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A study on the influence of educational practice on the identity construction of pre-service English teachers

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Abstract
This study aims to explore the experiences of teacher identity construction and the factors influencing it, with a participant being a pre-service teacher undergoing practical training. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the participant. The research reveals that the process of teacher identity construction is dynamically complex, involving exploration and growth across multiple stages and aspects. During the educational internship, the identity construction of pre-service English teachers is influenced by both personal and external factors. This paper discusses the changes in the identity construction of pre-service English teachers through educational internships and the underlying factors, providing insights into current teacher education practices and future research.

Keywords: Educational internship, pre-service English teacher, identity construction

Introduction
Since the beginning of this century, the Ministry of Education in China has attached great importance to the implementation of educational internships for pre-service teachers. Universities and colleges have actively organized and implemented educational internship programs for normal students and Master of Education candidates, aiming to enhance their teaching proficiency and facilitate their role transition from "students" to "teachers," enabling them to adapt to future professional life. Educational internships hold significant importance for pre-service teachers and represent one of the crucial periods for their identity construction (Trent, 2010) [4]. They provide pre-service teachers with opportunities for "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) [2], allowing them to engage partially and inadequately in teaching practices as novice learners. Through interactions with mentoring teachers and colleagues, they construct knowledge and learn how to teach effectively. During the internship, pre-service teachers can apply what they have learned into practice, gain insights into teaching, and achieve professional growth and development. As a practical activity, internships offer learning opportunities for pre-service teachers and play a non-negligible role in their identity construction. Farrell (2008) considers educational internships as one of the core programs in language teacher training. The identity constructed by English teachers indirectly influences their English teaching effectiveness and professional development. From this perspective, the identity of English teachers is a key factor in ensuring the efficient conduct of foreign language teaching.

Research framework
In this study, the four dimensions and their sub-dimensions of identity construction primarily refer to the classification of English teachers' identity proposed by Xun Yang (2012) [8], encompassing professional identity, expert identity, personal identity, and situational identity. Specifically, professional identity in this context refers to pre-service English teachers' understanding and perception of their profession, including professional values and a sense of belonging to the profession. Expert identity pertains to pre-service teachers' positioning and judgment regarding their professional development, encompassing their beliefs about English language teaching and their assessment of their own professional knowledge (i.e., their English language proficiency). Personal identity involves the degree of commitment and behavioral tendencies displayed by teachers during their internship, both in and out of the classroom, as well as their evaluation of their own teaching management

abilities. Situational identity refers to the support and assistance received by pre-service teachers from schools and mentors, as well as the teacher-student relationships experienced during their educational internship.

Regarding the two major dimensions of influencing factors, based on existing literature, they are divided into personal and external factors, drawing on the findings of Xie Shuhai (2016) [7], Wei Ge and Chen Xiangming (2015) [6], Luebbers (2010) [3], and others regarding the factors influencing identity construction. In terms of personal factors, they include pre-service teachers' motivation to teach, teaching experience, and professional competence. External factors mainly stem from significant others encountered during the internship, such as mentor teachers, students, and peers, as well as the working environment and atmosphere within the school.

I. Teachers' Identity Recognition

1. Professional Identity Recognition

In terms of professional identity recognition, the second-level coding involves professional values, which encompass "the mission and responsibilities of English teachers" and "the status of English teachers." The category of "the mission and responsibilities of English teachers" refers to the understanding and recognition of the duties and obligations associated with the role of an English teacher. The category of "the status of English teachers" pertains to the participants' perceptions of the position and treatment of English teachers within the school-family and society. The second-level coding also includes "professional belongingness," which comprises "role adjustment" and "teaching commitment." "Role adjustment" involves the potential role transition faced by pre-service English teachers during their internship, as well as the fatigue they may experience in handling different role tasks (such as subject teaching and class management). "Teaching commitment" refers to the determination and goals of pre-service English teachers regarding their future careers in English education.

2. Professional Identity Recognition

Regarding professional identity recognition, "beliefs in English teaching" signify whether pre-service English teachers find the actual English teaching in primary and secondary schools to align with their expectations and perceptions after starting their internships. "English language proficiency" includes both the English expression ability of pre-service English teachers during their internship teaching and their mastery of English subject knowledge.

3. Personal Identity Recognition: In terms of personal identity recognition, "work engagement" encompasses the level and extent of task completion by pre-service English teachers during their internships. It also involves pre-service English teachers' initiative in engaging in relevant professional learning beyond the assigned mandatory tasks during their internships. "Evaluation of professional behavior" refers to the self-assessment and reflection of pre-service English teachers on their teaching abilities during the internship period.

4. Situational Identity Recognition

In terms of situational identity recognition, "sense of organizational support" includes "guidance and learning opportunities provided by the school" and "mentorship and assistance from colleagues." "Guidance and learning opportunities provided by the school" refer to the opportunities for professional growth offered to pre-service English teachers by the internship school, such as opportunities to observe classes and participate in educational research discussions. "Mentorship and assistance from colleagues" pertain to the professional guidance and help provided to pre-service English teachers by their mentors and other teachers within the subject group. "Teacher-student relationship" refers to the degree of integration between pre-service English teachers and their students during the internship process.

