The Structure and Characteristics of Chinese University English Teachers’ Identities: Toward a Sustainable Language Pedagogy

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Abstract: This study investigates the enacted identities of Chinese university English teachers in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching. The aim is to explore the underlying structure and characteristics of these teachers’ identities and examine their alignment with the principles of sustainable learning in education (SLE), which goes beyond knowledge acquisition in a chosen discipline and aims to nurture life-long and resilient learners that are able to reflect upon, renew, relearn, and assess what has been taught and orient themselves for future learning processes. A questionnaire was used to gather perceptions of enacted identities in teaching practice from 326 Chinese university English teachers. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) revealed four distinct dimensions of identity: Advocate and Motivator for English Learning, Facilitator of English Learning, Reflective Practitioner and Researcher, and Book Teacher. Interviews were conducted with a subsample of 12 teachers to further explore the contextualized meanings of these identity factors. The findings indicate that these identity dimensions align with the four tenets of sustainable learning in education, reflecting the teachers’ orientations toward sustainable language teaching practices. This study contributes to our knowledge of language teachers’ shared identities and offers important implications for language teacher professional development.

Keywords: sustainable learning in education; teacher identity; language teaching; foreign languages

1. Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) in China has undergone significant changes in terms of its goals and priorities. In the 1990s, the focus was on the development of students’ reading skills, but it shifted to prioritize listening, speaking, and English application skills in the early 2000s [1–4]. These changes are in line with the state of university English education today and the needs of the nation, society, and individuals. The recent curriculum reforms in English education in China aim to move away from traditional, teacher-centered classroom pedagogy toward a model that emphasizes student autonomy and knowledge construction [5].

One emerging theoretical concept that sheds light on these pedagogical shifts is sustainable learning in education (SLE). Sustainable learning in education focuses on equipping learners with the necessary skills and abilities to engage in lifelong learning across various contexts and disciplines [6–8]. It encourages a mindset of openness, inquiry, adaptability, and continuous learning to address complex and challenging situations. By integrating the principles of sustainability into educational practices, we can aim to achieve sustainable learning in education goals by promoting ongoing assessments of the social and physical worlds and encouraging proactive, active learning. In line with the pedagogical reforms and the principles of sustainable learning in education, the latest Guidelines for College English Teaching (2020 Edition) in China as a policy document further expands and refines the concept of College English (CE) as a core general education course.
guidelines emphasize that CE should not only enhance university students’ language and communicative abilities but also facilitate humanistic learning and the cultivation of well-rounded individuals. Furthermore, CE is expected to contribute to the development of talents with a global perspective, international awareness, and cross-cultural communication skills, which are essential to our addressing current and future global issues [9].

Despite ambitions at the national policy level, the efficacy of ELT has long been subjected to criticism. The most well-heard accusation is that ELT in China is manufacturing students with “deaf-and-dumb English” [10] (p. 662), a term used to describe someone who can read and write in English but struggles with oral communication and listening comprehension. Since the teacher plays a vital role in implementing curricula and instructional methods, the transformation of learning and teaching would be impossible if teachers’ roles and identities remained aligned with the traditional, teacher-centered, textbook-based, and test-driven method that has a strong emphasis on repetition and rote memory [1,5,11,12].

The present study was conducted against such a background of ongoing reforms of English teaching in Chinese tertiary institutions. Its purpose is to investigate the underlying structure and characteristics of Chinese English teachers’ role identities so as to gain an in-depth understanding of how ELT is undertaken in Chinese universities. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) What are the underlying structure and characteristics of Chinese university English teachers’ role identities?
(2) How do these teachers perceive and enact their identities in the context of ELT in Chinese universities?
(3) To what extent does the identified role identity structure align with the principles of Sustainable Learning in Education (SLE)?

By quantitatively analyzing the questionnaire data through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and the semi-structured interview data qualitatively, the study examines the relationship between Chinese university English teachers’ role identities and the tenets of SLE, revealing a potential alignment between the two. These findings are expected to provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of English teaching in Chinese universities and shed light on the effective implementation of pedagogical approaches aligned with sustainable learning principles.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language Teacher Identity

The essence of the teaching profession lies in the establishment of a professional identity [13,14]. The notion of identity serves as a structural framework for educators to formulate their own conceptions regarding “how to be”, “how to act”, and “how to comprehend” their work and their position within society [14] (p. 15). The awareness of one’s own identity is a pivotal element in the process by which teachers shape their professional persona and align it with the nature of their work [15–18]. Teacher identity plays a significant role in shaping teachers’ pedagogy, professional growth, and attitudes toward educational reform [18–20]. Hence, a deeper comprehension of the identities of language teachers facilitates a more profound understanding of the intricacies of language teaching and learning [21].

Despite the growing body of the literature on language teacher identity, the majority of studies have focused on individual teachers and their personal experiences. Only a small number of studies have involved large samples. For instance, Wette and Barkhuizen [22] found that during the professional development (PD) program they conducted with 83 tertiary Chinese EFL teachers in Beijing, the Chinese teachers were evidently imbued with two commitments to teaching: “jiao shu” (教书) (teaching the book) and “yu ren” (育人) (educating the person). “Teaching the book” refers to developing communicative competence in the students, while “educating the person” indicates their desire to help students become competent life-long learners. The results, derived from the coding of narrative
frames of teachers’ responses to the researchers’ prompts, revealed teachers’ espoused beliefs and identities, and the ensuing tensions between subject-centered and learner-centered approaches in their practices. The Chinese participants in their study expressed their struggles in balancing both roles and frustrations in combating social and institutional constraints. Another study, though involving only three participants, is relevant to the current one as it also tapped into the multiplicity and commonality of language teachers’ identities. Farrell [23] used group discussions and interviews to elicit three native English-speaking, veteran English as a second language (ESL) teachers’ reflections on their role identities. He identified a total of 16 main teacher role identities, which were grouped into three clusters: teacher as manager, teacher as acculturator, and teacher as a professional. Farrell distinguished between “ready-made roles” and “individually created roles” in his analysis. Farrell’s study supports the notion that language teachers have multiple and interrelated role identities, which can be complex and challenging. The findings are particularly relevant to the current research, given that teachers in China are often assigned multiple role identities based on sociocultural traditions [10–12]. In a similar study, Nishino surveyed 188 Japanese high school English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers’ conceptions of communicative English language teaching. Nishino identified a relatively strong exam orientation in Japanese EFL teachers’ cognitions. The teachers in the study appeared to have set individualized goals that not only concerned their students’ English proficiency but also their self-development as whole persons [24].

