test based on the mean was greater than 0.05 ($p = .164$), suggesting that the homogeneity of variance assumption was not violated. Although no statistically significant difference in TPI levels were observed between the five groups: $F(4, 326) = 1.023$, $p = .395$, it is interesting to note that the results indicate a positive correlation: the higher the income, the higher the TPI level.

TPI and Marital Status

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of marital status on TPI levels. Participants were divided into three groups according to their marital status and whether they have children (Group 1: Unmarried; Group 2: Married with no child/children; Group 3: Married with child/children).

Table 12 shows the summary table of ANOVA output, with the Sig. value for Levene's test based on the mean greater than 0.05 ($p = .524$), suggesting that the homogeneity of variance assumption has not been violated. There was no statistically significant difference in TPI levels for the three groups: $F(2, 328) = 1.999$, $p = .137$. Regarding mean scores, teachers who were married with no children recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.20$, $SD = .589$), followed by teachers who were married with children ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .549$). Unmarried teachers displayed the lowest TPI levels ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .649$).

Table 10. LSD test results for different leadership positions

LSD		Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% CI	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Regular Teacher	Mid-Level Leader	-.21837*	.09796	.026	-.4111	-.0257
	Senior-Level Leader	-.38238	.21453	.076	-.8044	.0397
Mid-Level Leader	Regular Teacher	.21837*	.09796	.026	.0257	.4111
	Senior-Level Leader	-.16401	.23115	.478	-.6187	.2907
Senior-Level Leader	Regular Teacher	.38238	.21453	.076	-.0397	.8044
	Mid-Level Leader	.16401	.23115	.478	-.2907	.6187

Note: The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 11. ANOVA summary table for monthly income

Monthly Income	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>df</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
					<i>Between Groups</i>	<i>Within Groups</i>		
				.164	4	326	1.023	.395
Over 16000 RMB	3	4.61	.512					
12000-16000 RMB	9	4.21	1.12					
8001-12000 RMB	95	4.11	.524					
4001-8000 RMB	215	4.05	.550					
Below 4000 RMB	9	4.01	.634					
Total	331	4.08	.566					

Table 12. ANOVA summary table for marital status

Marital Status	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>df</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
					<i>Between Groups</i>	<i>Within Groups</i>		
				.524	2	328	1.999	.137
Married without Children	31	4.20	.589					
Married with Children	264	4.08	.549					
Unmarried	36	3.93	.649					
Total	331	4.08	.566					

DISCUSSION

On the whole, this study confirms prior findings that TPI is influenced by various personal, professional, and contextual factors (Bukor, 2015; McNaughton & Billot, 2016; Pennington & Richards, 2016). In terms of gender, echoing previous studies (Jia, 2018; Mofrad, 2016; Ye, 2014), this research also found no significant difference between male and female teachers. However, female teachers displayed higher TPI levels compared to the male teachers.

Regarding the type of institution, this study shows approximately the same TPI level between teachers working in public and private HEIs; however, the score is slightly lower for teachers from public universities than private universities. This is consistent with prior findings that indicate a higher TPI level among private institutions than public institutions (Liang & Su, 2011). One explanation might be that private university teachers work as contracted personnel and, therefore, face more competition, continuous change, and job insecurity. According to Doğan and Erdiller Yatmaz (2018), job insecurity could negatively impact TPI. On the other hand, they must demonstrate higher self-efficacy against a more competitive working environment as compared to public HEIs. The two factors offset each other. Thus, it is not surprising that the two groups of teachers recorded very close TPI levels.

In addition, the findings revealed that the 1950s generation recorded the highest TPI, followed by teachers born in the 1990s and 1960s. Notably, teachers born in the 1970s recorded the lowest TPI, and the 1980s generation recorded the second lowest. This finding is inconsistent with prior findings suggesting that TPI increases with age, particularly among preschool teachers (Xu & Xu, 2018; Zhang & Ye, 2021). This discrepancy might be due to the different eras in which various generations of teachers grew, with TPI influenced by the macro environment of a certain era. Another plausible explanation might be that teachers from the 1970s and 1980s generations, being middle-aged, might

face the challenge of balancing work and family. As per Yang et al. (2022), work-family conflict can lead to decreased professional identity.

