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From Collaboration to Transformation: How CAR Shapes Preservice EFL Teachers' Professional Identity

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Abstract

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This study investigates the impact of Collaborative Action Research (CAR) on the professional identity formation of preservice English-as-a-foreign-Language (EFL) teachers in Iran, framed within Kumaravadivelu's postmethod pedagogy. Through focus group interviews, mentor observation notes, and reflective journals, seven key themes emerged: Promoting Collaborative Learning and Shared Responsibility, Shaping a Lifelong Commitment to Professional Development, Building Leadership and Agency, Fostering Reflective Practice, Developing a Student-Centered Professional Identity, Enhancing Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving, and Connecting Theory to Practice. The findings reveal that CAR serves as a transformative tool that enables preservice teachers to engage in reflective, autonomous, and collaborative practices aligned with postmethod principles. By addressing real classroom challenges, participants developed a deeper understanding of their roles as educators, fostering a student-centered approach and a commitment to ongoing professional growth. The study underscores CAR's potential to prepare preservice teachers to function as adaptive, critical, and agentic educators in diverse contexts. It highlights the relevance of postmethod pedagogy in reshaping teacher education, particularly in Iran, where preservice teachers navigate unique cultural and educational dynamics. Integrating CAR into EFL teacher training programs can empower future educators to bridge theory and practice, ultimately contributing to more responsive and effective language teaching.

Keywords: CAR, postmethod pedagogy, preservice EFL teachers, professional identity, reflective practice

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1. Introduction

Professional identity (PI) formation in preservice teachers (PSTs) involves navigating pedagogy, classroom realities, and sociocultural demands, often complicated by limited experience and institutional constraints (Beijaard et al., 2004; Izadinia, 2013). Research indicates ongoing discrepancies between theoretical education and actual teaching practice that frequently lead to role confusion and reduced self-confidence (Alvarado Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010). These difficulties become even more pronounced in EFL environments, where teachers must manage linguistic variety, evolving policies, and cultural norms (Zhu et al., 2020). For instance, Iranian preservice EFL teachers' identities are commonly influenced by their academic studies, practicum experiences, and broader sociocultural pressures. However, the focus often remains on equipping teachers with skills and abilities, with little effort to address various negative societal perceptions of the teaching profession in Iran and the impact of such pressures on prospective teachers. Emphasizing technical competencies over reflective independence risks creating inflexible professional identities instead of adaptable ones (Graham & Phelps, 2003; Pérez-Gracia et al., 2022).

The evolution of language teaching methods reflects efforts to address the aforementioned challenges. Brown (2000) traces the shift from prescriptive methods to postmethod pedagogy, which emphasizes context-sensitive, teacher-led approaches. This model focuses on adaptability to specific local needs (particularity), knowledge generation by practitioners (practicality), and critical examination of sociopolitical inequalities (possibility) (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Meanwhile, Collaborative Action Research (CAR) has emerged as a cyclical approach for enhancing teacher agency through planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Burns, 1999; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The focus of CAR on collaborative inquiry and problem-solving corresponds with postmethod principles and provides PSTs with resources to connect theory and practice while encouraging reflective autonomy (Atay, 2008).

This research addresses a significant gap by combining CAR with postmethod pedagogy. While earlier studies have explored CAR's technical uses for skill enhancement (Burns, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and the theoretical foundations of postmethod pedagogy (Akbari, 2008), their combined potential for teacher identity development remains underexamined. Most research underscores CAR's functional benefits over its potential to transform teacher identity (Atay, 2008; Gao et al., 2011). Similarly, while postmethod pedagogy is widely discussed theoretically, its practical application to teacher identity is limited (Akbari, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2001). This gap obscures how CAR's reflective dimensions align with

postmethod principles to shape teacher identity, particularly in the Iranian context.

The outcomes of this study may offer practical strategies for teacher education programs by promoting curricula that integrate CAR to foster reflective collaboration and critical dialogue (Harfitt & Chan, 2017). The findings also aim to contribute to global discussions on educational equity. Highlighting CAR's potential to challenge systemic inequities, aligned with postmethod principles, reveals pathways for PSTs to better support marginalized students (Chacón, 2010; Kumaravadivelu, 2001). This is particularly crucial in educational systems, such as Iran's, that prioritize standardization and homogenization over socially responsive and adaptive teaching practices (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Postmethod Pedagogy

Language instruction shifted in the late 20th century as educators sought alternatives to conventional methods (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Kumaravadivelu (2006a) calls for reevaluating language teaching and teacher education in the postmethod era. He stresses the significance of localization and the inclusion of *all* stakeholders in this transformative process. Kumaravadivelu's (2001) postmethod pedagogy critiques entrenched *method-centric* approaches that have long dominated language teaching. It rejects top-down methods by recognizing that no single approach suits all learners (Rashidi & Mansourzadeh, 2017; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Prabhu (1990) noted that traditional methods often neglect diverse learner needs. This failure underscores the necessity of a postmethod approach in EFL teacher education that empowers educators to customize their teaching.