In summary, researchers in various academic fields agree on the importance of teacher identity in shaping teacher performance. They view teacher identity as multifaceted and fluid, influenced by an array of social and cultural factors [10,13,15,23]. Most studies on this topic have relied on self-reflections such as narratives, focus group discussions, and diaries to explore language teachers’ role identities and how they evolve over time [10,15–18]. Unlike research on teachers’ beliefs, which is closely related, a quantitative approach is rarely used in teacher identity research [25]. Additionally, most studies have focused on individual teachers and their personal experiences, without thoroughly exploring shared conceptions of language teachers’ identities and roles. The present study aims to fill this gap with a large sample of Chinese university EFL teachers and assess whether these align with sustainable learning principles.

2.2. Sustainable Language Pedagogy

In the past, stability was often emphasized in language teaching, with a focus on fixed grammar rules, cultural norms, and national identities. However, the reality of our world today is one of constant change, conflict, and diverse perspectives. Language teachers now face the challenge of embracing this flux and preparing their students for this complex and diversified world [5,26–28].

Sustainable learning principles can have a transformative impact on the pedagogical landscape. By focusing on renewing and relearning, active learning, collaborative learning, independent learning, and transferability, the four major principles of SLE proposed by Ben-Eliyahu [6] (Figure 1), language teachers can equip students with the skills and mindset necessary to navigate the challenges and complexities of the globalized society. It is noteworthy that in real classroom settings, it is difficult to separate one principle from another. Rather, instructional activities incorporate a combination of such principles to engage students in sustainable learning.

Applying the principles of sustainable learning in education to language learning and teaching involves a shift from a content-based, teacher-dominated pedagogy to a learner-centered approach. The primary objective is to cultivate active, independent, and collaborative learners who can apply their skills and knowledge in diverse social, cultural, and real-life contexts. This transition aligns with the principles promoted in many countries’ language teaching reforms, including the latest Guidelines for College English Teaching (2020 Edition) in China, and emphasizes the preparation of learners to authentically engage in complex and unpredictable cultural landscapes [9].
One of the key advantages of sustainable learning is its emphasis on active and engaged learning experiences. Through hands-on activities, problem-solving tasks, and authentic language use, sustainable learning actively engages learners in meaningful tasks and real-world applications of language and enhances motivation, involvement, and overall language proficiency development.

Sustainable learning also prioritizes the development of transferable skills and knowledge. It equips language learners with the ability to apply their language competencies to diverse contexts and domains beyond the classroom. Communication, intercultural competence, creativity, adaptability, and critical thinking are among the skills nurtured by sustainable learning. These skills are essential in today’s globalized and interconnected world, enabling learners to navigate various situations and contribute meaningfully to society [26].

Furthermore, sustainable learning instills a lifelong learning orientation in language education. By promoting metacognitive awareness, reflective practices, and self-directed learning, it prepares learners to become continuous learners beyond formal educational settings [7]. Sustainable learning empowers students to embrace learning as an ongoing process, providing them with the skills and strategies to adapt and learn in different situations throughout their lives [6,7].

An important aspect of sustainable learning is its culturally responsive and inclusive approach [8]. It recognizes the significance of cultural diversity and inclusivity in language education. By integrating diverse perspectives, experiences, and languages, sustainable learning fosters a rich and inclusive learning environment. It values and incorporates learners’ cultural backgrounds and identities, promoting a deeper understanding of language and culture while encouraging mutual respect and appreciation [28].

Correspondingly, sustainable learning in language education necessitates a fundamental shift in the role of the teacher. Traditionally viewed as the primary source of knowledge and language models, teachers now assume the role of facilitators of learning in sustainable learning approaches. Instead of merely transmitting information, they become guides, mentors, and supporters who create a supportive and interactive learning environment to foster autonomy, collaboration, and personalized instruction (Figure 1). By embracing this shift, language teachers empower students to become active and engaged learners, developing not only language skills but also critical thinking, problem-
solving, and interpersonal competencies essential for success in the dynamic and interconnected world.

Overall, sustainable learning in education offers a new paradigm for learning and teaching and a useful framework to design curricula, methods, and learning environments. Its principles resonate with the ongoing educational reforms in many countries, including English language education in Chinese universities. Despite some emerging conceptual discussions, there is a dearth of empirical studies that apply this framework to examine real classroom teaching practices. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the underlying structure and characteristics of Chinese university English teachers’ role identities. Additionally, it aims to explore how these teachers perceive and enact their identities in the context of English language teaching in Chinese universities. By examining the alignment between the identified role identity structure and the principles of sustainable learning in education, this study intends to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on language teacher identity and sustainable learning and teaching practices.

3. Methods
3.1. The Context

Chinese foreign language education is operated with a top-down approach to policy implementation [28]. The Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) formulates syllabi and sets out guidelines for instructional goals for all levels of education, including the stipulation of, and policies for foreign language teaching.

English is a compulsory subject for both English and non-English majors at the university level in China. For non-English majors, the course is typically an integrated program referred to as College English (CE) that comprises reading and writing as well as listening and speaking components. The Guidelines for College English Teaching a national syllabus, which was most recently updated in 2020, directs ELT in tertiary institutions, and several national textbooks are available for use by institutions. After two years of study, students sit the CET-4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET-6 to enhance their employment prospects. While obtaining a pass on these tests is no longer mandatory for graduation, many students still seek certificates as evidence of their English proficiency [9].

