



Discursive Construction of Identity Boundaries: Non-native English Teachers' Positionality in Relation to Learners

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A concern with identity has become remarkably widespread since the 1990s. An immense amount of research has been carried out to investigate the construct of identity, but few studies have been done to explore the construct of identity boundary, even less on the discursive construction of identity boundary. To fill this gap, this study explored how Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers construct identity boundaries between themselves and learners discursively. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 58 Iranian EFL teachers (31 male and 27 female) to identify how they demarcate the boundaries between themselves and learners. Five significant themes emerged from the data analysis: teachers' knowledge and power as indicators of their identity, setting boundaries by drawing up classroom rules, creating boundaries and not walls, demarcating boundaries both discursively and non-discursively, and establishing boundaries more implicitly than explicitly. The findings indicate that four categories could be conceivable with regard to teachers' identity boundary setting: discursive, explicit; discursive, implicit; non-discursive, explicit; and non-discursive, implicit. As the majority of the teachers in this study reported that they tended to demarcate their identity boundaries more implicitly and non-discursively, the implication might be that Iranian EFL teachers prefer to create the identity boundaries more indirectly so as not to cause any negative affective influences on their students.

Keywords: identity, identity boundary, discursive construction, non-native teachers, EFL learners

Introduction

Since the 1950s and 1960s, a concern with identity has become widespread and “this concern increased markedly through the 1980s and 1990s, to include not only individual but also collective forms of identity” (Bendle, 2002, p. 2). The construct of identity has been studied extensively in the humanities and social sciences (Bendle, 2002), education (Gee, 2000), and applied linguistics (Block, 2007; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Clarke (2008) argued that forming identities is at the heart of learning to become a teacher. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) redefined teacher identity as “both unitary and multiple, both continuous and discontinuous, and both individual and social” (p. 308).

As Ashforth (2001) pointed out, while elaborating the social identity theory (SIT), individuals categorize themselves and others to structure their social environment and to locate themselves and others

within it. Brown (2000) stated that SIT, which was developed by the psychologist Tajfel and his colleagues, is based on the assumption that identity is formed mainly through group memberships and that people strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity by drawing largely on favorable comparisons between the ingroup and relevant outgroups. In this way, they underline the ingroup as the one to which they belong and demarcate themselves from the outgroup which they regard to be as “outsider” and different from their ingroup (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

This identity demarcation can be observed in the teaching profession. Teachers may engage in comparing themselves with other teachers, namely the same community of practice (CoP). They might also engage in demarcating boundaries between themselves and learners who belong to a different CoP. Clarke (2008) pointed out that we are identified as much by who we are not, so CoPs have explicit and implicit markers of inclusion and exclusion, which are called “boundary objects and border practices” (p. 35). Alsup (2006) maintained that it is essential for teachers to engage in borderland discourse to develop a professional identity. In effect, teachers may attempt to establish and maintain their professional identity by enhancing their ingroup bonds with other teachers and setting some identity boundaries with their most relevant outgroups, i.e. learners. For this purpose, Miller Marsh (2002) advocated the explicit teaching of teachers about the discourses through which they might create positive social and academic identities.

Against this backdrop, one of the main controversial issues is how teachers demarcate those boundaries between themselves as teachers and their learners discursively, i.e., how they signal to their learners discursively that we are teachers and you are our learners, thereby establishing their own position as teachers. Another closely related issue is whether teachers set the boundaries between their own identities and those of learners non-discursively. The next related issue is whether teachers establish discursive identity boundaries by using explicit or implicit markers of inclusion with other teachers and exclusion from learners. To address these under-researched issues, the purpose of this study was to explore the construct of teacher identity boundary and its discursive construction from the perspective of Iranian EFL teachers.