Furthermore, this study reveals that individuals with PhDs recorded significantly higher TPI scores than those with master's degrees. This finding is inconsistent with a prior finding of no significant differences in TPI levels among math and science teachers from public schools in Oman (Ambusaidi & Alhosni, 2023). It is, however, aligned with findings that TPI levels increase with higher educational attainment among private preschool teachers (Xu & Xu, 2018) and university teachers (Fang & Mao, 2008). The mixed findings might result from variations in regions and contexts where the participants reside. Within the context of this study, the stringent entry requirements for pursuing a PhD program may contribute to the observed pattern. The competition for PhD programs appears to be even more fierce than other provinces in China, resulting to a cohort of PhD holders who tend to be more competent in their professional skills. Additionally, the elevated TPI levels among PhD holders may be attributed to more favorable professional development opportunities, including more access to various learning opportunities like visiting scholar experiences.

The study also shows that lecturers recorded the lowest TPI scores, while professors recorded the highest. The result is consistent with Zeng's (2022) finding that both the high academic title group and the low academic title group scored significantly higher TPI scores than the medium academic title group among university counselors. It also concurs with Fang and Mao's (2008) finding that teaching assistants and professors achieved significantly higher TPI scores than associate professors and lecturers. However, different findings are also reported. For example, two studies concluded that the higher the academic title, the higher the TPI level (Jin, 2015; L. Zhang & Ye, 2021). The mixed results might be attributed to the level of teaching. It is notable that studies with similar findings were conducted in universities, whereas studies with different findings were conducted in non-university settings. These mixed findings may be better interpreted in relation to the university promotion policies, which often feature teachers' academic competence. It is relatively easier to be promoted from teaching assistant to lecturer. However, for higher ranks, most universities require research outputs rather than teaching excellence.

In accordance with Katz's (1972) description of the survival stage and consistent with previous empirical studies that highlight the challenges faced by beginning teachers (Pillen et al., 2013; Seyri & Nazari, 2022), teachers who serve less than one year recorded the second lowest score. However, after the first year of teaching experience, there is a marked increase, positioning this group as the third highest. This finding lends support to Katz's (1972) model, which describes the consolidation stage as beginning at approximately one year after the survival stage.

Contrary to Katz's (1972) model, which describes the third or fourth year as a stage of stagnation, it is interesting and encouraging to see that teachers who serve four to six years of service recorded higher TPI than those with one to three years. This finding might suggest that teachers with increased length of service become more adept at teaching, which corroborates Huberman's (1993) categorization of the four to six year period as the professional stabilization stage. After the sixth year, while teachers with four to six of service scored the second highest, the TPI scores for teachers serving seven to nine years of service decreased considerably. These findings bring awareness to the critical transitional nature of the sixth year in a teacher's career trajectory, potentially indicating a juncture where burnout or a fading of passion may manifest. While Berliner (1988) hypothesized the fifth year as a turning point, this study identifies the sixth year, possibly due to the increased demand of teaching EFL at the tertiary level.

Another finding is that teachers with 16 to 18 years of service scored the lowest TPI compared to other groups, suggesting they may face specific challenges that require attention. Teachers with 19 to 21 years of service scored the highest; however, those with more than 21 years of service scored much lower. This might imply that the 21st year is another critical juncture, with teachers serving more than 21 years facing new challenges in their career.

Similar to Wang and Wang's (2012) finding that special education teachers' TPI is negatively affected by students' low cognitive ability, this study shows that diploma course teachers scored the lowest TPI. This could be ascribed to the varying entry requirements for different programs. Students enrolled in diploma programs enter the university with the least academic requirements, causing challenges for teachers of EFL diploma courses who must contend with students who are less prepared academically and less motivated to learn.