At the core of postmethod pedagogy are three interconnected parameters: particularity, practicality, and possibility (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Particularity stresses adapting teaching to local sociocultural and institutional contexts. It asserts that specific local needs and classroom situations should shape teaching methods. For example, in diverse EFL environments, educators may modify materials to represent the linguistic backgrounds of their students, which aligns with Kumaravadivelu's concept of "situational understanding" (2006a, p. 171). Practicality promotes teacher autonomy and reflective, context-based knowledge-building, thereby empowering teachers to experiment and adapt their methods to suit their learners' needs (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b). Possibility urges teachers to critique power structures and promote equity. It challenges curricula that overlook minority languages and promotes socially just practices (Akbari, 2008). Kumaravadivelu (2006a) contends that the postmethod era necessitates a significant transformation in the relationship between teachers and theorists by

urging educators to pursue greater autonomy and empowerment while highlighting their social and political obligations. Together, these elements introduce adaptability, reflection, and justice into language pedagogy—qualities that are critically needed in the Iranian context.

Concerning identity development, postmethod pedagogy asserts that professional identities are co-constructed through interactions with students, curricula, and institutional norms (Varghese et al., 2005). It links identity to context (particularity), agency (practicality), and social change (possibility) (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). This framework provides a lens through which to analyze how CAR—a collaborative, inquiry-based process—enables PSTs to navigate such dimensions.

2.2. CAR in EFL Teacher Education

Given the challenges PSTs face in forming their professional identities, CAR has emerged as a promising approach to support their development through reflective and collaborative practices. CAR is a collaborative cycle of inquiry, action, and reflection on classroom challenges (Burns, 1999; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). In EFL contexts, CAR fosters reflection, adaptation, and critical dialogue. By engaging in CAR, PSTs analyze their teaching practices, cultivate metacognitive abilities, and gain confidence in decision-making, all of which are vital for achieving reflective autonomy (Atay, 2008).

Using narrative inquiry, Sang (2023) found that reflective coursework significantly influenced Chinese preservice EFL teachers' identity development by shaping their teaching beliefs. Although not framed within CAR, this study reinforced the value of reflection and belief negotiation in teacher education—elements central to CAR and crucial for identity formation.

Lee (2010) found that South Korean PSTs enhanced their reflective and adaptive teaching skills through CAR. While the case study (25 participants) showed CAR bridging theory and practice, it overlooked sociocultural factors and was confined to a homogeneous setting. Our study builds on Lee's by combining CAR and postmethod pedagogy to explore identity development in Iran's standardized, often exclusionary, EFL context.

Alvarado Gutiérrez et al. (2019) showed that Mexican PSTs boosted engagement through CAR by using local cultural stories. While participation increased, the study didn't examine systemic inequities or identity development. This study addresses these gaps by combining CAR and postmethod pedagogy to explore how PSTs navigate identity challenges using reflective journals, observations, and interviews.

Gao et al. (2011) showed that Chinese EFL teachers used CAR to oppose exam-driven curricula with learner-centered strategies. Though aligned with postmethod pedagogy, the study focused on reform and collaboration, not identity or equity. Unlike Gao et al., this study emphasizes collective identity transformation and how PSTs navigate systemic barriers using reflective tools and dialogue. These instances demonstrate CAR's compatibility with postmethod principles and position it as an essential instrument for professional growth.

2.3. Intersection of Postmethod Pedagogy and CAR for Identity Formation

From a postmethod perspective, CAR's impact aligns with Kumaravadivelu's parameters: particularity is evident in CAR's localized, context-sensitive inquiries; practicality is reflected in how CAR empowers teachers to generate their own knowledge through research; and possibility emerges from collaborative reflection that stimulates discussions about power dynamics and envisions pedagogy as a tool for social justice (Chacón, 2010). The transformative potential of CAR is further evidenced by its capacity to democratize knowledge production. Ceylan and Comoglu (2024) observed that shared ownership of CAR projects helped Turkish PSTs bridge the theory-practice divide, mirroring postmethod pedagogy's emphasis on practicality (teacher-as-researcher) and particularity (localized inquiry). However, their study focused on e-practicums, leaving open questions about CAR's role in face-to-face settings like ours.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in Kumaravadivelu's (2001) postmethod pedagogy, which provides a tripartite lens for examining how CAR shapes PI: (1) particularity, where CAR's localized inquiries help teachers negotiate identity within Iran's sociocultural context; (2) practicality, as CAR cycles foster identity development through teacher-generated knowledge; and (3) possibility, through collaborative reflection that enables critical consciousness of institutional constraints. This framework aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective of identity as co-constructed through mediated activity - in this case, the collaborative processes of CAR. Specifically, we examine how CAR addresses three fundamental tensions in preservice teacher identity formation: bridging theory/practice divides, balancing individual/collective development, and navigating compliance/agency dynamics within Iran's educational system.