Chinese tertiary institutions are classified into hierarchical categories. Tier 1 institutions are primarily national key universities funded heavily by the Ministry of Education. Provincial tertiary institutions supported mainly by local governments are designated as Tier 2 institutions, while public and private schools with smaller enrollments and a limited range of programs are designated as Tier 3 institutions. Tier 1 and 2 institutions usually attract the highest-performing students, while Tier 3 institutions face challenges in recruiting high-achieving students. Students at the tertiary level come from various parts of China with different levels of English proficiency, educational and economic backgrounds, and learning experiences and strategies.

3.2. Research Design

The present study utilized a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design [29], combining quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of Chinese university English teachers’ perceptions of enacted identities in teaching practices. This design was chosen to leverage the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative phase allowed for the efficient collection of data from a larger sample size, enabling broader insights into teachers’ perceptions of enacted identities. The subsequent qualitative phase then provided an in-depth exploration of the contextualized understanding and unique experiences of teachers [30].

In the initial quantitative phase, a Teacher Identity Questionnaire (TIQ) was developed to gather data on Chinese university English teachers’ perceptions of enacted identities in their teaching practice. The questionnaire contained 25 Likert scale items derived from the synthesis and adaption of findings from empirical studies, such as Ferrell [23], Tsui [31], and Duff and Uchida [32]. Demographic information was also collected, includ-
ing age, gender, years of teaching experience, qualification, and institution category. Teachers were asked to rate to what extent they identified with the statements describing their enacted identities in classroom teaching, ranging from 1 (never true of me) to 5 (very true of me). The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 326 English teachers from various universities in China. The sample size was determined based on considerations of statistical power and feasibility [29].

Quantitative data analysis involved the application of exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to uncover the underlying structure and characteristics of the teachers’ perceived identities. Factor analysis is a data summarization and reduction procedure to identify the underlying structure of the responses which aggregate mathematically into conceptually meaningful pools [33,34]. Given two types of factor analysis, EFA and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), EFA was chosen because it identifies likely pools of items explained by a shared trait, whereas CFA is often used to test the fit of a proposed factor structure [35].

In the subsequent qualitative phase, follow-up interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of twelve teachers from the initial sample. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a deeper, contextualized understanding of the identified identity factors. The selection of interview participants was purposeful, based on the diversity of responses in the quantitative phase and the desire to capture a range of perspectives [30].

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide the interviews (see Appendix A). The interviews provided an opportunity for teachers to share their personal narratives and provide rich qualitative data that complemented the quantitative findings.

By adopting a mixed-methods design, the study aimed to triangulate the findings from both quantitative and qualitative data sources, enhancing the validity and credibility of the research outcomes. This approach allowed for a rigorous and comprehensive exploration of the complex phenomenon of enacted identities in teaching practice, going beyond mere quantitative measures to capture the depth and richness of teachers’ experiences. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods provided a more robust understanding of the multifaceted nature of these identities, contributing to the existing knowledge in the field [29].

3.3. Participants and Recruitment

3.3.1. Survey Participants

The study targeted English teachers of non-English majors in X Province, an Eastern Chinese Province. The participation was voluntary, and the convenience sampling method was employed in accordance with ethical considerations [36]. Emails to the College English Departments of the tertiary institutions located in X Province to seek permission for access to the school site and teachers. Altogether, 22 departmental heads granted the authors permission to conduct research with their teaching staff. Potential participants were then recruited through the department secretaries without any coercion and were invited to complete a web-based questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to express their interest in taking part in follow-up interviews and to provide contact information if interested.

A total of 326 participants completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 79.5%. The sample consisted of 84 male and 242 female teachers, with the majority holding master’s degrees (77.7%). 12.5% of the sample had bachelor’s degrees, while only 9.8% had obtained a PhD. Regarding the institutional classification, 36.7% of the participants worked in Tier 1 institutions, 32% in Tier 2 institutions, and 30.9% in Tier 3 institutions.

3.3.2. Interview Participants

Of the interested participants, 12 were recruited for the follow-up interviews which took place after the initial analysis of the survey data. A maximum variation sampling strategy was employed at this stage, which aimed to capture the central themes that transcend significant variation [30]. Maximum variation sampling required the researcher to identify certain characteristics or traits to locate individuals that display these different dimensions
of the phenomenon, so as to develop multiple perspectives to address the complexity of the research question [30,36]. The selection criteria for the interview participants in this study included institution type (Tier 1, 2, and 3), educational levels (bachelor’s master’s and PhD degrees), and years of teaching experience. By deliberately incorporating these diverse characteristics, we hoped to uncover meaningful insights and generalize findings beyond specific subgroups.

Of the twelve interview participants, two were male and the rest were female. Five interviewees had taught College English for ten years or more, while seven had taught College English for five to eight years. Three teachers held PhD degrees, four were studying in doctoral programs when the study took place, and the remaining five teachers held master’s degrees. To preserve anonymity, the participants’ IDs were coded as T1–T12.

3.4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the survey were analyzed using SPSS 23.0. An EFA was conducted on the participants’ responses, with squared multiple correlations as prior communality estimates. EFA is a statistical technique used to identify the underlying structure of the responses by grouping them into conceptually meaningful categories [33,34]. For this study, EFA with Maximum Likelihood and varimax rotation was used, and the eigenvalue greater than 1 was set as the cut-off, with the scree plot checked for confirmation. The number of factors to be retained was decided based on the following criteria suggested by Hair et al. [33]: (1) the presence of many coefficients of 0.30 and above indicating the suitability of the data for factor analysis; (2) Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value exceeding 0.60 and significant Barlett’s test of sphericity (p = 0.000), supporting the factoriality of the correlation matrix; (3) items with significant cross-loadings were removed. The internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach Alpha Coefficient, with a recommended value of 0.70 and not less than 0.60. The extracted factors were given descriptive titles, and factor-based subscales were created accordingly. After EFA, factor means for teachers’ common identities were calculated and compared to check alignment and identify features and trends.