Literature Review

As Lasky (2005) put it, “Teacher professional identity is how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others. It is a construct of professional self that evolves over career stages (p. 91).” Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) differentiated identity-in-discourse from identity-in-practice. They argued that poststructuralist theories present a concept of teacher identity-in-discourse whereas social or group theories present a concept of teacher identity-in-practice. They maintained that in “identity-in-practice” language teacher identity is the outcome of teachers’ practices in relation to a group while in “identity-in-discourse” teacher agency is discursively constructed, mainly through language, and is focused primarily on critical reflexivity. Haniford (2010) claimed that experienced teachers construct teacher identities partly through positioning themselves in relation to their students, other teachers, administrators, and parents. In the present study, we explored how teachers positioned themselves discursively in relation to their students. Indeed, teachers’ “identity-in-discourse” as a debatable issue as to how they constitute their agency discursively has been the major focus of this study.

De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg (2006) identified and discussed three approaches to the study of discourse and identity. The first is *social constructionism*, which they claim is the most essential perspective vis-à-vis the concept of identity. Identity, according to this approach, is a process which “(1) takes place in concrete ... interactional occasions, (2) yields constellations of identities instead of individual, monolithic constructs, (3) does not simply emanate from the individual, but results from processes of negotiation, ..., and (4) entails discursive work” (p. 2). As the second approach, *membership categorization analysis* movement is the approach in which identity construction is linked to categorical features for inclusion or exclusion of self and others and to their identification with typical activities. Finally, *anti-essentialist vision of the self* purports that there is no given or natural feature marking

membership of a social category or group. Of the three approaches, *membership categorization analysis* is the most relevant to the present study. This approach defines categories for inclusion and/or exclusion of self and others. In the present study, self refers to teachers and others to learners as two distinct CoPs. The less addressed issue is how teachers define their identities and identity boundaries discursively through inclusion with the community of teachers and exclusion from that of learners.

The term “identity boundaries” has been conceptualized by a few researchers. Sundaramurthy and Kreiner (2008) defined boundaries as “the physical, temporal, and/or cognitive limits or perimeters that define entities as separate from one another and that define components within entities” (p. 416). They stated that boundary theory explicates the processes through which individuals and communities create and maintain these boundaries. They further pointed out that boundary theory has been applied in various disciplines including political science, anthropology, and psychology. However, it seems that this theory has been used less frequently in teacher education and especially vis-à-vis the notion of identity. Introducing the identity boundary notions of identity intrusion, distance, and balance as different representations of identity boundary, Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006) proposed a perspective in which identity is co-constructed at the interface of identity boundaries. Thus, any individual constitutes one of two parties involved in the interactional co-construction of identity. In fact, the same perspective was adopted in the present study. Nevertheless, whereas Kreiner et al. (2006) worked at the interface of individual and organizational identities, we chose to work at the interface of teachers’ and learners’ discursive identity boundaries. An essential component in identity construction is the presence of another person or other people from whom one may distinguish him/herself (Davies, 1989; Hall, 1996).

Teachers’ (discursive) construction of identity and identity boundaries has been explored in a number of studies (Cook, 2009; Gibson, 2015; Haniford, 2010; Knapp, Smith, Kreiner, Sundaramurthy, & Barton, 2013; Trent, 2010; Trent & DeCoursey, 2011). Cook (2009) investigated the experiences of 10 first-year English teachers (two males and eight females). Some themes such as teachers’ negotiating their authoritative role in the class and understanding how and in what ways to set boundaries with their students emerged. Cook called the latter *Creating Boundaries but not Walls*. Most teachers in her study, who had gone through three in-depth interviews, talked about “having to carefully balance their relationships with students by creating boundaries that are flexible, sustainable, and reasonable” (p. 284). Cook noted that negotiating boundaries with students is not only a professional but also a personal concern. She further noted that boundary setting is a double-edged sword for novice teachers as they need to maintain a professional distance despite their connection to students’ lives outside of class.

Trent and DeCoursey (2011) also explored how one novice group of English language teachers from the Chinese mainland crossed the boundaries between their experiences as students in mainland China and as pre-service teachers. Trent and DeCoursey, having examined the participants’ discursive and participative practices through semi-structured interviews, concluded that if Chinese students are to be employed as teachers, local school authorities should ensure that their practices of teaching in Hong Kong schools do not impede the construction of their preferred teacher identities.