Despite CAR's potential to support reflective, context-responsive identities, research gaps remain. Few studies explore how CAR-postmethod alignment affects identity in preservice contexts (Burns, 2010). This gap is

especially pertinent in the Iranian setting, where preservice EFL teachers face unique sociocultural and institutional challenges that influence their PI formation. The present study addresses this gap by investigating the following questions:

1. How does engagement in CAR influence the construction of PI among Iranian preservice EFL teachers?
2. In what ways do the parameters of postmethod pedagogy interact with CAR to shape the PI development of Iranian preservice EFL teachers?

It is hoped that this study contributes to a contextualized understanding of identity and offers insights for educators, policymakers and curriculum developers. The subsequent sections outline the study's qualitative methodology, present thematic findings from PSTs' CAR experiences, discuss implications for postmethod pedagogy, and conclude with recommendations for integrating CAR into EFL teacher education.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study utilized a longitudinal case study design to investigate the development of PI - conceptualized as the dynamic interplay of teachers' self-conception, agency, and contextual positioning (Beijaard et al., 2004) - among preservice EFL teachers through CAR. The case study method was selected due to the focus on a distinct cohort of preservice educators who participated in a semester-long CAR course. The group's shared goals and experiences made it a strong case for in-depth study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To capture identity transformation, we traced critical incidents and turning points across CAR cycles during which we analyzed shifts in participants' self-descriptions, collaborative roles, and responses to institutional constraints.

Qualitative methods enabled in-depth exploration of complex, non-quantifiable identity formation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study employed a longitudinal design by tracking PSTs over an entire semester through continuous data collection to document evolving identity markers. These included participants' emerging metaphors about their roles, changes in problem-solving approaches, and expressions of autonomy. Data from observations, journals, and focus group interviews were triangulated to explore PI development over time.

The CAR course was designed to empower Iranian PSTs to develop into teacher-researchers by providing them with skills in collective inquiry and problem-solving. Over the course of 16 weeks, participants actively engaged in CAR projects during their practicum, with weekly reflections serving as identity artifacts that revealed turning points in their professional self-concept. They also benefited from weekly meetings and mini-lessons that focused on

action research. The course concluded with action research articles that functioned as summative narratives of participants' identity profiles that demonstrated their growth through CAR engagement.

3.2. Participants

The study involved seven female preservice EFL teachers aged 20, each leading a CAR group within a teacher education program at Farhangian University in Arak, Iran. This state-run university prepares secondary school teachers (grades 7-12) for the Ministry of Education. Participants were in their third year, with teaching experience limited to practicum courses, though some had begun part-time teaching due to staffing shortages. Participants' identity development was examined through Beijaard et al.'s (2004) framework, particularly their evolving self-conception as teacher-researchers, demonstrated agency in collaborative decision-making, and navigation of institutional constraints.

The leaders were selected through a rigorous two-stage process using purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, peers nominated candidates demonstrating three key qualities: (1) ability to guide collaborative work, (2) reflective practice skills, and (3) leadership potential shown during practicum. The researchers then verified nominations through classroom observations. When groups couldn't reach consensus (occurring twice), the researchers suggested candidates based on demonstrated organizational skills and ability to mediate discussions, which groups then approved.

As CAR leaders, participants had three primary roles: (1) facilitating weekly 90-minute group meetings following the CAR cycle (planning-action-observation-reflection), (2) maintaining structured journals with specific prompts about their emerging teacher-researcher identity, and (3) compiling monthly reports of group findings. While all group members participated in data collection, leaders coordinated these efforts and ensured documentation.

Participants received training on CAR procedures before beginning and provided written consent. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and anonymization of institutional details. This selection and role clarification process ensured participants could effectively engage in CAR while providing rich data about identity development.

3.3. Procedure

Data from interviews, observation notes, and journals provided a holistic view of CAR's impact on identity formation. A two-hour semi-structured focus group interview was conducted at the end of the semester with the seven group leaders. The interview aimed to capture their experiences with CAR, including challenges, group collaboration dynamics, and identity

development. It was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to provide rich qualitative insights into their reflective journeys.

As the course lecturers and mentors, the researchers documented participants' engagement through weekly observation notes. The notes captured group dynamics, problem-solving, and both verbal and non-verbal interactions. Observations were later analyzed to triangulate findings from other data sources.

Additionally, reflective journals maintained by the seven group leaders throughout the semester offered intimate, longitudinal insights into their professional growth and identity negotiation. Participants were instructed to document weekly entries detailing challenges, collaborative problem-solving efforts, and evolving perceptions of their roles as educators. Examples of effective journal entries were provided to ensure clarity and depth. Together, these methods—focus group interviews, observations, and reflective journals—provided a multifaceted view of how CAR shaped preservice Iranian EFL teachers' professional identities by balancing collective experiences, contextualized interactions, and individual reflections.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach using MAXQDA 2020. The process began with familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, journals, and observation notes, followed by generating initial codes inductively across all data sources. Codes captured both semantic content (e.g., explicit descriptions of teaching experiences) and latent meanings (e.g., metaphors about professional roles), with each data source coded separately before cross-comparison. Theme development emerged through iterative categorization of codes into potential themes, guided by, but not limited to, Beijaard et al.'s (2004) identity dimensions (self-conception, agency, contextual positioning). Code relationships were validated through three rounds of refinement.