Subsequently, one-way ANOVA and t-tests were applied to examine if there was any significant difference in self-reported role identities with different teacher characteristics, that is, teaching experience, qualification, and institution type. One-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) and t-tests are statistical methods used to compare groups and determine if there are significant differences between them. t-tests are used to compare the means of two groups while One-way ANOVA is used when three or more groups are involved in comparison. The rationales for using t-tests and ANOVA are identical, aiming to assess whether the observed differences between groups are statistically significant or simply due to random variation [37].

The factor means were set as dependent variables with the different groupings as independent variables. Teachers were divided into five groups in terms of teaching experience: Group 1—0–2 years, Group 2—3–5 years, Group 3—6–10 years, Group 4—11–20 years, and Group 5—over 20 years. Qualification was divided into three groups: Bachelor’s degrees, Master’s degrees, and PhDs. Teachers’ institutions were categorized as Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3. The last characteristic asked teachers if they had received training about language teaching methods or not. To control for Type 1 error resulting from multiple ANOVA tests, chosen confidence levels of 0.05 were divided by the number of tests to adjust error rates [37]. An alpha value of 0.01 was, therefore, requested for tests of significance.

Lastly, the interviews were transcribed, and a qualitative content analysis was performed using a deductive approach [38]. This analysis involved assigning the texts to categories or identity themes that were identified through factor analysis in the present study identity themes. The aim was to address Research Question 2 by exploring individual teachers’ nuanced and contextualized understandings of their multiple and interrelated identities.
4. Findings

In this section, the factor structure extracted from the teachers’ responses to the questionnaires is reported. The patterns and characteristics of each identity factor are then examined by presenting descriptive statistics and interview excerpts. The inclusion of interviews serves as a means of data triangulation, providing nuanced, and comprehensive meanings to each identity factor. Finally, the results of ANOVA are presented to determine if teacher characteristics, such as institution type, qualification, and teacher training, have any significant effects.

4.1. Dimensions of Chinese University English Teachers’ Role Identities

Four factors comprising 21 items, with loadings of 0.3 and above, were extracted, explaining a cumulative percentage variance of 52.47%. The items contributing to each factor are shown in Table 1. The first factor was labelled Motivator and Advocate for English Learning (Cronbach alpha = 0.849), including statements describing the many ways by which teachers motivated students to learn English. The second factor was labeled Facilitator for English Learning (Cronbach alpha = 0.810) characterizing their teaching practice and activities in CE classes. The third factor was named Reflective Practitioner and Researcher (Cronbach alpha = 0.828) as these statements showed their endeavors to engage in teaching-related research and to seek ways for professional development. The last factor was an aggregation of statements describing the teacher’s role as transmitting knowledge and scripted book teaching and, therefore, was labelled as Book Teacher (Cronbach alpha = 0.717). The Cronbach alpha values for the four-factor subscales as well as for the entire scale (0.890) indicated good internal consistency, which suggests that the subscales and the questionnaire as a whole were reliable measures of the intended construct [33,34]. Table 1 presents the factor structure of Chinese EFL university teachers’ role identities and Table 2 shows the subscale mean scores and standard deviations of each identified factor.

Table 1. Summary of EFA for the 21-item TIQ (n = 326).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors and Items</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Motivator and Advocate for English Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I endeavor to enhance student engagement and enjoyment in the class.</td>
<td>0.766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Through reflection, I search for ways to enhance my teaching practices.</td>
<td>0.625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I make sure my lessons are interesting and engaging.</td>
<td>0.624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I manage the classroom interaction.</td>
<td>0.621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I promote inquiry learning and autonomous learning</td>
<td>0.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Through a variety of activities and strategies to stimulate students’ interest in learning English.</td>
<td>0.532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I make students aware of the importance of learning English.</td>
<td>0.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 I look for novel ideas to surprise students and engage them.</td>
<td>0.498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II Facilitator of English Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 I teach English learning strategies.</td>
<td>0.746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 I attempt to understand students’ needs and the goings-on of their life and study.</td>
<td>0.726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 I recommend English learning resources for students.</td>
<td>0.601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 I encourage students to draw on various resources to learn English outside the class.</td>
<td>0.548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 I support students’ well-rounded development with feedback and care.</td>
<td>0.504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III Reflective Practitioner and Researcher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 I am involved in research on English language teaching and read related literature.</td>
<td>0.689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 I am interested in learning about English pedagogies and linguistic knowledge.</td>
<td>0.673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 I am in search of effective pedagogies and exploring the ways of being a qualified CE teacher.</td>
<td>0.616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 I like to reflect on my teaching practices and search for ways of improvement.</td>
<td>0.514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV Book Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 I teach what is scripted in the textbook.</td>
<td>0.804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 My job is to transfer the content from the book to the student.</td>
<td>0.788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 I see my main responsibility as helping students pass tests.</td>
<td>0.523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I don’t like to change my teaching method.</td>
<td>0.515</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Descriptive statistics for each subscale of TIQ (n = 326).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Factor</th>
<th>No. of Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivator and Advocate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Practitioner</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Characteristics of Chinese Tertiary EFL Teachers’ Role Identities

4.2.1. Motivator and Advocate for English Learning

The survey participants demonstrated strong identification with the role of the motivator and advocate for English learning (mean = 4.15). This factor described the various ways CE teachers employed to stimulate students’ interest and engage them in learning English in and out of the classroom (see Table 3). Over 90% of the participants expressed that they made efforts to make the CE class interesting and engaging (items 6, 15, and 19). Such efforts included designing various kinds of instructional activities and providing students with more opportunities for inquiry-based learning and autonomous learning (items 1 and 7). In the Chinese EFL context, the term “activity” is the equivalent of learning tasks. Another important aspect embedded in the role of a motivator is to increase students’ awareness of the importance of learning English and advocate for English learning (item 2). This involved informing students that English skills are valuable assets for their future life and career development.