Knapp et al. (2013) examined the ways in which individuals set boundaries in family businesses. They interviewed 44 individuals utilizing an inductive, qualitative approach. They found that organizational members create and manage their individual and organizational identity boundaries by using 13 identity work tactics, labeled under the rubric of social boundary management. Knapp et al. categorized those identity work tactics into *first-order concepts* (such as “adapting conversation” and “emphasizing domains”) and after a secondary analysis into *second-order themes* (such as “managing encounters” and “importing values”).

In a case study of one teacher candidate, Haniford (2010) analyzed teachers’ written plans and portfolios to demonstrate the process of discursive construction of teacher identity. She argued that teacher candidates set their identity boundaries with students through various discourses to which they have access such as their teacher education programs, their personal histories, and numerous other discourses in their personal lives. The most obvious finding that emerged from this study was that “this teacher candidate positioned herself differently over time in relation to discourses from her teacher

education programme about the importance of using detailed knowledge of students to guide planning and instruction” (p. 987).

Trent (2010) also analyzed how teachers constructed their identities as teachers discursively. He investigated six pre-service English language teachers in Hong Kong. Employing a qualitative approach, he tried to gain an in-depth understanding of how the teachers' identities were constructed through semi-structured interviews. The findings of his study revealed that those teachers held rigid perceptions about mutually exclusive kinds of teachers and teaching approaches. These perceptions were challenged when the teachers reflected on their own enactment of teacher identity. This study has implications for teacher education programs that attempt to provide teachers with not only educational theories and instructional practices but also the information requisite for constituting a teacher's identity.

Gibson (2015) explored 18 pre-service teachers' professional identities drawing on the poststructural social theory and a Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis. Through four one-hour focus group discussions, Gibson meticulously examined the special ways in which the pre-service teachers used a variety of discourses to constitute their professional identities discursively and to speak about children's images and quality in early childhood. The findings revealed the participants' employment of a range of competing discourses available to them and from elsewhere to describe the job of teaching young children. Their competing and colliding discourses helped produce the identity of pre-service teachers.

Besides the studies outlined above, some other lines of research have investigated various issues concerning identity. This body of research shed light on, inter alia, teachers' identity boundaries between teacher training and their initial practice as teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011), identity markers in work meeting talk (Fasulo & Zucchermaglio, 2002), the discursive construction of identity through narratives (Watson, 2009), narrative identities of EFL teachers (Azar, Pishghadam, Hashemi, & Adel, 2012), and the discursive malleability of identity (LaDousa, 2006). However, the review of these studies on the discursive construction of identity and identity boundaries indicates that almost no study has dealt with the particular notion of discursive identity boundaries. Therefore, this study sought to bridge the gap in the literature by exploring how teachers set the boundaries between themselves and learners discursively in an Iranian EFL context. For this purpose, the following research question was addressed: How do Iranian EFL teachers demarcate identity boundaries between themselves and learners discursively?

Method

Participants

Fifty-eight Iranian EFL teachers, 31 male and 27 female, participated in this study. Convenience method of sampling was employed to select these teachers based on their availability and their consent to participate in this study. Teachers' teaching experience ranged from 6 to 17 years, with the average of 11 years. Forty-eight teachers' field of study at university was teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), with only 10 teachers majoring in English language and literature. The teachers taught English at universities, high schools, or language institutes. The language institute teachers taught courses up to the high-intermediate level.

Instrumentation

Having reviewed the related literature on identity in general and identity boundaries in particular, the researchers developed six interview questions to elicit the required data for the purpose of this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers in an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' perspectives on their discursive identity boundaries with students.

Out of the six questions utilized to elicit the requisite data, the first question asked what made the position of the teacher different from that of the learners in the classroom. The second question asked if teachers ever negotiate boundaries with their students. What teachers say to distance themselves as teachers from the learners was the focus of the third question. What teachers say when a learner wants to challenge their identity and position as teachers was explored in the fourth question. The fifth question asked if teachers ever use any jargon in class which might distance them as teachers from learners. Finally, the sixth question asked teachers what the learners usually say to them to show that they are teachers as different from the learners. It should be noted that each question was aimed at exploring one aspect of the way teachers demarcate their identity boundaries discursively. The researchers came up with these dimensions by reviewing the related literature.