The analysis progressed through rigorous theme review, involving: (1) code-theme coherence checks (retaining themes with 85%+ code consistency across participants), (2) peer debriefing with an independent researcher coding a 25% sample ($\kappa = 0.76$), and (3) member checking with participants. This process yielded seven finalized themes during the defining/naming phase. Each theme was supported by all data sources. Themes were retained only after consensus meetings confirmed their distinctiveness and relevance to both CAR processes and PI formation.

To ensure trustworthiness, multiple strategies were employed. Triangulation used a convergence matrix to compare findings across the focus group interview, observations, and journals. The final reporting phase integrated thematic narratives with vivid participant quotes to ensure findings

reflected both the complexity of identity transformation and the specificity of the CAR context. These measures enhanced the study's credibility, dependability, and confirmability and grounded the findings in the participants' lived experiences.

3.5. Researcher Positionality

As the lecturers and mentors for the course, the researchers assumed a dual role in facilitating the CAR projects while also gathering data for the study. To minimize bias, the researchers maintained neutrality and encouraged open responses during interviews. When conducting observations, the researchers concentrated on objectively recording group dynamics and reflective practices. The researchers' experience as competent EFL teacher educators and mentors offered valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities presented by CAR. However, measures were implemented to ensure that these insights did not inappropriately affect data interpretation. For instance, peer debriefing and member checking were utilized to confirm the findings and mitigate potential bias.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

This study identified seven key themes on how CAR shaped Iranian preservice EFL teachers' PI (see Table 1). Listed by frequency across data sources, the themes highlight CAR's role in reflection, collaboration, problem-solving, and theory-practice integration.

Table 1
Code Frequency Distribution Across Data Sources

Theme	Interviews (N)	Journals (N)	Observations (N)	Total (%)
Promoting Collaborative Learning and Shared Responsibility	59	36	14	39.7%
Shaping Lifelong Professional Development	28	15	5	18.0%
Building Leadership & Agency	19	12	10	14.8%
Fostering Reflective Practice	12	9	6	10.1%
Developing Student-Centered Identity	10	7	4	7.4%
Enhancing Critical Thinking	6	7	5	6.9%
Connecting Theory to Practice	3	3	3	3.2%
Total	137	89	47	100%

Code frequency distribution generated using MAXQDA's Code Matrix Browser, showing theme prevalence across data sources. Percentages reflect proportion of total coded segments (N=273).

4.1.1. Promoting Collaborative Learning and Shared Responsibility

Through this most prominent theme, CAR emphasized the significance of teamwork, accountability, and varied viewpoints by nurturing a collective sense of ownership over learning. Focus group discussions revealed that participants reported greater engagement when working in groups than alone. One participant remarked, 'When someone says, "Let's get started," it's like a little push that gets you going. But if you're on your own? Eh, you might just keep putting it off.' This perspective was reiterated in several conversations and indicates that peer support was a crucial factor in driving active involvement.

Mentor observations corroborated these findings. In one session, the mentor noted, 'Assigning responsibilities motivated students to engage meaningfully,' illustrating how designated roles within groups prompted deeper involvement. One journal noted, "Working with my group opened my eyes to new ways of seeing our project," showing how collaboration enriched learning.

Additional mentor feedback described how group dynamics evolved over time. Initially, some students displayed reluctance, but as tasks were

shared more evenly, a more equitable participation developed. This gradual change not only enriched discussions but also established a foundation for the participants to see themselves as vital members of a teaching community. Their collective experience of addressing challenges together further reinforced their joint responsibility for teaching and learning.

4.1.2. Shaping a Lifelong Commitment to Professional Development

Participants in CAR were encouraged to perceive professional development (PD) as a continuous and vital part of their teaching careers. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of embracing new ideas and continually improving their teaching practices. One participant said, ‘A teacher can’t just rely on what they already know and there’s always something new to learn or ways to grow.’ This insight highlights the recognition that growth in teaching is a fluid, lifelong journey.

Mentor observations frequently highlighted how students engaged in reflective practices that recognized PD as an ongoing process. For instance, during a mentoring session, a dialogue emerged around the idea that ‘upholding a PI necessitates adaptability and responding to educational challenges.’ They viewed PD not as a duty but as a key part of their professional growth.