Table 3. Motivator and advocate for English learning: frequencies (%), means, and standard deviations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors and Items</th>
<th>Frequencies (%)</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Motivator and Advocate for English Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Endeavor to enhance student engagement and enjoyment in the class.</td>
<td>1 a 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Through reflection, I search for ways to enhance my teaching practices.</td>
<td>0 0.3 4.9 42.0 52.8</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 I manage the classroom interaction.</td>
<td>0.9 2.8 19.3 58.9 18.1</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I promote inquiry learning and autonomous learning</td>
<td>0.3 0.7 5.4 7.5 7.5</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I use a variety of activities and strategies to stimulate students’ interest in learning English.</td>
<td>0 2.5 12.6 55.8 29.1</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I make students aware of the importance of learning English.</td>
<td>0 1.8 12.6 60.4 25.2</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 I look for novel ideas to surprise students and engage them.</td>
<td>0 3.4 29.8 45.7 21.2</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a 1 = never true of me, 2 = slightly true of me, 3 = moderately true of me (sometimes true, sometimes not), 4 = fairly true, 5 = very true of me.

During the interviews, teachers provided examples of different ways of enacting this identity in teaching practice. T7, who worked with high-performing students in a Tier 1 institution, observed that student motivation for English learning was declining as the university and colleges or schools prioritized disciplinary major studies over general education courses, including CE. To advocate for the CE course, T7 often used real-life examples to convince students that English competence is a valuable addition to their skill set which offers better pay rates and job prospects. Two students go to the job market. The one with good English skills is offered 7000 CNY per month, but the other one whose English is average will only get 5000 CNY (interview 1, lines 41–42). T8, who had worked in a Tier 1 institution and now working in a Tier 3 institution, recently graduated with her PhD in Language Teaching, and she expressed her preference to draw on research findings to make a similar point: “I tell them in my first intro session, showing a graph and saying that learning a foreign language can make you smarter, healthier, and richer, and it can also delay the onset of dementia. Why not take English lessons (interview 1, lines 12–13)?”
T7, a CE teacher from a Tier 2 university, also found motivation is crucial to the success of CE teaching, and she often shared her travel experiences to stimulate students’ interest in English, especially practicing speaking and listening (interview 1, lines 154–160).

The factor mean demonstrates these teachers’ dedication and commitment to creating a positive and stimulating learning environment. By utilizing different teaching strategies, they aim to cultivate students’ motivation and awareness of the importance of learning English. These examples exemplify how these teachers go beyond traditional teaching methods and actively engage with students by integrating real-life experiences and evidence-based arguments into their lessons. By doing so, they not only foster students’ motivation but also enable them to recognize the practical value of learning English for their future career and personal development.

4.2.2. Facilitator of English Learning

The second factor represents the teachers’ roles in facilitating students’ English learning. Teachers have embraced the identity of a facilitator in the classroom (mean = 4.05). The survey results (see Table 4) indicate that nearly 90% of the teachers taught English learning strategies to their students (item 12, fairly true and very true) and 85.3% recommended English learning resources (item 14, fairly true and very true). By teaching learning strategies, such as vocabulary strategies, reading strategies, and oral presentation strategies, teachers help students become effective language learners and improve their metacognitive skills. This approach emphasizes know-how and transferrable skills that students can take with them after graduating, rather than focusing solely on linguistic knowledge. The survey also found that 72.4% of teachers identified with the role of providing guidance and scaffolding to help students successfully complete their tasks (item 25). Teachers also showed concern for students’ needs and encouraged them to extend learning beyond the classroom (items 13 and 24, 77% and 83.5% fairly true and very true, respectively).

Table 4. Facilitator of English learning: frequencies (%), means, and standard deviations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors and Items</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I teach English learning strategies.</td>
<td>0 0.3 0.3 0</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to understand students’ needs and the goings-on of their life and study.</td>
<td>0 0.3 0.3 0</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I recommend English learning resources for students.</td>
<td>0.3 0.3 0.3 0</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encourage students to draw on various resources to learn English outside the class.</td>
<td>0 0.3 0.3 0</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I support students’ well-rounded development with feedback and care.</td>
<td>0.3 0.3 0.3 0</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 1 = never true of me, 2 = slightly true of me, 3 = moderately true of me (sometimes true, sometimes not), 4 = fairly true, 5 = very true of me.

The post-survey interviews contributed to a more detailed portrait of College English teachers as facilitators of English learning. For instance, T1 emphasized the subtle yet influential nature of College English classes. She believed that the questions posed to students during College English classes provoked deep thinking, fostering critical thinking skills. Specifically, debates and argumentative essays train students to think and argue effectively, teaching them not just the language, but also a way of thinking. T1 acknowledged that some may underestimate the value of College English classes but argued that College English classes contribute significantly to students’ growth and have been unfairly criticized (interview 1, lines 154–160). T7, having contrasted the currently promoted student-centered, communicative teaching approach with the traditional language teaching conceptions, commented: “The teacher is more like a guide, a facilitator. A guide is to stimulate and give them the confidence to learn English. English teaching is not transmitting knowledge; it is more on the humanistic side, to enrich (students’) vision, to open up their horizons and make them feel that there may be different opportunities in life” (interview...
T11 highlighted the importance of promoting independent and successful learning. Recognizing the limited instructional time in class, she provided students with a diverse range of resources to cultivate self-reliance. To support her viewpoint, she explained, “Unlike in elementary schools where students may rely on being spoon-fed, college students should develop effective and active studying strategies outside the classroom to optimize their learning potential. I show them how the Cornell note-taking system works, introduce the Feynman technique for deep learning, and they find them useful” (interview 1, lines 25–29).