Data Collection

The second researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the 58 teachers individually, in which six questions were utilized as elicitation prompts to have teachers express themselves regarding their identity boundaries with learners. The interviews lasted from 10 to 20 minutes. All the interview sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed for data analysis purposes. Fifty interviews were carried out face to face, but the other eight were conducted over the phone. All the interviews were carried out in English.

With less experienced teachers, a warm-up session was held before the main interview session to describe the general and specific purposes of the study and to answer the teachers' questions about the issue of discursive identity boundary, which was rather vague to them. In the warm-up session before the main interview, it was expounded that this study intended to explore how teachers set the boundaries between themselves and learners discursively. First, the notion of identity was defined to them as how we see ourselves, who we are, and the qualities and attitudes that a person or group of people have, distinguishing them from other people. Second, the concept of boundary was explained as the distance teachers might perceive between themselves and learners as two distinct communities of practice. Finally, it was expounded to teachers that the main purpose of the interview was to find out how teachers demarcate their identity boundaries with their learners discursively.

Ethical considerations were adopted in collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data. For instance, before the interview sessions, the participants were amply informed about the purpose of this study and the fact that the results of this study would be used for research purposes only. All the participant teachers had given their consent to be interviewed and all of them were cognizant of the fact that the interview sessions were recorded. Furthermore, they were reassured that all the information collected via recording interviews would be kept confidential and private. They were also assured that their identities would not be disclosed and pseudonyms would be used to code and later refer to the teachers.

Data Analysis

First, all the audio-recordings of the interview sessions were transcribed using Microsoft Word. Then all the transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews were perused by the researchers a couple of times and qualitative data analysis was employed to find any recurrent themes and patterns indicating the ways in which Iranian EFL teachers demarcated the boundaries between themselves and learners. Axial coding was used to examine, compare, contrast, and classify the data to gain the broad categories and themes. All analyses and then interpretations of the data were done in a recursive, iterative manner (Dörnyei, 2007). As the transcripts of the interviews were reviewed a couple of times, tentative categories and salient themes of potential relevance to answering the research question were constituted from the data rather than from any preconceived hypotheses. In fact, in line with Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), axial coding was used in the process of relating different categories and concepts to each other, using a combination of inductive and deductive thinking.

Findings

The main purpose of this study was to explore how Iranian EFL teachers demarcate the boundaries between themselves and learners discursively. As revealed by the content analysis of the interview transcripts, five major themes emerged: (a) teachers' knowledge and power as indicators of identity; (b) setting boundaries by drawing up classroom rules; (c) creating boundaries and not walls; (d) demarcating boundaries both discursively and non-discursively; and (e) establishing boundaries more implicitly than explicitly. Each theme, in conjunction with the relevant interview excerpts, is described below.

Teachers' Knowledge and Power as Indicators of Identity

When teachers were asked what makes the position of a teacher different from that of the learners in a classroom, 50 out of 58 referred to teachers' knowledge and power as indicators of their identity in class. For instance, in the following excerpt, Sara regards transferring her knowledge in her classes as the main identity marker when she was a novice teacher:

Excerpt 1:

Teacher knows something that learners don't know. Maybe this is the first thing that is important and which makes a difference between the identity of the learner and teacher in the class. In fact, transferring the knowledge, I myself when I was a novice teacher, I tried to focus on this to show that I know more than my students. But when I gained more experience, I think I tried to equalize my status in the classroom.

She goes on to explain that, after years of teaching experience, she thinks that teachers should share the things they know with their students and try to learn things from them in non-threatening ways.

In addition, Roya, believing that "teachers' status is normally higher than students," considers teachers' knowledge and power as indicators of their positions in their classrooms. In the following excerpt, Maryam, who has 17 years of teaching experience, also refers to the authoritative role of teachers:

Excerpt 2:

I think all the teachers in classrooms are the leaders. And they go to the class situation with their own special rights. Somehow, they are the controller of the level and teaching process. At the same time, they are the mediator of everything happening in class situation. As you arrive in the classroom, all the students will accept you as the leader of the situation and the controller of the things.

