Whispers of Words: The Poetic Weaving of Reader Identity in the Hearts of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is increasingly understood as a complex construct that requires recognition of Reader Identity (RI), the way students view themselves as readers. This study examines how the notion of reading comprehension has evolved from being viewed as a straightforward skill to a multifaceted construct closely related to RI, which reflects how students perceive themselves as readers. The overall aim of this study was to investigate RI using a mixed methods approach. In this research journey, a total of 284 Iranian EFL students participated in the study and were tested using both a standard questionnaire and an interview. Further analysis yielded eight distinct themes related to RI: Reading Enjoyment, Reading Preferences, Reading Environment, Reading Content, Reading Self-Perception, Reading Challenges, Reading Motivation, and Reading Strategies. No significant gender differences were found; however, there were strong correlations between Reading Efficacy and Reading Enjoyment. Interestingly, the Reading Environment correlated most strongly with Reading Enjoyment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reader Identity has been a focus of academic interest, where it is defined as individual assumptions and beliefs that shape one's interpretation of texts. It transcends cognitive skills and processes by which one may comprehend what they read; it also acknowledges the significant role that culture and society have in shaping interpretation (Hall, 2012a). The connection between experience and learners' identities is significant, as these are the elements that decide their very own unique interpretative matrices (Hall, 2012a). In this regard, Ripp (2022) highlights this phenomenon by asserting that the question "Who are you as a reader?" is equivalent to "What are you reading?" This implies the double nature of reading as both a mental and a very personal process. Although

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research on the RI has increased dramatically (Baldwin & Nadelson, 2023; Doty, 2021; Frankel, 2017; Wagner, 2023; Wang, 2018) a considerable gap is still present among students' reading interactions, and this has an impact on the way learners define themselves as certain types of readers. This issue appears to be less addressed among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who have to deal with the language and culture aspects of a reading activity.

The rationale for this study is that a nuanced appreciation of these identities can shed light on valuable aspects of how students construct meaning from text and connect with deep-seated reading conventions. In order to address this research gap, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach, which is increasingly prominent as a way of generating rich, contextualized understandings of complex phenomena (Dornyei, 2007). The study was conducted in two distinct phases: the quantitative first phase assesses students' self-concepts as readers using a standardized tool developed by Kolb (2014). The purpose of this phase is to quantify how EFL learners view themselves in terms of reading behavior. This is followed by a qualitative phase where personal beliefs about RI will be studied on the basis of theoretical constructs elaborated from the literature review. This two-phase approach allows for a detailed examination of statistical trends and individual narratives.

The merit of this research lies in its capacity to fill a necessary lacuna in existing research on RI among Iranian EFL learners, an area that has not yet been the subject of enough academic investigation. By working to have a systematic analysis of relevant literature and establishing clear research questions, this article attempts to illuminate the intricacies of RI and its pedagogical consequences for EFL contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literacy is not just memorizing terms; it is a dynamic process of creation and re-creation that facilitates self-transformation that dislocates one's contextual milieu (Ripp, 2022; Street, 1984). Reading literacy, in contemporary terms, is referred to as a thought activity whose goal is to elicit meaning from reading practices (Hall, 2012). This entails understanding, evaluating, and responding to texts, thereby clarifying the relationship between the author and the reader (Li et al., 2023).

The connection between literacy and identity, or RI as it is commonly referred to, holds that literacy is more than simply a collection of skills, but rather a cultural and social phenomenon reflecting beliefs and traditions of larger communities (Abodeeb-Gentile & Zawilinski, 2013). The foundational credo of RI acknowledges that there is more to reading than vocabulary development and text analysis (Stewart, 2017). There have been various definitions of RI in the literature(Alvermann, 2001; Norton, 2000; Wagner, 2023). According to Baldwin and Nadelson (2023), RI is self-identification as a reader. They contend that reading proficiency is closely associated with RI; consistent reading performance builds competency, which in turn shapes RI.

Empirical research has directly explored the function of RI across different contexts. For instance, Smith (2014) employed a survey to identify the strong predictors of reading engagement, reading ability, efficacy, RI, and motivation, in which RI emerged as the strongest predictor. A recent systematic review by Berry et al. (2025) revealed that pupils' views on the provision of comments in reading and writing change in a negative way along their educational path, thus influencing their will and involvement. It also points out that bilingual students, like EFL learners, are receptive to various feedback formats, for example, audio and video, which can facilitate their learning in a way that differs from the traditional feedback method. The research results highlight the necessity of taking into account the learners' self-concept and perception of feedback when the

aim is to develop skills in the field of literacy. This is also in accordance with the intricacy of RI in EFL studies.