Journal entries further enriched this theme. One entry mentioned, ‘PD is honestly a game-changer—it’s what keeps that spark alive in teaching. But, you know, if you don’t really embrace it, burnout can happen fast. I’ve seen it happen. For me, staying curious and always being open to learning is what keeps the passion going.’ This reflection indicates that the dedication to ongoing learning is not only a professional obligation but also a shield against the emotional difficulties of the teaching profession. Throughout the duration of the project, PSTs began to view each experience—be it successful or difficult—as a chance for development that reinforced a mindset focused on lifelong growth.

4.1.3. Building Leadership and Agency

A notable result of CAR was the enhancement of leadership abilities and self-agency among PSTs. The focus group interview reflected growing confidence in initiating tasks and leading group discussions. One participant remarked, ‘Working in a group is a great way to build discipline better planning. It’s not just about getting things done—it also helps you grow as a leader and prepares you to tackle bigger projects.’ This statement reflects the practical elements of leadership that were developed through collaborative assignments.

Mentor observations recorded a clear transformation in leadership styles. Initially, leaders predominantly aimed to maintain harmonious group

interactions; however, as the project progressed, these same individuals adopted more objective-focused and structured attitudes. For example, the mentor once noted that leaders started to organize meetings in a more systematic manner and delegate tasks more effectively. This indicated their growth in self-discipline and proactive planning.

Journal entries add a personal insight into these transformations. One group leader stated, ‘At first, the responsibility felt like a lot to handle. But as we kept going, something clicked—I started feeling more in control, and that doubt slowly turned into confidence. It was a pretty cool shift!’ This reflective comment demonstrates that while the early experience was daunting, ongoing participation in CAR helped alleviate those anxieties and nurture a sense of agency.

4.1.4. Fostering Reflective Practice

The CAR initiative significantly contributed to the development of a reflective mindset among PSTs. Reflection became a tool for continuous self-growth, not just an academic task. One participant noted, ‘You know, it’s funny—sometimes we don’t even realize what we’re capable of until we start thinking about how to make things better. That’s when those hidden talents suddenly show up and surprise us!’ This statement captures the core of reflective practice as a route to personal and professional advancement.

During the focus group discussions, many participants indicated that dedicating time to reflect on both their achievements and failures led to meaningful learning experiences. Another participant shared, ‘Becoming a teacher isn’t just about teaching others—it’s also about looking at yourself and asking, “How can I be a better version of me?” It’s all about thinking back on your actions and growing as a person along the way.’ Journal entries supported these views by documenting moments of insight and strategy adjustment following group work. A group leader wrote, ‘We make plans, take action, and then—bam—the next meeting is held and things don’t quite turn out as we expect. But you know what? We shrug it off and remind ourselves, “Hey, it’s all good. We still learned something from this!” It’s all part of the process.’

The mentor observed that these reflective practices not only enhanced teaching but also aided participants in building resilience. As educators, they started to perceive obstacles as opportunities rather than failures. The consistent practice of reflection during CAR sessions allowed PSTs to fine-tune their teaching philosophies and adjust their methods based on immediate feedback.

4.1.5. Developing Student-Centered Professional Identity

CAR encouraged a shift from teacher-to student-centered teaching. As a result of CAR, PSTs in our study started to view themselves as facilitators of

student development instead of mere providers of information. During the focus group interview, a preservice teacher remarked, ‘Teachers should be there to push students further than they think they can go by helping them unlock potential they didn’t even know they had.’ This sentiment was shared by various participants who stressed the necessity of encouraging student potential.

Mentor observations also revealed a notable change in attitudes. One leader once commented in class, ‘We’ve got to keep students front and center. We should make sure the way we teach is nothing like the uninspiring methods some of us might have experienced during our own school education. It’s all about creating a learning environment that actually works for them [students].’ Such remarks suggest that CAR not only altered viewpoints but also generated a dedication to transforming conventional teaching methods.

Journal reflections further validated this change. One participant noted, ‘Doing a needs analysis is key. It makes sure what the teacher is doing actually is in line with what the students need. That way, you avoid this weird disconnect where it feels like everyone’s in totally different worlds.’ By focusing on the coherence between teacher activities and student needs, PSTs began to embrace approaches that were more inclusive and attuned to the unique differences of their students.

4.1.6. Enhancing Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

CAR also contributed to the enhancement of critical thinking and problem-solving skills among PSTs. The collaborative nature of the research allowed participants to view challenges from multiple angles. One participant said, ‘In action research, you’ve got to know what you’re aiming for. Every method has its pros and cons, so you need to dig into them to figure out how to fix what’s not working.’ Critical thinking became a common discussion theme.

Mentor observations confirmed that group interactions often led to deeper critical analyses. During class discussions, participants critiqued each other’s ideas, which led to more refined outcomes. One participant remarked, ‘Honestly, when we share ideas with each other and give feedback, it’s like we’re all helping each other polish things up, you know? It just makes everything better, and we end up making smarter decisions. Plus, it saves us from making a ton of mistakes along the way.’ Collective problem-solving improved decisions and encouraged ongoing learning.