In the above excerpt, Maryam states that the students already have in mind a sort of preconceived idea of the teacher's position and their own positions in class. Amin also reports that in most teacher training courses, the trainers tell the teacher trainees that they should be "the boss" in their classes. However, he argues that:

Excerpt 3:

But I can't. My character is not like that to be so authoritative. You have to be authoritative but not in a bossy way. In my classes, the position that makes a difference that I am the teacher and they are the learners is that I know things they don't, and they need me to learn those stuff.

In fact, Amin seems to imply that knowledge is power and hence teachers can show their power and thereby their position as teachers in their classes through their knowledge.

Setting Boundaries by Drawing up Classroom Rules

Another major theme that emerged from the analysis of our data was the fact that most participant teachers (n=51) reported that they set boundaries between themselves and their students by drawing up classroom rules in the first few sessions of their classes, that is, by telling the students what to do and what not to do during the term. The following two excerpts from Amin (excerpt 4) and Maryam (excerpt 5) are illustrative of this finding:

Excerpt 4:

At the beginning of every term, I say the rules of my class. For example, your absences shouldn't exceed this many sessions or you do not speak your mother tongue in my class.

Excerpt 5:

At the beginning of each class, I talk about all the things that are important in our teaching-learning process and make everything clear to them. Sometimes about their behaving towards their classroom and their teacher. But I myself as a teacher try to maintain all the rules and procedures that I make clear for them at the beginning and try to stick to them because the students will respect their teacher when they see you are honorable to your own boundaries.

Here, Amin and Maryam both point out that they discursively establish the identity boundaries between themselves and their students by laying down the classroom rules in the first few sessions. Moreover, Maryam suggests that teachers may not only set boundaries but also stick to their own boundaries so as to make their students do so.

Both Roya (excerpt 6) and Sara (excerpt 7) maintain that having established their identity boundaries through reminding their students of the rules in the first session, they then try to gradually soften those boundaries and try to build rapport in their classes:

Excerpt 6:

Then in the next sessions, I get more friendly. Still I always try to keep my distance. To keep the students within their limits. If you get too friendly they ignore many things and it would be difficult to control the class.

Excerpt 7:

My experience shows that if we soften these boundaries they [students] participate in the classroom and they learn more.

In the above excerpts, whereas Roya is more concerned about class management and the disciplinary issues in her class, Sara talks of students' increased participation due to less strict boundaries her students need to share with their teacher.

Creating Boundaries and Not Walls

A major finding of our study was that all the participants, despite creating boundaries between their positions as teachers and those of their students, strove to make those boundaries as flexible and dynamic as possible. For example, to Jahan, "the boundaries are merged." He further expounds his view as follows:

Excerpt 8:

I can say that there are some boundaries but I don't say there are no boundaries. In general this is related to my personality and defined by my philosophy of teaching to be very intimate with my students. I don't usually differentiate my identity with others' identity.

In this excerpt, Jahan states that his tendency not to distance himself too far away from his students originates from his personality type and is defined by his philosophy of teaching. Pooya, who seems to be of almost the same personality type as Jahan with regard to his role relationships with his students, answers the question about whether he ever negotiates boundaries with his students in this way:

Excerpt 9:

Yes. But I don't make it [the boundary] very strict. I try to make fun and listen to their [students'] comments. I always end my classes like this, "any questions? Comments?" From time to time if during the sessions there are any shy students, I try to change the role of teacher and student. "Ok this student is the teacher. He is going to read sentences and you repeat after him as a student." Sometimes I change the boundaries to give confidence to that particular student.

It appears that to Pooya, like Jahan, the boundaries are combined in a way that is not easy to distinguish teachers from learners. He reports that he even sometimes reverses the role of the teacher and the student in his classes in order for his students to feel more at home and therefore less threatened. Maryam also reiterates that "So as a teacher we don't have to put strong walls like a castle around ourselves and not let anybody come in especially our learners."