Li et al. (2023) noted that EFL learners have an upbeat attitude towards reading in English. Good feelings were the major cause of the mentioned motivators, along with teacher support and past learning experience. The relationship between academic and recreational reading attitudes was more powerful in the second language than in the first language, hence suggesting that the learners were reading more regularly in English. Besides, the results showed that neither age nor the level of English proficiency was a factor that significantly affected reading attitudes. The output is an indicator of the importance of affective factors such as anxiety and comfort in giving EFL learners their reader identities and engagement (Thepseenu, 2025).

A qualitative study on Iranian EFL learners indicated that dealing with culturally varied literary fabrics not only encourages learners to build their identities but also intertwines them with the language for both professional purposes and pleasure. Namely, learners' identities changed in parallel with their engagement with source and target culture narratives, which in turn signaled the significance of culture-inclusive syllabi. These identity transformations among learners made them more interactive, critical, and reflective of their own language learning experience. The study points out that the EFL instruction has to be geared towards supporting different identity reconstructions for better matching individual learner preferences and local sociocultural contexts (Nureldeen et al., 2024).

In educational settings, reading is considered a valuable source of life experience among students. Drawing from previous findings, students' identities play a pivotal role in motivating them in approaching the text to be read, thus their engagement in reading activities becomes active (Hall, 2012b). Moreover,(Hall, 2012b) emphasized that these identities significantly impact students' cognitive and discursive interactions with texts. Recent studies have examined how adolescent readers express their engagement with reading interventions and how such engagements contribute to their RI (Doty, 2021; Frankel, 2017; Hall, 2010; Kırca & Glover, 2021). Doty (2021) study revealed substantial variations in students' RI based on their literacy background, learning environments, and associations with teachers.

Regarding the connection between RI and their social environments, Tabbi (2021) found that peers and family were among the most influential players in constructing reader identities and making this specific skill a "common" practice. RI is complex and consists of sub-identities. Individuals do not have a single fixed identity as readers; rather, it involves smaller, context-dependent ways of practicing reading. For instance, a learner may simultaneously identify as a religious reader, an English language learner, a student, and a recreational reader. When reading the Quran, the religious-reading sub-identity becomes salient; through interactions with teachers, peer groups, or academic tasks, the other sub-identities may be brought to the fore. These facets overlap to create the overall RI, which is dynamic and socially constructed across contexts. As a whole, reading selections by readers were strongly driven by these sub-identities, including the ones associated with readers' vocations, the languages they speak, and religious practices.

The study by Frankel (2017) was an investigation into how the students in high school literacy intervention classes recognize themselves as readers after the acts of positioning. The research findings showed that the characters specified by the stated acts could both recast students who were negatively inclined to self-perception and had a small influence on their reading identities. Furthermore, Sellers (2019) explored the effect of peer groups on teenagers' evolution of reading identities and found that reading activities have a strong connection with social and cultural engagement, which is even more evident when the participants do not show any deficits in reading. The results of the study confirm the interaction among identity aspects in the process

of young learners' reading practices; thus, the findings challenge the conventional view that considers young learners' reading skills to be problematic or insufficient.

It was also discussed that the pedagogical condition is key in understanding students' experiences and their criteria for being a reader. Kırca and Glover (2021) identified three types of RI among Turkish university students: manifest state identity (with reading at the center of life), integrated state identity (with reading aligned with professional ambitions), and neutral state identity (with reading utilized as a tool for sense-making in limited scenarios). Bernstein (2014) highlighted the well-established link between teachers' RI and their classroom practice in reading, specifically. Teachers greatly influence the literacy practices and the identities of the students. Hall (2024) also underscored the need for teachers to be able to identify competent versus struggling readers through processes of working through the social contexts in which students position themselves.

Similarly, Garrett (2012) reported in his study that literacy learning and reading experiences are socially constructed; thus, effective readers are shaped by their school environments, notably by teachers who help them translate social experiences into meaningful reading experiences. Hall's (2010) research also suggests that students' involvement in various reading assignments is affected by their own image of themselves as readers and by their reasons to avoid allowing their peers or family members to label them as poor readers. Despite the immense body of literature on RI, research focusing specifically on EFL learners remains limited. Furthermore, past studies have not sufficiently attended to contexts in the case of countries in Asia, such as Iran.