Additionally, the finding that ESP teachers scored the second lowest TPI score aligns with studies by Cai (2021) and Liu and Cai (2021) indicating low TPI scores for ESP teachers. The result is not surprising given that ESP calls for interdisciplinary knowledge to meet the specific needs of learners, making it a demanding field for ESP teachers compared to other course instructors (Luo & Garner, 2017). A plausible explanation could be that ESP teachers feel inadequately prepared to deliver content knowledge because their training focuses on language instruction.

In line with Zhang and Ye's (2021) finding that TPI increases with higher leadership positions, this study revealed significantly higher TPI levels among middle-level leaders than regular teachers. The result is not surprising, as it is logical to expect that teachers in leadership positions generally have higher competence and a heightened sense of responsibility. On the other hand, their competence and sense of responsibility might have helped them to secure success in an administrative position.

The finding that the higher the income is associated with higher levels of TPI is consistent with previous studies on preschool teachers (Liang & Su, 2011) and primary and middle school teachers (Jin, 2015). The result is consistent with the qualitative case study by Xiong and Gao (2020), which highlighted material rewards as a significant influencing factor of TPI. The finding also agrees with previous research finding that higher the satisfaction with income is correlated with higher TPI scores among university counselors (Zeng, 2022) and preschool teachers (Zhang & Ye, 2021).

Echoing Zhang and Ye's (2021) finding that married preschool teachers displayed higher TPI levels than unmarried teachers, this study indicates that married teachers recorded higher TPI levels than unmarried teachers. A plausible explanation for this could be that the marriage and family life contribute to a better understanding of the teaching profession or an improved outlook on students.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To summarize, among the 10 identified factors, educational level and leadership position were found to cause significant differences in TPI levels. Although the remaining eight socio-demographic factors did not cause significant differences in TPI levels, an analysis of TPI change patterns revealed valuable insights, as outlined in Table 13.

Table 13. TPI and socio-demographic factors

Factors	TPI Levels
Gender	Female > Male
Age	1950s > 1990s > 1960s > 1980s > 1970s
Educational Level	PhD > Bachelor's > Master's
Academic Title	Professor > Teaching Assistant > Assoc. Prof. > Lecturer
Length of Service	19-21 years > 4-6 years > 1-3 years > 10-12 years > 13-15 years > over 21 years > 7-9 years > within 1 year > 16-18 years
EFL Course Type	Training course > Postgraduate course for English majors > Undergraduate course for English majors > Undergraduate course for non-English majors > ESP course > Diploma course > Other
Type of Institution	Private > Public
Leadership Position	Senior-level > Mid-level > Regular teacher
Monthly Income	Over 16000 RMB > 12000-16000 RMB > 8001-12000 RMB > 4001-8000 RMB > Below 4000 RMB
Marital Status	Married without children > Married with children > Unmarried

In summary, this study presents new insights into teacher development stages, highlighting the critical nature of the first year in which teachers, especially those with less than one year of experience, may benefit from more guidance and support in terms of teaching skills and understanding of the profession. The findings suggest a two-stage growth pattern. The first stage spans the first one to three years and the second stage spans four to six years of service. The sixth year marks a turning point, as enthusiasm towards the profession appears to diminish. Another notable turning point is the 21st year of service.

In light of these findings, it is suggested that teacher management and educators should provide targeted support to teachers during the first year of teaching, as well as to lecturers with 16 to 18 years of experience and the diploma course teachers. It is also suggested that teachers should be encouraged to pursue doctoral degrees.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations must be considered. First, the snowball sampling technique introduces a major limitation, as it may jeopardize the generalizability of the findings. Second, the issue of social desirability cannot be completely ruled out, especially in the context of China's hierarchical society. The data collection process involved the aid of deans from their subordinates, which may introduce a level of social desirability bias.

This study follows a quantitative approach; therefore, qualitative data was not available for a more in-depth interpretation of certain quantitative findings. Future researchers are encouraged to adopt explanatory sequential design, incorporating qualitative data collection methods. This approach would promote a richer exploration and interpretation of the quantitative findings.

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