



# Recognition in the EFL Profession: Teachers’ Needs and Professional Identity

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Received 26/05/2025	<b>ABSTRACT</b>  Every individual seeks to be acknowledged for who they are, and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers are no exception. This study investigates the recognition needs of Thai EFL teachers and how these needs influence their professional identity. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study draws on data from two research instruments: a structured questionnaire responded to by 24 Thai EFL teachers and a mini portfolio survey completed by twelve Thai EFL teachers of the same group. A purposive sampling method was used to include participants from a selection of secondary schools in Thailand. Findings reveal that EFL teachers require various forms of recognition, both formal and informal, to reinforce and reshape their professional identities. Pearson correlation analysis indicates strong relationships between recognition and both professional identity ( $r = .62$ ) and intrinsic motivation ( $r = .57$ ), while extrinsic motivation proved less influential ( $r = .28$ ). These insights underscore the essential role of intrinsic validation and professional acknowledgment in sustaining morale, enhancing motivation, and ultimately ensuring instructional quality in EFL contexts.  <b>Keywords:</b> recognition, EFL profession, teachers’ needs, professional identity, motivation
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## Introduction

Recognition, a fundamental human need, plays an important role in sustaining EFL teachers' commitment to the profession, as explored in previous studies (Day & Gu, 2009; Honneth, 1995). In every context, including education, individuals strive to be valued, acknowledged, and affirmed by those around them. These "significant others" may include students, peers, supervisors, or wider communities. For EFL teachers, especially in non-native English-speaking countries like Thailand, this recognition is not always easy to acquire, often due to cultural norms that tend to take teachers' efforts for granted and the systems that tend to overlook the day-to-day contributions of language teachers. There is even a Thai saying that is quite analogous in schools, which goes, "A teacher is like a boat for hire, used to cross the river, then forgotten on the shore", a cultural expression that well reflects educational values in Thailand (Wongthai, 2022).

In Thailand, English language education is often highlighted as a national priority due to globalization and ASEAN integration. However, despite this prominence, many EFL teachers report feeling under recognized in their professional environments. Recognition, in this case, goes beyond academic titles and qualifications as it includes simple yet powerful emotional support or encouragement, be it verbal, written, or practical. Without this recognition, EFL teachers can feel undervalued, leading to burnout and demotivation (An & Tao, 2024). This underlying relationship is confirmed in research, indicating how insufficient recognition contributes to teacher stress and attrition (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Generally speaking, EFL teachers face numerous challenges including cultural adaptation, digital transformations in education especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, increasingly diverse student groups, and higher pressures from demanding work environments. Their motivation, often rooted in internal satisfaction, student success, and professional growth can be severely impacted by lack of acknowledgment. Without recognition, these challenges can decrease teacher motivation and professional commitment. Recognition, then, becomes a pivotal factor in the equation of teaching effectiveness and professional sustainability (An & Tao, 2024; Ingersoll, 2017).

Moreover, identity in teaching is not a fixed label; it is constantly evolving, shaped by relationships, experiences, and contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004). When teachers feel acknowledged, their sense of self as professionals is ensured. Without it, even the most passionate and caring EFL teachers may struggle to maintain confidence, purpose, and resilience (Kelchtermans, 2009).

This study therefore seeks to explore how recognition affects the professional identity and motivation of Thai EFL teachers, through both qualitative and quantitative lenses. To guide this investigation, the following research questions were attempted:

- 1) What are Thai EFL teachers' needs for recognition in relation to their professional identity?
- 2) What forms of recognition influence their professional identity?
- 3) What is the relationship between recognition and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation among Thai EFL teachers?

## **Literature Review**

Recognition plays a crucial role in shaping a teacher's identity, motivation, and professionalism. As a notion, recognition in the teaching profession is beyond just simple rewards or praise; it is deeply tied to how teachers perceive where they are in the educational system. For EFL teachers, who often work under several cultural, institutional, and linguistic constraints, the need for recognition is particularly paramount.

Several studies support the position that recognition serves as a psychological and emotional ideology for educators. Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition states that human beings require affirmation from others to develop a positive sense of self. This theory aligns well with EFL teaching contexts, where support from students, peers, or institutions can profoundly affect teachers' self-worth and performance. With no recognition, teachers would have difficulty forming or sustaining a well-balanced professional identity. In fact, research shows that recognition fulfills not only a personal need but also as a professional inspiration, giving teachers the confidence to stay motivated in their work (Day & Gu, 2009).