This study aims to fill the void in research related to the reading instruction of EFL learners in Iran, with great emphasis on examining RI within the unique Iranian academic context. The theoretical underpinning for this research comes from a number of paradigms. The ideological model of literacy highlights that different literacy practices are associated with political and social ideologies, and hence, readers approach their text through identity-based and knowledge-based lenses. The autonomous model of literacy considers literacy as a set of transferable skills to be used across contexts with less cultural sensitivity. Finally, Bourdieu and Wacquant (2013) symbolic capital theory underscores the role played by social and cultural capital in influencing identity construction in classroom interactions. Together, these paradigms give insight into how literacy practices are typically shaped within specific social contexts, identities, and educational settings in Iran, therefore offering a strong foundation for the current study into the RI of EFL learners. The present study will attempt to answer two overarching research questions:

1. What are the key predictors and demographic influences on RI among Iranian EFL learners, and how are the constructs of RI interrelated?

• What are the most significant predictors of RI among Iranian EFL learners, and do they differ across demographic groups?

• How highly interrelated are various constructs of RI among Iranian EFL learners, and which constructs correlate most highly?

• Does gender influence how Iranian EFL learners construct their identities as readers?

2. What are Iranian EFL students' typical patterns and themes in their self-conceptions of themselves as readers, and what do these self-conceptions reveal about their identities?

3. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The present study employed a mixed-methods approach to leverage the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative data. Data collection was conducted through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, which facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the research questions.

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Participants

For the quantitative phase, data were gathered from 284 Iranian students (122 males and 162 females) in ninth grade from public high schools in Sabzevar, a small north-eastern Iranian city. Participants were recruited at random to present a representative sample. In the qualitative phase, convenience sampling was employed by taking ten students (five males and five females from the same school) most likely to cooperate with an interview, and hence providing rich qualitative information (Robinson, 2014).

Instruments

Various instruments specifically designed for quantitative and qualitative analyses were employed in the current study. Through the quantitative phase, a standard survey instrument (Kolb, 2014) specifically designed to measure participants' RI was used. The instrument consists of 64 items that were scored on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), across seven underlying dimensions: Reading Enjoyment, Recognition, Challenge, Compliance, Competition, Reading Efficacy, and Social Motives. The coefficient of reliability (α) for the scale was found to be 0.81, which is above the reliability level suggested by (Bozack, 2011).

Demographic information was collected using the above survey. In addition, qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews with ten participants, which were designed to offer in-depth perspectives into the findings. The questions asked by the researchers are as follows:
1. What kinds of things do you enjoy reading? When and where do you enjoy reading?
2. What do others state about your reading?
3. What challenges do you usually face in reading?
4. How many ways are there to read?
5. How do you rate your reading compared to your classmates?
6. How do you see yourself as a text reader and a book reader?
7. How do your family and teachers view your reading compared with other readers?
8. Tell me about your reading habits.
9. How motivated are you to read?
10. What kinds of books do you choose to read the most?

The interview questions were piloted by three experienced researchers specializing in qualitative research in RI. Their remarks were both word and content-based. A pilot interview was conducted on three EFL learners, which saw further questioning adjustments. Each interview lasted 15 to 30 minutes, was digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Procedure

At the initial stage, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Hakim Sabzevari University and the Ministry of Education in Sabzevar prior to the commencement of data collection. Before data collection, written consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were fully informed about the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. The students were made aware of the data collection process and how their responses would be used.

Data was collected in quantitative and qualitative stages. For the quantitative component, the questionnaire was filled in by all of the participants in one sitting at their school. The qualitative data were collected through interviews, which provided control of the questioning process but still allowed participants to provide rich information (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The interviews were

undertaken in Persian to minimize potential language problems or misunderstandings. The participants were interviewed individually, and the interviews were also recorded meticulously.

Data Analysis

This study attempted to examine RI in Iranian EFL learners through a mixed-methods design. The quantitative question was divided into three sub-questions: The first sub-question was addressed through descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies for closed-ended questions regarding factors influencing RI. The second sub-question used correlation analysis to examine inter-relations among factors influencing RI. The final sub-question employed comparative analysis via an independent samples t-test to contrast reading identity perception differences across demographic groups (for example, gender).