Journal entries expressed moments when participants had to quickly adapt their strategies based on peer feedback. For example, after a failed attempt at implementing a new teaching method, one participant wrote, ‘Today was one of those days where we really had to dig deep and figure things out. Each of us suggested new ideas about what worked, what didn’t, and why. It

wasn't easy, but we kept pushing ourselves to think critically and solve the problems we were facing. It's amazing how stepping back, thinking things through, and working together can make such a big difference.' These examples highlight how CAR nurtured a critical mindset and equipped PSTs with the skills needed to handle complex challenges in their future classrooms.

4.1.7. Connecting Theory to Practice

While emerging as a less prominent theme (3.2%), connecting theory to practice was a crucial aspect of the CAR experience. Initially, many participants expressed difficulty in recognizing the practical applications of theoretical concepts. One preservice teacher admitted, 'I used to jot down classroom notes in journals, but it never crossed my mind that they could actually be useful as research material for something bigger. Now they're being used!'

Over time, mentor guidance and structured discussions helped participants bridge the theory-practice gap even better. Mentor observations noted that as groups became more comfortable with CAR, they began to incorporate theoretical issues into their planning and execution. Journal entries highlighted this progression; one participant acknowledged, 'Maybe we're not getting anywhere because our theoretical foundation's a bit weak.' Another noted, 'It was the first time I really tried to link what we studied in class to what we're working on now—and honestly, that alone made it worth it. Till now, I thought theory is pointless!' This gradual integration of theory into practice not only enhanced the quality of the research projects, but also helped PSTs develop a more sophisticated understanding of how academic concepts inform real-world teaching practices.

4.2. Discussion

This study explored how CAR shapes preservice EFL teachers' professional identities in Iran by addressing two research questions: (1) *How does engagement in CAR influence the formation of PI among Iranian preservice EFL teachers?* and (2) *In what ways do the parameters of postmethod pedagogy—particularity, practicality, and possibility—interact with CAR to shape the PI of Iranian preservice EFL teachers?* Collectively, the themes demonstrated how CAR operationalizes Kumaravadivelu's (2001) postmethod pedagogy: (1) Particularity emerges through localized problem-solving; (2) Practicality is embodied in teacher-generated knowledge; (3) Possibility appears in critiques of systemic inequities and advocacy for marginalized learners. This tripartite alignment confirms CAR as a vehicle for postmethod-informed identity development.

The central theme, *Encouraging Collaborative Learning and Shared Responsibility*, illustrates how CAR empowered preservice EFL educators in

Iran to transition from being simple transmitters of knowledge to manipulators of context-specific issues. This reflects the principle of particularity, as participants adapted to their classrooms' specific needs. Collaborative inquiry led to the establishment of communities of practice that encouraged shared responsibility and accountability. Such communities helped novice teachers form more adaptive professional identities and enhanced their self-confidence, two concerns expressed by Perez-Garcia et al., 2022. Collaborative learning reframed teaching as mutual learning through shared challenges. As this perspective prevails, its transformative effect becomes clear. It fosters continuous learning and teaching improvement. This supports the principle of practicality (Kumaravadivelu, 2001), with teachers co-constructing knowledge instead of relying on external materials. In individualistic educational culture of Iran (Alizadeh et al., 2024), CAR's emphasis on collaboration marks a significant shift (Burns, 1999). This shift to collective practice fosters a collaborative mindset central to teachers' identities.

Moreover, the concept of shared responsibility redefines accountability as a collective task, which aids in diminishing teachers' apprehension about facing the repercussions of their choices while simultaneously boosting their resilience (MacNeil et al., 2023). Within the educational context of Iran, where teachers frequently hesitate to take on responsibility (Rashidi & Mansourzadeh, 2017), this collective approach nurtures both resilience and confidence. By adopting a model of shared accountability, educators are more equipped to handle future challenges through collaboration and increased self-confidence, in line with what Perez-Garcia et al. (2022) admitted.

Shaping a Lifelong Commitment to PD illustrates how CAR reshaped preservice EFL teachers' understanding of teaching as a dynamic and evolving profession. Moving beyond the perception of PD as a one-time event tied to formal education, participants embraced it as a lifelong, self-directed process. This shift aligns with Kumaravadivelu's (2001) principles of practicality and particularity, which emphasize teacher autonomy and context-specific knowledge generation—a process exemplified by Ahmadian et al.'s (2021) finding that reflective diary circles help teachers 'theorize what they practice' (p. 4). In environments like Iran, where PD is frequently perceived as concluding with graduation, CAR promoted ongoing growth through organized reflection—such as journaling and mentorship—and collaborative inquiry (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019). These practices helped teachers view PD not as an external obligation but as a fundamental aspect of their PI.