In language education, teacher identity is seen as dynamic and complex. Beijgaard et al. (2004) point out that forming identity is not stable but gradually develops through experiences, personal reflections, and work expectations. For EFL teachers, particularly in EFL countries like Thailand, this non-static identity is even impacted by how others accept their competence and integrity. In line with Varghese et al. (2005), teacher insecurity about their language proficiency and other cultural limitations in the target language can bring about the ideology of identity construction. Studies in Thailand also suggest that these concerns are not just assumptions, but actual challenges teachers face when it comes to language proficiency and cultural expectations (Kirkpatrick, 2017; Sah, 2016). Considering these, it even makes recognition more essential for teacher mentality as well as professional standards.

In Southeast Asia, recognition is often associated with cultural norms. Teachers may feel reluctant to express their professional needs due to respect

for authority or maturity (Tran & Li, 2025). In Thailand, for example, EFL teachers, particularly those who are young or junior, may feel marginalized in the EFL community. They are sometimes perceived as young and inexperienced despite their essential role in delivering language skills to students. This marginalization can lead to their being invisible in the workplace, especially when teachers' efforts are not appreciated or acknowledged through formal and informal recognition. Research also indicates that this issue does not concern only EFL teachers; teachers of other subjects can face similar problems, especially when they are new or less senior in their institutions. (Ingersoll, 2017).

Moreover, recognition is also directly related to motivation, a main element in the quality of teaching. Based on Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, motivation appears to increase a lot in environments where teachers feel proficient, independent, and engaged. For EFL teachers, this simply shows that recognition can be a powerful indication of intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, when recognition disappears, EFL teachers may disengage or demotivate, even if they are well-connected to the teaching career.

According to Hanus and Fox (2015), comparison of individuals and recognition in society can greatly affect teacher motivation and fulfillment. Their study looked into gamification in learning contexts and suggested that recognition promotes a sense of pride and togetherness. In fact, both teachers and students appreciate feedback that is constructive and the encouragement that their contributions make a difference.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Day and Gu (2007) reported that constant recognition from school and students plays a role second to none in teacher morale and teaching commitment. When recognition is given, teachers are more likely to be more resilient when facing challenges and adversity in their career. In contrast, the lack of such acknowledgment can lead to emotional breakdown, increased turnovers, and finally, career resignation. These challenges are particularly apparent in countries where educational systems focus on test scores and evaluations over teacher satisfaction and welfare.

In Thailand, teacher motivation has been investigated along with recognition. According to Sah (2016), Thai EFL teachers are influenced by respect, peer support, and opportunities for development than by financial benefits. This is in line with Ayeni's (2015) claim that intrinsic motivation including self-respect, responsibility, and teacher independence are important for instructional quality. These findings point out that recognition must be made part of not only performance evaluations but also into culture of the workplace.

Recognition is also connected with emotional labor as proposed by Hargreaves (1998). This concept affirms that teachers often hide their true feelings to appear professional, and when this effort goes unnoticed, it can quietly demotivate them. For EFL teachers, who constantly deal with different cultures and complex relationships, emotional labor is just part of the job. Thus, schools and universities can offer sincere recognition to minimize this emotional burden (Hargreaves, 2001.).

As we live in the world of technology these days, learning environments are certainly digitalized and this has complicated teaching in the classroom. The change to online teaching due to the COVID-19 outbreak and its aftermath has reduced the amount and quality of interactions, which normally provides EFL teachers with informal recognition. A study by Cramarencu et al. (2023) illustrates that in virtual classrooms, student engagement and feedback are not available, leaving teachers unsure about their teaching effectiveness. As a result, teachers may experience separation from the teaching job and feel distanced from their purpose in teaching and learning.

This study overall highlights how important recognition is for EFL teachers' identity and motivation. Constructive feedback, support from schools, appreciation from students, or acceptance from colleagues help teachers feel valued and recognized. For EFL teachers who work across cultures and languages, it is these forms of acknowledgment that make a difference to their teaching journey, giving them a true sense of pride and purpose in their work.

Recognition, motivation, and professional identity are commonly discussed in literature; however, they are often researched in isolation. This leaves a gap in how they all play a part in teachers' lives. For EFL teachers, recognition reinforces intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and inexorably shapes their professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2004). This study examines that gap by looking into recognition as both a psychological and social process that underpins teachers' commitment and motivation, acknowledging it as central to their professional growth.