For the qualitative component, responses to ten open-ended questions were transcribed, then thematically coded and analyzed. Content analysis followed Braun and Clarke–inspired thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which included verbatim transcription of the transcripts, coding by two researchers with discrepancies resolved through discussion (or by a third coder if necessary), and linking open codes to themes using a coding tree. Data extraction and visualization were conducted using MAXQDA 2020, and inter-coder reliability was assessed on a subset by means of Cohen's kappa (.72).

The integration of MAXQDA allowed proper organization and analysis of qualitative data, enhancing the strength of theme identification and facilitating the visualization of theme relationships. The features of this software assisted in comprehending extensively how qualitative outcomes would complement quantitative outcomes, hence advancing the overall analysis of RI among Iranian EFL students (Software, 2019).

Analysis proceeded according to Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which is intended to search for, examine, and document themes in qualitative data. The phases are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis

1) Being familiar with the data	4) Reviewing themes
2) generating initial codes	5) Defining themes
3) Searching for themes	6) Producing the final report

4. RESULTS

The present research aimed to examine RI among Iranian EFL learners using a mixed-methods research design. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test has been utilized to check the normality assumption for each independent group separately. The p-values for the continuous variable under examination were .20 and .30 for groups 1 and 2, respectively; hence, both values were above .05, which means the data for each group are probably sampled from a normal distribution. Therefore, the use of parametric methods can be allowed in this research.

The RI means and standard deviations for sub-scales with N = 284 are shown in Table 2. The average total score of RI reached 234.72 (SD = 35.45). The sub-scale of Reading Efficacy got the highest mean score among all the other sub-scales (M = 65.71, SD = 10.61). Further, the lowest minimum value was at the Recognition sub-scale (6.00) and the highest was at the Reading Efficacy sub-scale (29.00). Besides, the lowest maximum value of 25.00 was shared by the three

sub-scales of Recognition, Challenge, and Compliance, and the highest maximum value of 85.00 was on Reading Efficacy.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Sub-scales of Reader Identity

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Reading Enjoyment	284	18.00	80.00	59.85	12.61
Recognition	284	6.00	25.00	17.45	4.06
Challenge	284	9.00	25.00	20.55	3.08
Compliance	284	8.00	25.00	16.30	2.99
Competition	284	9.00	40.00	27.98	6.30
Reading Efficacy	284	29.00	85.00	65.70	10.60
Social Motives	284	13.00	39.00	26.84	4.87
Total Reader Identity	284	114.00	316.00	234.72	35.45

Regarding the first research sub-question and the most frequent factors in the development of the RI of Iranian EFL students, the Reading Efficacy (M = 65.70) and Reading Enjoyment (M = 59.85) sub-scales were identified as the leading ones with the highest mean scores, according to Table 1. Besides, females were found to be more competent in both sub-scales than male subjects. In fact, the mean scores were M = 66.33 for females and M = 64.80 for males in Reading Efficacy, as well as M = 60.40 for females compared to M = 59.06 for males in Reading Enjoyment.

Table 3: Correlations of the Reader Identity constructs for the participants (N=284)

	M (SD) for F	M (SD) for M	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1- Reading Enjoyment	60.40 (10.26)	59.06 (15.44)	1	.547 (**)	.539 (**)	.291 (**)	.452 (**)	.757 (**)	.486 (**)
2-Recognition	17.67 (3.65)	17.13 (4.59)		1	.429 (**)	.313 (**)	.524 (**)	.674 (**)	.635 (**)
3-Challenge	20.69 (3.01)	20.36 (3.20)			1	.140 (**)	.654 (**)	.731 (**)	.447 (**)
4-Compliance	16.26 (2.56)	16.36 (3.54)				1	.147 (*)	.257 (**)	.341 (**)
5-Competition	27.73 (6.49)	28.36 (6.04)					1	.672 (**)	.518 (**)
6-Reading Efficacy	66.33 (9.18)	64.80 (12.39)						1	.587 (**)
7-Social Motives	26.88 (4.49)	26.80 (5.41)							1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In order to answer the second sub-research question, Pearson correlation was conducted, and as the results in Table 3 indicate, all RI sub-scales were significantly correlated with one another. The strongest correlation identified was between Reading Enjoyment and Reading Efficacy. Challenge and Compliance were identified as having the weakest correlation of the sub-scales.