Demarcating Boundaries Both Discursively and Non-discursively

Another recurrent theme that has manifested itself in our study is the fact that 49 teachers reported that they demarcated boundaries between themselves and their students not only discursively but also non-discursively through their behaviors, body language, etc. Asked whether he ever negotiates boundaries with his students, Jahan says, "Just one percent. In 99% of the cases NO." Next, he explained that for young learners and beginners at language institutes it is sometimes necessary, but for "more advanced students at sophomore or other levels, then that 1% will be zero." He says that he usually sets his identity boundaries indirectly through his "manner," "intimate facial expressions," and "nonverbal behaviors." Pooya uses the term "teacher area" to describe what differentiates the position of a teacher from that of the learners:

Excerpt 10:

I mean this teacher area makes teachers different from students. When a teacher starts to walk around, he is the only person who walks in the classroom. This kind of gives the position to the teacher.

Asked what she says to distance herself as a teacher from the learners, Roya, having emphasized that first she usually says who she is and what she wants her students to do in her classroom, states:

Excerpt 11:

I usually show the boundaries through my behavior more than words. I usually try to look a bit serious in the classroom. For example, I don't say cheap jokes or I don't let students make fun of each other excessively to send them a clear message that I am the teacher in the class and you are the students and you should respect some rules.

Perhaps, Roya believes actions speak louder than words. She says she avoids telling jokes and funny things and tries to look to be the teacher in the class rather than directly saying that she is in the position

of a teacher. Sara, too, reports that she uses a variety of non-discursive means to signal to her students that she is the teacher. Furthermore, to set what she calls her “professional identity,” she sometimes changes the task the learners are performing or the topic they are discussing.

Establishing Boundaries More Implicitly Than Explicitly

Overall, almost all the teachers in the present study said that they attempt to set the boundaries to distance themselves from their students more indirectly and implicitly than directly and explicitly. The following excerpt from Jahan’s interview is an illustrative example of this finding:

Excerpt 12:

I indirectly tell them. So I don’t come to that situation in which they need any explanation for making boundaries. But if you mean overall I am the teacher and they are the students I should send them some messages, yeah in that sense I’m clear indirectly that I am the teacher, so please pay attention.

Jahan continues to expound that, for instance, he does not announce the regulations of the class, and he believes that when he writes something on the board, he indicates that he is the teacher. He points out that it is part of the students’ “identity development” that they occasionally try to ask some difficult questions and may intend to challenge the teacher’s identity by so doing. Even in such cases, he says, “First, I listen to that criticism. Then, I show a kind of cooperation in defining what he or she means. I rephrase it, ‘oh, you mean that ...the sentence I wrote is not correct aha..? acceptable. Let’s see.’”

However, while claiming that they normally go through the process of demarcating boundaries with their students implicitly, some teachers stressed that in some cases they prefer to set those identity boundaries with their students in a more explicit, and usually discursive, manner when it comes to dealing with what may be called “difficult students.” For instance, Amin recounts how he once dealt with such a situation:

Excerpt 13:

I had some classes that students didn’t know their positions in my class. So I needed to tell them: “This is your position in my class and this is my position and I have some strict rules about my classes. However, I may sound funny and easy going but we have rules.”

In the above excerpt, Amin explicitly reminds his students of their positions in his class, making it clear to them that although he might not be so serious and strict as they might expect of a typical teacher, they should respect the rules and the already established boundaries in his classes.

Discussion

This study set out with the aim of exploring how Iranian EFL teachers demarcate the boundaries between themselves and learners discursively. An important finding of this study was that 50 out of 58 participant teachers in the study referred to teachers’ knowledge and power as indicators of their identity boundaries with the students in class. This finding may help understand how teachers establish their own position as teachers in class. What the teachers said in their interviews indicates that most of them believed that their students have a preconceived notion of their teachers’ being more knowledgeable and hence more powerful than they are. Overall, it seems the teachers confirmed that their identity boundaries with their students are demarcated by the students’ knowledge-is-power perception toward their teachers, with the students positing that necessarily those who are their teachers have more knowledge and power than they do. This result may be explained by the fact that in Iran, which is an EFL context, the mainstream educational system in general and foreign language teaching in particular is more teacher-

centered than learner-centered. This is consistent with what Amin also referred to in his interview, that is, in most teacher training courses (TTCs), the trainers tell the teacher trainees that they should be “the boss” in their classes. Interestingly, however, most participant teachers reported that they prefer to set the boundaries with their students in non-authoritative and less face-threatening ways in their classes due to such factors as their personality types or their special philosophy of teaching.