Guided by Honneth's (1995) recognition theory, Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, Hargreaves' (1998) concept on emotional labor, and Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory, the study shows that these theories are particularly pertinent to the Thai EFL context because they help explain how recognition from students and colleagues can even be more motivating than extrinsic incentives. They also show how appreciation from students, other teachers, and school groups can shape teacher professional identity.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Employing a mixed-methods approach to explore both EFL teachers' emotional experiences and teacher recognition, the study intends to examine both the individual experiences of EFL teachers while also supporting them with empirical evidence.

### **Quantitative Phase**

The quantitative section involved a questionnaire which was completed by 24 EFL teachers, purposively chosen from three public and private schools in Thailand. All participants held at least a master's degree in ELT, TEFL, Education, or Applied Linguistics and have been teaching English from three to fifteen years at school level. Their ages ranged from 24 to 46, which provided viewpoints from both young and more experienced teachers. Participants were invited through their schools and professional teacher networks, and all agreed to participate in the study voluntarily. The questionnaire comprised 20 statements where the teachers had to rate their views on recognition, professional identity, motivation, and satisfaction with their job. Three experienced EFL teachers were asked to validate the survey using the IOC to make sure it was clear and suitable. The items were based on previous studies on recognition, motivation, and professional identity (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Beijaard et al., 2004). After IOC review, revisions were made, and a small pilot test was carried out with two teachers outside the study group. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." It was also tested to check that the questions made sense and worked well together. The questionnaire proved reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha above .80. The responses were collected online using a Google Form to make participation easy and flexible, no matter where the teachers were located. All ethical considerations were also taken into account: the teachers gave their online consent, and their answers were kept completely anonymous.

### **Qualitative Phase**

In parallel, for the qualitative phase, twelve Thai EFL teachers were asked to take part in completing a mini portfolio survey, also validated by the three experts using the IOC. The selection of these teachers was made on the basis of the diversity of their responses to the initial questionnaire, as well as

their availability and willingness to contribute more insights. The participants came from different school contexts, allowing experiences from diverse teaching environments to be considered.

The survey contained three open-ended questions which gave the chance to the teachers to further share their experiences, feelings, and teaching and learning challenges on their identity vis-a-vis needs and recognition as EFL teachers. In practice, the mini portfolio survey asked teachers to reflect on and provide examples of recognition in their teaching practices, whether from students, colleagues, or other stakeholders. This method was necessary because it enabled the teachers to describe their experiences in greater depth. The data was collected online, ensuring their reachability and convenience. To strengthen the credibility of the qualitative data, member checking was carried out. After the initial analysis, brief summaries of the participants' responses were shared with them. This allowed the teachers to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations and offer any alterations or additional thoughts. Their feedback helped ensure that the findings truly represented their experiences and perspectives. In analyzing the responses, a thematic coding approach was used (Saldaña, 2021). Codes were assigned to key words and ideas, grouped into categories, and extracted into themes. These themes were then compared with the quantitative findings to gain richer insights.

### **Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods**

The blend of quantitative and qualitative methods was methodologically and practically intended. The quantitative data provided direct insights into the patterns of recognition experienced by Thai EFL teachers from different educational settings. However, data itself cannot reflect the personal feelings, challenges, and professional journeys that form a teacher's identity. That's why the qualitative phase was then added, which then amplified voices and lived experiences of these EFL teachers under study. Combining both methods gave rise to a better understanding of Thai EFL teachers' recognition and professional identity. It also warranted that the study reflected not only the shared experiences common to many teachers but also individual perspectives that make each teacher's professional trajectory unique. It should be noted that as the study included only 24 teachers in the survey and 12 in the qualitative phase, the findings remain exploratory and are not intended to be generalized.

## Findings and Discussion

The results of the study revealed several insights into the recognition experiences of Thai EFL teachers. The participants, through both the questionnaire and the mini portfolio survey, consistently highlighted the emotional and professional importance of being acknowledged in their roles as teachers of English as a foreign language. Research Question 1 regarding teachers' needs for recognition in relation to their professional identity will be specifically addressed first.

The quantitative data, collected through the questionnaire from a purposive sample of 24 Thai EFL teachers, provided some evidence how recognition relates to key variables of their professional experience. A large majority, 78% of these participants, agreed or strongly agreed that recognition from workplaces and school environments positively influenced their job satisfaction. As seen in Table 1, Pearson correlation values show that recognition is strongly correlated with professional identity ( $r = .62$ ) and intrinsic motivation ( $r = .57$ ), while only slightly connected to extrinsic motivation ( $r = .28$ ). These statistical correlations suggest that as recognition increases, EFL teachers are more likely to have a stronger professional identity and intrinsic motivation. These results indicate associations, rather causation. They show how recognition is related to professional identity and motivation without entailing direct effects.