Table 4: Independent Samples T-Test

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
			T-test for Equality of Means			
Reader Identity	Equal variances assumed	.584	182	.560	3.11083	5.32873
	Equal variances not assumed	.546	120.671	.586	3.11083	5.70149

To address the final research sub-question, an independent samples t-test was conducted to determine if gender influences participants' self-concept as readers. As illustrated in Table 4, there was no statistically significant difference in the two groups by gender on the mean score (p = .560 > 0.05). In order to respond to the qualitative research question regarding participants' views of their RI, a constructive thematic analysis was employed, with data management and analysis conducted using the MAXQDA 2020 software (VERBI Software, 2019). This approach allowed systematic consideration of the patterns and themes emerging from the data, in keeping with the complexity of RI in Iranian EFL learners. The authors initially immersed themselves in the data to gain a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences and points of view. The earliest codes that were identified in the interview transcripts were based on the frequent phrases and ideas associated with RI. A good example of the usage of terms like "I feel proud when I read" and "Reading helps me relate to my culture" was instrumental in the creation of the main themes. After that, they tried to find such themes that would include these codes. These codes were found to be covered in the themes of Reading Enjoyment, Reading Self-Perception, and Reading Challenges. Additionally, the authors confirmed the most accurate presentation of participants' voices by delving into each theme extensively.

Next, each theme was related to the existing literature on RI and discussed in detail. For example, Reading Enjoyment was connected with increased motivation and initiation of reading activity, which is in line with the results of (Hall, 2012a) on the significance of emotional connections in literacy learning. Finally, a relevant report was developed. The report highlights not only the identified themes but also their implications for the understanding of RI among EFL students. Specifically, the Reading Environment theme pointed to how the home and school settings, where pupils are safe and nurtured, become the venues that facilitate positive self-concepts as readers.

Along with embedding participant interview quotes, the authors attempted to offer a more vivid account that demonstrates how the themes are reflected in everyday life. Such a method not only enhances the reliability of our results but also highlights the significance of cultural context in the study of RI among Iranian EFL learners. The current qualitative analysis benefits from these amendments as the authors convey the process of theme development and its implications for RI more clearly. Reading Enjoyment, Reading Preferences, Reading Environment, Reading Content, Reading Self-Perception, Reading Challenges, Reading Motivation, and Reading Strategies were the eight broad themes that were identified through this process. The themes, along with example quotations, are presented in Table 5. Each theme is supported by participant quotes that mirror the richness of their experience and perception as readers. An understanding of these themes is critical for teachers to develop healthy reader identities in various learning environments.

Table 5: The Themes of Reader Identity (A selection of interviews)

Themes	Categories	Example Quotations
Reading Enjoyment	Reading for pleasure	Student 1: "I enjoy reading scientific books, especially science, mathematics, and astronomy."
	Reading interest	Student 5: "If they are my favorite books, I like to read anytime and anywhere."
Reading Preferences	Book choice	Student 3: "I prefer to choose novels that are not too difficult and have advice in them. It should be more realistic and not fantasy."
	Reading habits	Student 2:" I have to repeat the sentences several times to understand. Also, I usually read out loud."
Reading Environment	Reading position	Student 5: "The place is calm and quiet (my room), and I like to read a lot at night because the mind is calm and we don't think about anything else."
	Best places for reading	Student 8: "I prefer a quiet place like my room or the library."
Reading Content	Reading topics	Student 10: "I seek for science books like biology and astronomy."
	Understanding topics	Student 4: " I am looking for conceptual questions related to the text so that the article is fully understood."
Reading Self-Perception	Efficacy	Student 8: "I have made good progress in reading and can understand the meaning of new words well. Sometimes due to stress in the company of people, I may face a little problem in reading, but overall my reading is very good."
	Personal thoughts	Student 2: "I think of myself as a text reader, I read the text with excitement and naturally for others."
Reading Challenges	Competition	Student 6: " My carelessness and my incessant reading are big challenges."
	Difficulties	Student 1: " I have a lot of difficulty in reading mathematics."
Reading Motivation	Intrinsic motivation	Student 4: "I like reading books because I learn new things and it makes my life better. It has advice and the comfort and it takes you away from other things."
	Extrinsic Motivation	Student 10:"I am motivated to achieve academic and career success in the future by reading."
Reading Strategies	Good strategies	Student 3:"For example, let's divide a text into details to make it easier for us to understand the text."
	Techniques	Student 7: "I take notes (summary) and explain and write in simpler language for myself and those around me. It's like I'm giving a conference about my understanding."