A second important finding of this study was that most teachers (n=51) reported that they established boundaries between themselves and their students by drawing up classroom rules in the first few sessions of their classes, that is, by saying the students what they are expected to do and what they should avoid doing during that term. This finding might contribute to the understanding of the debatable issue of how teachers signal to their learners discursively that they are teachers. This finding is in line with that of Haniford (2010), who argued that teacher candidates set their identity boundaries with students through various discourses to which they have access such as their teacher education programs, their personal histories, and numerous other discourses in their personal lives. Teachers also held the conception that after setting the boundaries by discursively explaining the class rules and regulations, they try to soften those already set boundaries and get closer to their students. On the one hand, teachers are concerned about class management and disciplinary issues in their classes, and they try to firmly establish their positions in their classes by setting specific rules. On the other hand, they are also concerned about their students' degree of participation due to less strict boundaries their students need to share with their teachers. It seems that teachers in our study, including both more and less experienced ones, implied that they try to strike a balance between setting their identity boundaries and, at the same time, building up rapport with their students. A possible explanation for this might be that a great majority of the teachers were majoring in TEFL, in which they study about the cognitive, affective, and social factors influencing the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, they must be sufficiently aware of the enormous impact that lowering the affective filter, to use Krashen's (1985) term, has on their students' motivation and their possible willingness to communicate in class. Simultaneously, they must be cognizant of the importance of establishing their positions as teachers at the beginning of each term by clarifying the class rules for their students.

Our third finding in the present study is consistent with what Cook (2009) called “creating boundaries and not walls,” in a study in which most teachers talked about “boundaries that are flexible, sustainable, and reasonable” (p. 284). In our study, too, all the participants stressed, in one way or another, that though they set boundaries between their positions as teachers and those of their students, they attempt to make those boundaries as flexible and dynamic as possible. This finding could provide insights into how teachers demarcate identity boundaries between themselves as teachers and their students discursively. In fact, this finding is closely related to the abovementioned one, that is, teachers try to soften the boundaries having set them firmly during the first few sessions. The teachers noted that they usually create boundaries between themselves and their students perhaps as part of their professional identity formation. Despite this, they reported that they opt for a sort of boundaries with which students feel comfortable and by which they do not feel threatened. This finding can be explained in part by the participant teachers' personality types and in part by their overall philosophy of teaching, as noted by two of the participants. It seems that boundary setting is crucial to teachers' negotiations of their relationships with their students as almost all the teachers stated that they go through boundary setting. However, there also seems to be some willingness on the part of the teachers to blur those boundaries in order not to “put strong walls like a castle” around themselves, as Maryam noted.

Another major finding that was documented in this study is that most teachers reported that they demarcated boundaries between themselves and their students not only discursively but also non-discursively through their behaviors, body language, posture, etc. This finding might shed light on the issue of whether or not teachers set boundaries between their own identities and those of learners non-discursively. In accordance with what the participants reported, teachers' boundary setting occurs through both verbal and non-verbal communication between teachers and students. Therefore, it appears that teachers make use of a variety of non-verbal communication strategies such as their manner, eye contact,

body language, rising and falling tone, and posture to demarcate their identity boundaries in their classes. Nevertheless, the teachers also pointed out that they sometimes have to discursively remind their students, especially the naughty ones, of teachers' positions and those of the students as an attempt to control the class. It may be that our participants used discursive ways of boundary setting subsequent to their use of non-discursive ones. That is, they first try to create their boundaries in a non-discursive way, and they will not use the discursive means unless they have to. Varghese et al. (2005) differentiated "identity-in-discourse" from "identity-in-practice." It seems that this distinction is applicable vis-à-vis the notion of identity boundary setting, too. Here, we might distinguish "identity boundary-in-discourse" from "identity boundary-in-practice." Indeed, in "identity boundary-in-practice," teachers' practices including what they do and the ways they behave toward their students in the class constitute their identity boundaries with the students, whereas in "identity boundary-in-discourse," teachers show their agency and positions discursively through language.