The survey and interviews depicted College English teachers as dedicated facilitators of English learning, emphasizing the importance of teaching strategies, guidance, and a humanistic approach. Their efforts go beyond linguistic knowledge, aiming to equip students with transferrable skills and critical thinking abilities, ultimately contributing to their holistic growth and development, which is in alignment with sustainable learning principles.

4.2.3. Reflective Practitioner and Researcher

The third factor extracted from the data revealed that teachers were reflective practitioners and researchers (mean = 3.98). As shown in Table 5, they regularly engaged in reflection on their teaching practices, sought out new ideas, and explored alternative approaches to expand their knowledge and skill sets with the aim of improving their teaching practices (items 11, 18, and 20). These activities were considered essential for continuous learning and professional growth, as they fostered professional reflectivity and the ability to redirect one’s practice without being hindered by familiar ways of thinking or doing things [39].

Table 5. Reflective practitioner and researcher: frequencies (%), means, and standard deviations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors and Items</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>III Reflective Practitioner and Researcher</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. I am involved in research on English language teaching and read related literature.</td>
<td>0.3, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I am interested in learning about English pedagogies and linguistic knowledge.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I am in search of effective pedagogies and exploring the ways of being a qualified CE teacher.</td>
<td>0.3, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I like to reflect on my teaching practices and search for ways of improvement.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1 = never true of me, 2 = slightly true of me, 3 = moderately true of me (sometimes true, sometimes not), 4 = fairly true, 5 = very true of me.*

In addition, slightly over 70% of the teachers in this study were actively involved in English teaching-related research (item 10). As academic professionals in the Chinese tertiary context, College English teachers are increasingly required to maintain an active research and publication agenda [40,41] and often pursue doctoral degrees in related areas [42]. Through their involvement in language learning or teaching research, teachers gain exposure to research-based language learning theories and pedagogies, which helps to develop a sound knowledge base for their professional practice.

The 12 teachers interviewed displayed a strong commitment to their professional development (PD) by actively engaging in various programs. Eight of them specifically mentioned their participation in online teacher learning groups, such as Unipus (Unipus is an online education platform that provides various resources and services for students and educators), through posts and chatrooms. This allowed them to stay up-to-date with the latest technological advancements and conceptual developments in language teaching and education as a whole. Their comments shed light on the significance of continuous learning and reflection in their roles as reflective practitioners and researchers.

T1 acknowledged the value of participating in PD programs as they provided valuable opportunities to acquire new knowledge and reflect upon their own beliefs and practices.
The teacher recalled attending a seminar where they learned about the BOPPPS model, which she found to be a practical and versatile framework for instructional design and flipped teaching. She also learned about rubrics as a means of assessing learning from one of the in-house PD programs (interview 1, lines 144–146). Reflective practice was also emphasized by T6, who mentioned maintaining reflective journals as a means of constantly improving her teaching methods and expanding her knowledge and skills in the field (interview 1, lines 124–125). This dedication to reflective practice demonstrates their commitment to critically evaluating their own teaching approaches and seeking areas for growth and enhancement. Additionally, T12 highlighted their active involvement in online PD communities, indicating a conscious effort to stay updated with emerging trends and popular practices in the language teaching field (interview 1, lines 189–190). By participating in these online communities, they actively sought out opportunities to expand their knowledge and stay connected with the evolving landscape of language education.

Apart from participation in PD programs, pursuing PhD studies is also found to improve teachers’ awareness of their own beliefs and practices. Four teachers (T4, T6, T7, and T8), who had completed PhD studies or were working on their doctoral studies, expressed that reading and learning about theories and related literature had deepened their understanding of language learning and encouraged them to be more reflective and self-evaluative in their teaching practice.

### 4.2.4. Book Teacher

The last factor contains four statements describing the teacher’s role as scripted teachers and exam-oriented, strictly following the textbook and preparing students for tests (see Table 6). Teachers’ responses to this factor indicated their reluctance to be identified as such (mean = 2.87). They generally resisted full compliance with the textbook. For items 21 and 23, the majority, approximately 70%, found it only slightly true or moderately true of their situations. Less than a quarter of the respondents rated generally true and completely true on these two statements. Nevertheless, exam-orientation was still having an influence. Nearly half of the participants emphasized their roles in preparing students for exams and tests (item 22). Teachers were generally open to alternative or new teaching methods (item 4). Although CET-4 and CET-6 are no longer tied to students’ degrees in many tertiary institutions, approximately half of the teachers were still bound by exams.

#### Table 6. Book teacher: frequencies (%), means, and standard deviations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors and Items</th>
<th>Frequencies (%)</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IV Book Teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 I teach what is scripted in the textbook.</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 My job is to transfer the content from the book to the student.</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 I see my main responsibility as helping students pass tests.</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I don’t like to change my teaching method.</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1 = never true of me, 2 = slightly true of me, 3 = moderately true of me (sometimes true, sometimes not), 4 = fairly true, 5 = very true of me.

During the interviews, some teachers expressed their reasons for adapting and modifying teaching materials, highlighting their opposition to a strictly textbook-based approach. T2 revealed her dissatisfaction with the reading textbook, describing it as boring. In order to make the content more engaging and relevant for the students, she connected the text to real-life applications. She illustrated her approach with an example of teaching menus. “When the lesson involved reading menus, with no extra reading resources presented the textbook, I will drag in recipes, tell them how to order food in a western restaurant, share my experiences of eating at an Australian restaurant. I try to make the learning experience more enjoyable and relevant” (interview 2, lines 37–40).