CAR also challenged traditional reliance on intuition and technical skill-building as the only aspects of PD (Graham & Phelps, 2003). It encouraged PSTs to critically reflect on their development and align it with their local needs, as seen in Mashhadi et al.'s (2020) findings, where teachers refined their practices through context-specific action research. Through

mentorship and collaborative inquiry, they developed a mindset that welcomed addressing emerging educational demands rather than avoiding them (Harfitt & Chan, 2017). This process transformed their identities from static skill-holders to dynamic, growth-oriented practitioners, aligning with Postmethod Pedagogy's vision of educators as adaptive and reflective professionals. By bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and the realities of Iran's educational landscape as expressed by Rodrigues and Mogarro (2019), CAR positioned continuous learning as a natural and essential aspect of teaching, rather than a superficial addition. This ultimately cultivated an identity that considers lifelong growth and adaptability essential to professional lives of teachers.

The third theme, *Building Leadership and Agency*, illustrates how CAR allowed preservice EFL teachers in Iran to shift from passive recipients of knowledge to becoming proactive leaders who developed what Mashhadi et al. (2020) noted as 'emic voice' (p. 66). This transition fostered agency, defined as the purposeful and proactive influence over educational practices (Biesta et al., 2015). This is in line with Kumaravadivelu's (2001) principles of practicality and possibility, which highlight the importance of teacher autonomy and advocacy for systemic transformation. Within Iran's bureaucratic education system, where accountability is often sidestepped (Fathi et al., 2021), CAR nurtured self-efficacy and accountability. This shift transformed professional identities towards greater autonomy and leadership. By enhancing managerial skills and increasing self-confidence through reshaping of teacher beliefs (Sang, 2023), CAR resulted in teacher empowerment—an essential characteristic for emerging Iranian teachers to not only instruct but also lead in their classrooms.

CAR enabled PSTs to see themselves as change agents (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Mashhadi et al., 2020). Through this process, they challenged norms and contributed to their educational communities (Atay, 2008). In a context where teachers often feel disconnected from decision-making, CAR fostered collaborative leadership, which helped participants overcome systemic limitations and act as proactive problem-solvers. This identity shift—from passive recipients to empowered leaders—positions teachers to drive positive change in Iran's educational landscape by challenging the long-established power structures (Akbari, 2008, Chacon, 2010). CAR's emphasis on leadership and agency aligns with Kumaravadivelu's (2001) principle of possibility, as it empowers teachers to critically examine issues from multiple perspectives. This process necessitates the development of critical skills that enable them to evaluate diverse situations selectively and make informed decisions that contribute to more equitable educational practices, as was evidenced in this study. This redefinition expands their roles beyond mere

curriculum implementation to active contributors to equity and social justice as expressed by Chacon (2010) in a system that desperately needs them.

Enhancing Reflective Practice illustrates how CAR integrated reflection as a vital element in shaping the professional identities of preservice EFL teachers. The iterative sequence of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting inherent in CAR encouraged participants to thoughtfully assess their methods (Burns, 1999). This aligns with Kumaravadivelu's (2001) principles of practicality—highlighting knowledge created through reflection and the subsequent understanding that arises from it—and possibility—advocating for transformative change through heightened critical awareness. The reflective practice encouraged by CAR allowed teachers to generate local knowledge for analysis in their personal PD (Alvarado Gutiérrez et al., 2019). By exploring previously overlooked aspects of their teaching, PSTs recognized unresolved issues. This process gradually transformed them into reflective practitioners (Lee, 2010; Sang, 2023), all without the need for external prompts. This process emphasized that while reflection cannot be explicitly taught, it is an actionable process that reinforces the concepts of practicality and possibility.

In Iran's teacher-centered system (Rashidi & Mansourzadeh, 2017), which often prioritizes rigid norms, CAR reframed teaching as a dynamic, reflective process rather than a technical task (Schön, 1983). Schön's concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action became integral to participants' identities, helping them reconcile idealized teaching roles with classroom realities (Atay, 2008; Flores & Day, 2006). Through iterative reflection and peer feedback, PSTs adopted systematic methods, such as reflective journals (Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019), to tailor their practices to specific contexts. This shift was transformative in a setting where reflection is undervalued and top-down mandates prevail (Rashidi & Mansourzadeh, 2017). By embedding reflection into their identities, PSTs transitioned to more adaptive professionals capable of addressing classroom complexities, reducing the gap between theory and practice expressed by Alvarado Gutierrez et al. (2019). This aligns with Schön's vision of teachers as reflective practitioners who utilize creativity and sound judgment, resonating with the postmethod principle of possibility.

The fifth theme, *Developing a Student-Centered PI*, highlights how CAR enabled preservice EFL teachers in Iran to shift from rigid, teacher-centered methods to inclusive, student-focused practices. Participation in CAR increased attention to students' needs and encouraged a bottom-up approach that helped reconcile the top-down agendas heavily influencing teachers' pedagogical practices (Burns, 1999; Rashidi & Mansourzadeh, 2017). This shift aligns with Kumaravadivelu's (2001) *particularity*, as teachers adopted context-sensitive pedagogies responsive to learners' diverse needs defined by Kumaravadivelu (2006a) as 'situational teaching, and *possibility*, by advocating for marginalized students and challenging hegemonic practices

(Chacón, 2010). In Iran's teacher-dominated education system (Akbari, 2008), CAR's collaborative inquiry sensitized teachers to nuanced student needs by amplifying previously overlooked voices (Gao et al., 2011). By institutionalizing the belief that teaching requires contextualizing and localizing mandated practices to address students' needs, CAR prevented the establishment of rigid dogmas which was gradually developed into a sustainable habit among some PSTs and led to what Sang (2023) referred to as reconstruction of teachers' beliefs.