Reading Enjoyment

Participants exhibited a profound pleasure while reading, which is a significant factor in the construction of their identity as readers.

　　Excerpt 1: "*I enjoy reading mathematics, English, and science.*"

　　This theme reveals the internal motivation that students possess in reading. Enjoyment not only adds richness to their reading lives but also maintains their self-concept as energized learners. It has been found that positive feelings generated through reading can enhance understanding and recall (Guthrie et al., 2000). Additionally, students' Reading Preferences will also instruct teachers

on what texts are likely to engage learners' interests and experiences so as to foster their motivation and ownership of reading practices (Brown et al., 2019).

Reading Preferences

The students indicated specific preferences regarding the types of books that they like to read.

Student 3: "*I like to choose novels that are not too difficult and have advice in them.*"

This theme validates the importance of accessible content in constructing RI. With the selection of texts with which they can relate on the basis of their own experiences and cognitive abilities, students are more likely to read the content intensively, evoking a feeling of control over their reading activity (Brown et al., 2019).

Reading Environment

The importance of an accessible reading environment also emerged as a vital theme.

Student 5: "*My environment is quiet and serene (my room), and I like to read a lot at night.*"
A positive reading environment is necessary to assist concentration and enjoyment in reading. This thread is the way that outside forces influence reading practice and being a reader. Research has shown that contextual details are vital in influencing the motivation of reading and comprehension (Çigdemir, 2022). Additionally, recognizing Reading Challenges allows teachers to intervene in helping learners construct approaches to overcome obstacles, resilience, and adaptability in reading practice (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011).

Reading Content

Students had specific interests in certain topics that informed their reading choices.

Student 10: "*I seek books on science like biology and astronomy.*"
The focus on certain topics reveals the manner in which content choice affects engagement and identity. Students engaged on topics of their own choice are more likely to construct a robust RI because they link reading to personal growth and education (Sutherland & Crowther, 2006).

Reading Self-Perception

Self-efficacy for reading developed as a central aspect of the participants' identities.

Student 8: "*I have been able to make good progress in reading, and new words are quite understandable for me.*"
This theme emphasizes the importance of self-perception in the formation of RI. Studies show that a positive correlation exists among self-efficacy beliefs, motivation, and perseverance in the reading activity; thus, students who consider themselves competent readers are more willing to handle difficult texts (Yoğurtçu, 2013).

Reading Challenges

The participants identified some of the challenges of reading.

Student 6: "*My carelessness and my continuous reading are gigantic obstacles.*"
Identifying these challenges speaks to the subtleties of RI formation. Identification of challenges allows students to learn to operate in spite of them, which can enhance resilience and adaptability in reading practices (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011).

Reading Motivation

Motivation was experienced both intrinsically and extrinsically by the participants.

Student 4: "*I like reading books because I learn something new.*"

This combination of motivation is typical of its significance in shaping RI. Intrinsic motivation enhances love for reading, while extrinsic motivation enhances academic achievement. Research has demonstrated that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are essential to being able to maintain engagement in literacy (Troyer et al., 2019).

Reading Strategies

Effective strategies were discussed by the students as major tools of comprehension.

Student 3: "*For example, let's divide a piece of text into details to enable us to easily comprehend it.*"

The implementation of particular strategies reflects an active reading of texts, further testifying to their roles as good readers. Through effective strategies, comprehension is improved, thus students are empowered to manage their learning processes (Higgins et al., 2012).

Emerging themes from this qualitative phase of the study are informative and provide detailed information regarding the complexity of RI among EFL students. The unknown factors behind constructing RI may include socio-cultural factors or learning contexts that need to be examined more closely in order to provide a wide vision of this involved process.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current research aimed to examine RI among Iranian EFL learners using a mixed-methods research design. The findings provided important insights into the identified research questions. As anticipated, the quantitative analysis of the data did not reveal a significant difference in readers' self-concept between male and female EFL learners. This corroborates other studies that have shown that gender may not be the deciding factor in the construction of RI (Garrett, 2012; Tabbi, 2021). In fact, both gender groups exhibited remarkably similar levels of RI, making it urgent to further study the nuances of the role of gender in attitudes towards reading. Additionally, the analysis indicated a high correlation between Reading Enjoyment and Reading Efficacy, with Reading Efficacy being the strongest construct of RI in the study. This finding contrasts with Smith (2014), who emphasized the interdependence between Reading Motivation and Reading Ability but did not necessarily identify Reading Efficacy as being of utmost significance.