Similarly, T5 opposed to scripted teaching focusing on the textbook and emphasized the importance of creating an interactive and collaborative learning environment. She expressed their desire to see students actively participating in discussions, exchanging ideas,
and collectively making sense of reading texts. She believed that true learning occurred within a community. She expressed a concern that solely following the book would lead to a boring class (interview 1, lines 154–160).

T7 emphasized the role of the teacher in guiding students toward achieving their goals, regardless of the materials chosen by the department. She highlighted the need for teachers to focus on developing and fostering students’ competence, suggesting that the textbook alone is insufficient for achieving this aim (interview 2, lines 82–83).

Lastly, T12 acknowledged the changing nature of textbooks while emphasizing the importance of a well-designed syllabus. She argued that a competent teacher should be capable of selecting and adapting materials, recognizing that a textbook cannot fulfill all instructional needs (interview 1, lines 112–114). This further supports the idea that teachers should not overly rely on textbooks but should have the autonomy to incorporate self-selected materials.

Both survey responses and interviews demonstrated that these educators recognize the limitations of relying solely on a textbook and instead strive to provide a sustainable and effective learning environment that fosters critical thinking, real-life application, and student empowerment.

4.2.5. Differences in Identity Factors across Teacher Groups

At the $p < 0.01$ level, significant differences were found in the Reflective Practitioner factor between teachers with different levels of qualifications: $F (2, 323) = 6.02, p = 0.003$. Post hoc comparisons using the Scheffe tests indicated that the mean score of teachers with a PhD ($M = 4.34, SD = 0.47$) was significantly different from that of teachers with bachelor’s degrees ($M = 3.89, SD = 0.65, p = 0.001$) and master’s degrees ($M = 3.95, SD = 0.62, p = 0.002$). Teachers with higher levels of qualification tended to be more reflective practitioners.

Institution type was found to have an impact on the Motivator and Advocate factor. Significant differences were found between teachers working in Tier 1 institutions and those working in Tier 3 institutions [$F (2, 323) = 5.38, p = 0.005$]. Post hoc comparisons suggested that the Motivator and Advocate factor mean score of the teachers working in Tier 1 universities ($M = 4.30, SD = 0.48$) was significantly different from that of teachers working in Tier 3 universities ($M = 4.12, SD = 0.46, p = 0.005$). This difference showed that teachers working in Tier 1 universities were more likely to identify themselves as motivators and advocates for English learning than teachers working in Tier 3 institutions.

5. Discussion

5.1. Chinese University English Teachers’ Multiple Identities

This study aimed to examine the common identities of a large sample of College English teachers to gain insights into how Chinese College English teachers understood their work and how they positioned themselves accordingly. To answer the first research question, the factor structure extracted from the identity questionnaire indicate that Chinese College English teachers identified their roles mainly with three factors: as motivators/advocates, facilitators for English learning, and reflective practitioners. In contrast, they tended not to identify themselves as merely teaching the textbook. This multi-factor structure resonates with what previous studies have shown; namely, language teacher identity is a pluralistic construct [10,13,15]. More notably, the high mean factor scores for the first three factors and a low mean score for the Book Teacher factor suggest a move away from the highly criticized transmission and scripted lesson focus to be more in line with the reforms as well as a sustainable language pedagogy [6–9].

The second research question asked how Chinese College English teachers perceive and enact these identities. This question is answered and discussed in reference to previous studies. Firstly, the identification of the role of motivator and advocate can be better understood within the larger context of College English teaching in Chinese universities. Many university students lack the motivation to learn English as they do not see the immediate tangible benefits that English can bring to their present and future lives. Instead, they are
more concerned with obtaining credits for their degree and passing CET-4 or CET-6 exams. For instance, at Tsing Hua University, a top comprehensive university in China, around 55% of first-year students opt out of CE classes and choose private language institutes like the New Oriental School, which specialize in CET, TOEFL, and IELTS training [43]. Ruan and Jacob [44] highlighted that student dissatisfaction with CE was one of the four significant challenges facing College English teachers, curriculum makers, and higher education institutions. In a synthesis of survey studies conducted with university students in Beijing and Tianjin, they reported that on average, 78% of university students were not satisfied with College English teaching. As a result, tertiary institutions’ administrations began to question the legitimacy and efficacy of College English and reduced the credit hours allocated to it [45]. In response to this challenging situation, the findings of the present study seem to suggest that College English teachers positioned themselves to transform traditional teaching methods and “win over” students.

Secondly, the facilitator for English learning identity emerged from this study is reminiscent of Wette and Barkhuizen’s research [22], where two-thirds of the responses from 83 Chinese College English teachers emphasized the importance of fostering interest and motivation in learning English, developing independent and collaborative learning skills, and promoting a lifelong learning orientation, which the authors summarized as “educating the person”. However, the results of the current study differ from the findings of Chen and Chen’s [46] study on Chinese College English teachers’ beliefs during a curriculum reform in 2008. In that study, teachers primarily identified themselves as language instructors and language models. The authors concluded that the majority of participants were unable to apply their modern communicative teaching beliefs effectively. Interestingly, in the present study conducted more than 10 years later, the “Book Teacher” factor, which represents scripted lessons and transmission pedagogy, did not receive high ratings. Instead, the participants in the present study highlighted the humanistic dimension of language learning, which emphasized student-centeredness and the use of learning strategies to promote active and independent learning. The shift towards a facilitator identity represents a move away from traditional knowledge-transmission methods toward a constructivist approach to learning, which highly corresponds with sustainable learning in education.