The sixth theme, *Enhancing Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving*, highlights how CAR empowers preservice EFL teachers to develop critical thinking and sociopolitical awareness, which aligns with Kumaravadivelu's (2001) possibility. In Iran's educational system, which often stifles critical inquiry (Rashidi & Mansourzadeh, 2017), CAR provides a transformative platform for teachers to analyze challenges multidimensionally, generate context-specific solutions, and advocate for marginalized learners (Akbari, 2008; Chacón, 2010). By engaging in CAR, participants increased their self-awareness about the gap between academic studies and real classroom practices through reflective autonomy (Atay, 2008) and recognized the necessity of critically thinking about how to bridge this divide. This process shifts teachers from reliance on top-down mandates to proactive, autonomous decision-making, as emphasized by Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) advocacy for teacher-driven inquiry. Encouraging critical thinking enables teachers to act as autonomous agents of change (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b). This means that teachers develop identities rooted in critical pedagogy that enables them to address diverse student needs in evolving classrooms.

Bridging Theory and Practice emphasizes how CAR connects the enduring gap between theory and practical implementation in teacher education (Lee, 2010; Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019). In Iran, where future teachers frequently find it challenging to translate theoretical knowledge into actual classroom practice, CAR provides a structured approach to merge theory with practice (Burns, 1999). By identifying classroom issues, crafting solutions, and reflecting on the results, participants deepen their grasp of theoretical ideas while developing context-specific knowledge that adheres to Kumaravadivelu's (2001) principles of practicality and particularity. The collaborative aspect of CAR enables PSTs to merge formal education with insights from their peers to address local challenges. This approach cultivates communities of practice focused on mediated activities (Vygotsky, 1978) that promote active participation instead of reliance on top-down interventions (Graham & Phelps, 2003). This is especially significant in Iran's fragmented education system, where educators often experience isolation due to bureaucratic constraints and cultural standards. By encouraging critical

thinking and closing the theory-practice divide, CAR empowers teachers to become agents of change in a system that is frequently resistant to reform.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study revealed CAR as a transformative tool for developing postmethod-informed professional identities that occur by operationalizing Kumaravadivelu's (2001) principles through: (1) context-responsive teaching (particularity), (2) teacher-led knowledge generation (practicality), and (3) critical engagement with inequities (possibility). For Iranian preservice EFL teachers, CAR bridges the gap between institutional constraints and the need for adaptive, socially just pedagogies. This model seems to be applicable to similar centralized systems globally.

Practically, the findings underscore the value of integrating CAR into teacher education programs, particularly in EFL contexts like Iran, where traditional methods dominate. Effective implementation strategies include mentorship programs to guide PSTs through reflective practice, collaborative projects to address real-world classroom challenges, and reflective journaling to document experiences and adapt methods to students' unique needs. By embedding these practices into preservice training, programs can cultivate resilient, context-sensitive, and socially conscious educators equipped to navigate modern classrooms. These steps can transform teacher education in Iran and beyond and prepare teachers to lead positive change in their local educational environments as independent agents.

This study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the small sample size of preservice EFL teachers in Iran may limit the generalizability of the results to broader populations or diverse educational contexts. Second, while multiple data sources were utilized, self-reported data, such as reflective journals, may introduce biases, as participants might present socially desirable accounts of their experiences. Additionally, focusing on a single teacher education program restricts the applicability of the findings to other institutional or cultural settings. Future research could address these gaps by expanding the sample size and diversifying participants across multiple institutions and regions, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of CAR's impact. Moreover, employing mixed methods designs could enhance insights into how CAR influences PI over time. Despite these limitations, the triangulation of mentor observation notes with other data sources strengthens the study's credibility and offers valuable insights into CAR's potential for fostering adaptive and reflective educators in EFL contexts.

The insights obtained from this study underscore CAR's potential to bridge the theory-practice divide in Iran's bureaucratic educational system by empowering teachers as adaptive, equity-focused professionals capable of

navigating local challenges awaiting them. By encouraging resilient identities rooted in collaboration and critical inquiry, CAR aligns with global calls for inclusive and socially just teacher education (Chacon, 2010).

Future research should explore CAR's long-term impact on in-service teachers, its adaptability across diverse cultural contexts, and how technology can enhance collaborative inquiry. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the sustainability of CAR's transformative effects. Ultimately, this study highlights the urgency of reimagining teacher education to prepare reflective educators who can create equitable learning environments and drive meaningful change in evolving educational landscapes.

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