**Table 1**

*Correlation between Recognition and the Key Variables*

Key Variables	Pearson Correlation with Recognition ( $r$ )	Significance ( $p$ )
Professional Identity	0.62	$p < .01$ **
Intrinsic Motivation (e.g., sense of purpose, enjoyment of teaching, personal development)	0.57	$p < .01$ **
Extrinsic Motivation (e.g., salary, awards, incentives)	0.28	n.s.

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . n.s. = not significant\*

Additional analysis of the questionnaire responses offered insight into the main sources of recognition reported by participants. As shown in Table 2, students were by far the most frequent source of recognition, followed by fellow teachers and school leaders.



**Table 2**
*Source of Recognition*

Source of Recognition	Number of Teachers Reporting (n)	Percentage (%)
Students	21	87.5%
Fellow Teachers	16	66.7%
School Directors	13	54.2%
Parents	5	20.8%
External Organizations	2	8.3%

In relation to Research Question 2 on the forms of recognition that influence professional identity, these findings highlight the relational nature of teaching. However, given the small sample size, these percentages should be interpreted as indicative of this group rather than broadly generalizable. Most participants described the emotional boost they felt when recognized by students, colleagues, or school leaders. Notably, 87.5% of the teachers (n = 21) reported that student appreciation had a greater motivational impact than financial incentives or formal awards. Recognition from fellow teachers followed at 66.7% (n = 16), while 54.2% of the teachers (n = 13) stated that recognition from supervisors encouraged them to try new teaching strategies, particularly when working with students requiring additional support. These responses reflect the powerful role of recognition in shaping both teacher morale and pedagogical innovation.

In response to Research Question 3 on examining the relationship between recognition and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, while the sample was modest, the findings were rather compelling. Recognition was closely associated with teachers' sense of professional identity and intrinsic motivation, the internal satisfaction that comes from helping students and taking pride in their teaching, as indicated in the survey responses. External rewards such as salary or bonuses showed a much weaker relationship. The results reinforce that Thai EFL teachers place greater value on feeling seen and appreciated in their everyday work than on material compensation.

The mini portfolio survey allowed personal insights to emerge. Many teachers described how small signs or actions could have a great impact on their emotions or perceptions. Recognition according to them does not have to be grand or laborious. A kind word of thanks from a student, and supportive fellow teachers, or a simple approval from an authority is more than sufficient. One teacher pointed out,

“I remember one student once emailed me saying my lessons changed how she perceived English. That truly made my day and kept me going for days”.

A participant noted,

“My team teachers, as a surprise, handed me a small card thanking me for coaching them. I never expected it, but it made me feel so special and appreciated”.

Another teacher said,

“Just a simple saying, ‘thanks for your hard work’ from the supervisor at the end of the semester energizes me to give my best for the next semester.”

The teachers who felt recognized expressed more confidence and interest in attempting new teaching approaches and meeting the needs of their students. On the contrary, the teachers who felt disregarded reported having lower morale and sensations of discouragement. The 12 teachers, ranging from junior to senior levels with 3 to 15 years of experience, reflected diversity that helped strengthen the qualitative findings. This shows that feeling appreciated is important for professional growth and classroom efficacy. These results provide useful insights into how recognition serves as a catalyst for teacher security and professional identity.

Comparing these findings with previous studies reveals both similarities and differences. As Day and Gu (2010) remarked, teachers who are valued by students, colleagues, and school administrators are more likely to stay committed and motivated. This study is in support of such findings, showing a clear relationship between recognition and professional identity ( $r = .62$ ), resonating Flores and Day’s (2006) position of the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching.

What was most obvious was the role of student recognition. The participants often described it as the strongest and meaningful source of acceptance. This is in line with Crosswell and Elliott’s (2004) findings on how student appreciation helps maintain teacher engagement, especially under pressure. In the Thai context, where teachers are widely respected, recognition from students is especially meaningful. Recognition from parents or outside groups appeared far less often, suggesting that for Thai EFL teachers, professional affirmation is largely embedded in the day-to-day life of the school.

The relatively low correlation between recognition and extrinsic motivators such as salary ( $r = .28$ ) confirms Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, which posits that intrinsic needs for relatedness,

autonomy, and competence often outweigh external rewards in influencing motivation. This study adds local evidence to that theory, emphasizing that Thai EFL teachers derive the greatest sense of purpose from positive interpersonal exchanges rather than material incentives.