The last major finding of this study was that, overall, almost all teachers stated that they attempt to set the boundaries to distance themselves from their students more indirectly and implicitly than directly and explicitly. This finding shows that teachers prefer to establish discursive identity boundaries implicitly. As Clarke (2008) pointed out, teachers use explicit and/or implicit markers of inclusion and exclusion to indicate their inclusion with other teachers and exclusion from learners. These findings, in conjunction with our findings about discursive and non-discursive construction of identity, bear evidence to four categories of teachers' identity boundary setting with their students: (a) discursive, explicit; (b) discursive, implicit; (c) non-discursive, explicit; and (d) non-discursive, implicit. Based on our findings, some teachers distinguish their positions in their classes from those of their students more implicitly, in particular non-discursively (i.e., non-discursive, implicit). Here, it seems that teachers intentionally look for more blurred identity boundaries with their students. They indirectly signal those boundaries to their students through non-verbal communication. However, the results of this study revealed that some other teachers also use more explicit and discursive ways to set identity boundaries when they have to solve some discipline problems in their classes (i.e., discursive, explicit). A third category, reported by the participant teachers of our study, is implicit but discursive means of boundary setting (i.e., discursive, implicit). Here, for instance, they talk about the rules and regulations to be followed by their students, thereby implying that they enjoy their status as teacher in the class. The last category of boundary setting would be explicit and non-discursive (i.e., non-discursive, explicit), in which the teachers reported that they directly and clearly demarcate the boundaries with their students but through actions and behaviors rather than words.

Conclusion and Implications

A considerable amount of research has been conducted investigating the construct of identity, but little research has been done to explore the construct of identity boundary, even less on discursive identity boundary. To our knowledge, no such research has investigated Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives. To fill this gap, this study set out to examine how Iranian EFL teachers demarcate the boundaries between themselves and students discursively. The findings indicate that teachers refer to their knowledge and power as indicators of their identity boundaries with the students in class. Further, they establish boundaries between themselves and their students by drawing up classroom rules in the first few sessions of their classes but attempt to make those boundaries as flexible and dynamic as possible. It can be concluded from the findings that teachers tend to demarcate boundaries between themselves and their students not only discursively but also non-discursively and to set the boundaries to distance themselves from their students more indirectly and implicitly than directly and explicitly. Taken together, based on our findings, we have come up with four categories conceivable with regard to teachers' identity boundary setting with their students: (a) discursive, explicit; (b) discursive, implicit; (c) non-discursive, explicit; and (d) non-discursive, implicit.

As the majority of the teachers in this study reported that they tended to demarcate their identity boundaries with the students more implicitly and non-discursively, the implication of this finding might be that Iranian EFL teachers, functioning in an EFL context where the educational system is still more teacher-oriented than learner-oriented, may prefer to create the identity boundaries more indirectly so as not to cause any negative affective influences on their students. In view of this, teacher educators and TTC trainers might move toward more learner-centered approaches in which, perhaps, the teachers' and learners' identity boundaries are less distinguishable leading to an atmosphere of cooperation and rapport and, hence, more successful and enjoyable learning and teaching.

The generalizability of the results of this study is subject to certain limitations. For instance, our sample was limited to 58 EFL teachers and due to teachers' tight work schedules we could not have lengthier and more detailed interviews with them to gain more in-depth insights. Moreover, as the scope of this study was restricted to only EFL teachers, excluding, for instance, English as a second language (ESL) teachers, we cannot generalize from our findings to the whole population of language teachers. Still another limitation of the current study is the lack of triangulation of data as we delimited our research study to semi-structured interviews. To bridge these gaps, further studies might be undertaken to consider how ESL teachers demarcate the boundaries between themselves and their students discursively, and to compare and contrast ESL and EFL teachers with each other to come up with a broader and clearer picture of teachers' identity boundary settings with students. Further studies might also investigate larger samples using other qualitative data collection techniques than semi-structured interviews such as observing teachers' classes and analyzing teachers' diaries.

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