Thirdly, the majority of Chinese College English teachers in this study did not consider their main responsibility to be delivering the content from the textbook. This finding contrasts with the images of Chinese CE teachers depicted by previous studies, in which the ELT working environment in Chinese universities has been characterized as a highly structured environment, where teachers are expected to adhere to a pre-determined syllabus, textbook, and examination prescription [10,22,47]. In such an environment, English textbooks play a crucial role in the provision of quality ELT, serving as the primary source of English input for many students and a guide for teachers to plan and deliver language instruction. Consequently, a subject-centered approach that prioritizes mastery of knowledge through classroom instruction and the textbook, as well as disciplined mental effort in the service of imitation and memorization of key texts, has been the prevailing pedagogical practice in Chinese English classrooms at all grade levels [8,48]. In the present study, however, the teachers seem to shift toward a more flexible and open approach to handling the textbook, a practice often present in low-structure environments, which allows for negotiation and flexibility in the curriculum between teachers and learners [49].

Lastly, the findings regarding the reflective practitioner and researcher identity of Chinese College English teachers in this study align with previous research conducted by Borg and Liu [40]. In their study, which involved 725 Chinese College English teachers, they found that most of the participants (85.7%) reported reading research to some extent. Nearly three-quarters of those who read research stated that the research they read influenced their work moderately to strongly. These similar findings emphasize the engagement of Chinese College English teachers in research activities and indicate that these teachers value the influence of research on their work.
5.2. Differences between Subgroups

Regarding the first and second research questions, significant differences have been found in two self-reported role identities with different teacher characteristics. The ANOVA results suggest that there are significant differences in the Reflective Practitioner factor among teachers with different levels of qualifications. Specifically, teachers with a PhD demonstrate higher levels of reflection in their practice as compared to those with lower levels of qualification. This finding may indicate that higher levels of education are associated with a greater emphasis on reflection, self-evaluation, and professional agency [50]. Individual interviews suggest that studying for advanced degrees, such as a PhD, has helped teachers to be more aware of their teaching practices. This is because advanced degrees offer the opportunity for them to learn about state-of-the-art theories and practices of English literacy teaching, which in turn prompts teachers to be more reflective and self-evaluative in their teaching practice.

Additionally, the results suggest that institution type has an impact on the Motivator and Advocate factor. It is possible that teachers working in different types of institutions have different priorities or face different challenges in motivating and advocating for their students’ English learning. The interview data provided some insights into this point. For instance, T4 and T7, who worked with high-achieving students in Tier 1 and Tier 2 institutions found it was a challenge to stimulate students’ interest in learning English because the institution placed more emphasis on students’ major subjects. However, the major challenge for English teachers from Tier 3 institutions was students’ lack of English proficiency and big class sizes (T10 and T12). Further research would be needed to explore the reasons behind these differences in more detail.

5.3. Towards Sustainable Learning in Language Education

The third research question asked if the extracted identities are aligned with the principles of SLE. Teachers’ responses to the TIQ show a strong alignment with the tenets of sustainable learning. On the one hand, teachers’ engagement with the identities of motivator/advocate, facilitator for English learning, and reflective practitioner all point towards a student-centered approach to teaching English, where the teacher plays an active role in facilitating students’ learning rather than just imparting knowledge. By positioning themselves as motivators and advocates for English learning, College English teachers are taking on the responsibility of creating a positive and engaging learning environment for their students. They also acknowledge the importance of teaching English learning strategies and providing resources, indicating a shift away from traditional teaching methods that focus solely on teaching the content. The emphasis on self-reflection and research engagement as a role identity factor also highlights the importance of continuous professional development by diverse means for College English teachers, such as action research, engagement with short-term or long-term studies or training programs, and participation in online professional communities [51,52]. By constantly seeking to improve their own language proficiency and professional knowledge and skills, teachers are better equipped to meet the changing needs of their students and adapt to new teaching approaches and technologies. On the other hand, they generally oppose the old textbook-based teaching of English in universities. Instead, they tend to stay open to new ideas and approaches and are disposed to adapt and modify teaching materials to enable sustainable learning. Additionally, by having a broader understanding of the goals and scope of English language teaching in tertiary settings, these teachers are better equipped to create learning experiences that are relevant and meaningful for their students, which can also support sustainable learning.

To sum up, the role identity factors identified in the study suggest a shift towards a more student-centered and reflective approach to CE teaching, which is in line with the principles of sustainable learning.
6. Conclusions and Implications

The study focused on investigating Chinese university English teachers’ enacted identities in the context of EFL curriculum reforms. The findings indicate a significant departure from traditional teaching methods, with teachers embracing student-centered and communicative approaches. They take on the roles of motivators, advocates, and facilitators in English learning, and prioritize student engagement, personal development, and the teaching of effective learning strategies, along with promoting reflective practice. Such characteristics manifest a clear orientation toward a sustainable language pedagogy focusing on active learning, renewing and relearning, independent and collaborative learning, and transferability.

These insights have important implications for sustainable learning practices and in-service teacher training programs. Professional development programs should align with the evolving identities of College English teachers, fostering self-reflection and continuous improvement [53,54]. Administrators and policymakers can leverage these insights to develop targeted programs that address teachers’ specific needs, ultimately improving student outcomes.

However, it is important to note that the findings are specific to the Chinese tertiary EFL context and may not be representative of other educational contexts or cultural backgrounds. Additionally, self-report measures may be subject to social desirability bias or other biases that could potentially affect the accuracy of the findings. The study focused primarily on university EFL teachers’ identity and roles and did not explore other factors that may influence EFL teaching and learning, such as student characteristics or institutional factors.

Since identity is a fluid and dynamic construct, future research can take a longitudinal approach to examine how it evolves and shifts, mediated by an interplay of multiple intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors [5,13,16].

At last, the findings of the study indicate that there were differences in the teaching culture, resources, and expectations among institutions of different tiers. Further research is needed to delve into the reasons behind these differences.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Ethics Committee of The University of Auckland, New Zealand. All participants voluntarily took part in this study and provided their written informed consent to participate in this study before their participation (Ethics Approval No. 010815).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical considerations.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What is your overall approach to teaching the CE course?
2. How do you see your role or identity in relation to the students and the teaching materials in the teaching process?
3. What activities do you participate in to enhance your teaching and research competence as a CE teacher?

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