Interestingly, these findings also mirror the observations of Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011), who argued that teacher job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion are closely tied to feelings of being supported and valued. Similarly, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) reported that teachers who have had early career recognition and coaching show stronger long-term commitment to teaching and professional growth. The role of recognition as a drive for teacher identity is also reinforced by Kelchtermans (2011), who noted that teachers' emotional well-being and commitment are highly impacted by simple acts of appreciation from colleagues and school.

This study also complements work conducted by Jitpraneechai (2019) which reported that Thai teachers, particularly in private school settings, consistently identified school-based recognition and positive feedback as major factors in sustaining their motivation and satisfaction.

The participants in this study expressed a mutual admiration of the impact of informal recognition. Many stated how simple acts had a remarkably profound effect on their sensitivity and motivation. These reflections affirm that such recognition does not always have to be formal or come through official protocols, but its value lies in being genuine, suitable, and appreciative.

The findings highlight the influential role of informal acknowledgment in enhancing teacher morale and classroom engagement. At its core, the study warrants a deep human truth which is the desire to feel seen and valued. By offering insights into how this need establishes among Thai EFL teachers, this research encourages school policymakers and administrators to foster environments where teacher appreciation is not just by chance but embedded in the daily culture of teacher professional life.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined the intricate role of recognition in shaping the professional identity and motivation of Thai EFL teachers. The findings show that recognition is closely rooted in how teachers feel about themselves, their determination and their long-term dedication to both their students and their own development. It became clear that recognition is not just an addition but it is something teachers genuinely need to stay motivated and committed. At the same time, with only 24 teachers in the study, the conclusions mainly reflect the EFL teachers' experiences under study and

may not apply beyond this group, suggesting future research with larger and more diverse groups.

The teachers in this study indicated that recognition helped them feel emotionally supported. This kind of encouragement often reminded them of why they chose to teach in the first place and helped them feel proud of their work. The findings suggest that when recognition is honest and happens regularly, it can help teachers stay strong and positive, even during difficult times.

The use of a mixed-methods approach proved effective in this research as it can offer a more holistic understanding of the emotional realities of teaching. It highlights the importance of looking beyond what can be measured, to include what teachers experience and feel in their teaching practice. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results was especially important. Both the survey and the interviews provided empirical results, with the latter adding to teachers' personal experience of recognition in their teaching. Together, the two methods offered a more complete understanding than either method used alone.

Thai EFL teachers, like teachers elsewhere, want to feel seen, heard, and valued. In addition to teaching English, these teachers also help students understand culture and identity, acting as important navigators in both areas. This study shows that recognition is not just a minor concern since it plays a central role in keeping teachers motivated, connected to their work over time, and able to give their best to students.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings from this study shed light on some practical ways in which schools and policymakers can better support EFL teachers. First to note is that meaningful recognition does not depend on elaborate systems or significant financial investment. Rather, such small genuine recognizable actions help build a school culture in which teachers feel respected and motivated.

Creating more chances for teachers to recognize and support one another can help build stronger professional relationships. Many EFL teachers, especially in small programs with relatively few teachers such as those teaching in private schools or small university language centers, often feel segregated. By setting up some simple ways for teachers to share positive thoughts and vibes, and encouragement can help build a spirit of teamwork and mutual purpose.

Teacher evaluation systems also need to be re-examined. Instead of focusing only on performance results, evaluations should be used as a platform for mutual discussions. When teachers receive feedback that not

only suggests areas for improvement but also signifies what they have done well or satisfactorily, it appears to be more helpful and motivating.

Also, professional development should also be perceived as a form of recognition. When schools support teachers to attend workshops, join conferences, or do small research projects, it delivers a powerful message that teacher development matters. These experiences help teachers feel acknowledged for their efforts and can revive their passion for teaching. This aligns with the data collected in this study, where the participants identified professional development opportunities and peer encouragement as meaningful forms of recognition.

Given the small sample size, this study serves as exploratory research, which may restrict the extent to which the findings can apply to broader contexts. Future research should therefore include a larger and more diverse group of EFL teachers. Also, further research could investigate how recognition affects teachers in the long term particularly in terms of job satisfaction and classroom performance. It would also be useful to compare how native and non-native EFL teachers experience recognition, as their needs and perceptions may vary. Additionally, student feedback as a form of recognition is an area which is underexplored which can shed light on how teacher identity is formed and reshaped in the classroom setting.

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