The literature also suggests that while Reading Enjoyment is significant, it may be more of an addition to Reading Efficacy rather than a single, independent component (Guthrie et al., 2000). Competition and Social Motives were also found to be the determinative factors of RI, supporting Garrett (2012) and Tabbi (2021) findings, which also highlighted the determinative roles of environmental factors, for instance, family and peers, in reading identity formation. However, Challenge, Recognition, and Compliance were found to be the least determinative dimensions among these students. This classification justifies Hall (2012) assertion on the importance of RI as a key to inducing enjoyment and participation in reading.

The Reading Enjoyment theme is aligned with Aarnoutse and van Leeuwe (1998) operational definition of positive reading attitudes toward reading content. Reading Preferences, as the second theme, is associated with Book Choice and Reading Habits constructs of Bozack (2011) scale. These findings are congruent with earlier studies demonstrating the importance of individuals' personal tastes in constructing reading experiences. In addition, the Reading Environment theme demonstrates participants' views regarding optimal reading environments,

supporting the premise that context plays a significant role in RI. This contrasts with Smith (2014) emphasis on internal variables such as motivation and efficacy without a thorough examination of the influence of environments.

Qualitative data revealed Reading Self-Perception to be directly related to Reading Efficacy, portraying instructional beliefs of learners towards reading competency, thus confirming Schunk (2003) finding on motivation within learning contexts. Reading instructional challenges were also part of the theme of Reading Challenges, thus confirming Guthrie et al. (2000) instructional challenge statement on reading motivation. Lastly, Reading Strategies were operationally defined as psychological methods to enhance comprehension effectiveness (Afflerbach et al., 2008). This component emphasizes the complex nature of RI, suggesting that cognitive methods and affective responses equally contribute to the development of a solid RI.

Evidence from this study underscores that cultural contexts play a pivotal role in the development of RI in Iranian EFL learners, shaping how they regard themselves as readers. Cultural perceptions in Iran have a tendency to consider reading as a vital aspect of scholarly accomplishment and personal growth, which can elevate the self-concept of students as good readers (Hall, 2012a). However, this cultural emphasis may also generate pressure to conform to traditional literacy conceptions, dangerously eliminating differential reading experiences. As Stewart (2017) explains, the co-mingling of literacy practices with cultural values generates a sense of urgency in the recognition of how these components form students' identities.

Moreover, the findings have important implications for EFL teachers in Iran, as they need to consider reinforcing learners' Reading Efficacy by using particular strategies and comprehension exercises in order to raise the confidence of the students. It is absolutely necessary to establish a positive reading atmosphere for learners, as social influences from their peers and family have a very strong impact on RI. Moreover, the curricula must also manage to meet the needs of both the internal and external motivators, while still offering students the opportunity to pursue the topics they find interesting, so that they can be active participants and derive enjoyment from the activity. A reading-discussion group might also be students' next step in turning the texts into a personal experience, which thus would acknowledge the role of Reading Enjoyment and Reading Efficacy in the development of a strong RI.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the complex relationships between language acquisition, reader self-concept, and culture in an EFL context in Iran. The results show that the process of reading competence and enjoyment is at the center of the formation of learner RI, which is positive. Additionally, social milieus and community-based educational methodologies significantly shape learners' self-conceptions as readers. Altogether, these findings emphasize the importance of going beyond strictly monolingual and monocultural pedagogies to educate students who are fluent in multiple languages and conversant with different cultures, and thus able to achieve fair educational outcomes. The amalgamation of quantitative and qualitative data has uncovered the intricacies of RI as both a cognitive and a socio-cultural construct, which depend on several factors. However, this work acknowledges that the research results are valid for the EFL learners in Iran and may not be widely applicable to speakers of other languages or different cultures. Another point that must be acknowledged is the bias potential due to the dependence of the research on the self-reported data. Hence, subsequent researchers might aim to include a more substantial and varied population and conduct a longitudinal study to track changes in reader identities over time. It is also recommended that future research further investigate both reading practice and identity in EFL contexts. Moreover, it is imperative that researchers examine direct relationships between components of RI more closely. The results suggest that Reading Efficacy and Reading Enjoyment are critical constructs worth further examination due to their core positions in forming RI in Iranian EFL learners.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest

The author of this work states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

The participants in the study were all informed and gave their consent before the research was conducted. The participation in this research was absolutely on a voluntary basis.

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