II. Factors Influencing Teachers' Identity Recognition

1. Personal Factors

In terms of personal factors, "teaching experience" encompasses "past teaching history" and "internship teaching experience." "Internship experience" primarily refers to pre-service English teachers having had prior internship experiences in primary and secondary schools, which have exerted a certain influence on their current internship. "Other teaching experiences" include part-time teaching in institutions, tutoring jobs, etc., which also have an impact on pre-service English teachers' current school internship. "Professional competence" includes "linguistic knowledge" and "teaching ability." "Linguistic knowledge" mainly refers to the English language proficiency and literacy of pre-service English teachers. "Teaching ability" encompasses their lesson preparation and instruction skills. "Motivation to teach" comprises "internal motivation" and "external motivation." "Internal motivation" primarily refers to the subjective personal willingness of pre-service English teachers, namely, whether they have a strong interest in English teaching and are willing to devote themselves to the field of education. "External motivation" mainly refers to the external reasons that prompt pre-service English teachers to choose this profession.

2. External Factors

In terms of external factors, as novice teachers in the workplace, pre-service English teachers construct or adjust their identities in the process of interacting with others, primarily influenced by their "internship mentors," "students," and "peer colleagues." "School environment" includes "work atmosphere" and "colleague relationships."

Based on the theoretical framework discussed in this section, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of pre-service English teachers in constructing their identities?
2. What are the factors that influence the identity construction of pre-service English teachers?

Research Design

This study primarily involves interviews with pre-service English teachers, employing a semi-structured interview approach. Semi-structured interviews can help pre-service English teachers recall daily experiences in their teaching work, summarize and reflect on their job performance and role orientation. All interviews are recorded and transcribed, with the content focusing on pre-service English teachers' sense of identity and its influencing factors. Specific interview questions include the interns' degree of

identification with their professional roles and sense of belonging to the profession, their understanding of English teaching and learning, reflective evaluations of their commitment to teaching work, and their views on the school's organizational environment; major difficulties and pressures encountered during the internship, issues discovered in teaching practice and their perspectives on them; feelings of contradiction and conflict in role orientation; and the degree of influence of various factors on English teaching practice during the internship.

The subject of this study is a graduate student pursuing a master's degree in the field of English Education at Yangzte University. The participant is required to undergo an approximately four-month educational internship in a primary or secondary school, participating in activities such as lesson preparation, teaching, homework correction, and textbook research under the joint guidance of university supervisors and internship school mentors.

For ethical considerations, pseudonyms are used for the participant. To ensure anonymity, all data are coded during the data collection process. The research results have been verified with the participant, and any specific data that the participant did not wish to be included in the research results were excluded. Participants were clearly informed of the nature, purpose, and methods of the survey from the outset.

Results and Discussion

I. Identity of Pre-service English Teachers

1. Professional Identity

Interviewer: During your internship, how did you transition from being a student to a teacher?

Respondent A: Even though I was an intern, I didn't fully see myself as a student. In the eyes of those students, I was a teacher. It was a shift in identity. I couldn't treat myself as a student who is still learning. I needed to have a teacher's mindset.

Interviewer: How did you feel during your educational internship as a pre-service teacher?

Respondent A: During the internship, I realized that being a good teacher isn't just about teaching well. It also involves controlling the classroom, interacting with students, communicating with parents, and even getting along with school leaders and colleagues. In terms of teaching, it covers regular classes, practice classes, public lessons, and teaching research and lesson preparation. I even went to other schools to observe classes and participated in exams and seminars. But I don't think there's any easy work. If you want to do this job, you need to have some understanding of the industry. You can't just think about taking it easy.

This reflects the process of role adjustment for pre-service teachers. It shows that pre-service English teachers have a high level of identity with the profession and are willing to stick to their choice, become English teachers, and uphold their commitment to teaching.

2. Professional Identity

Interviewer: During your internship, since graduate students mainly focus on theoretical learning, did you encounter any discrepancies between theory and practice?

Respondent A: Yes, there were discrepancies. One of them was that it was difficult to implement core competencies in actual teaching. During my internship, I observed that most teachers used the grammar-translation method in their classes.

Interviewer: With the introduction of the new curriculum standards and core competencies in teaching, do you feel a lot of pressure as a teacher?

Respondent A: When I first saw students giving English presentations, I thought their oral expression was very good. I thought they were really good at English. Sometimes I even worried about whether I could teach fluently in English. So I felt quite a bit of pressure.

3. Personal Identity

Interviewer: You mentioned that teaching middle school students can be challenging because they can be rebellious. Have you ever considered teaching high school students?

Respondent A: I have a little bit of a desire to try teaching high school, but I'm also worried because I've already interned in a middle school. I'm afraid I might not be able to get into a high school.

Interviewer: Besides that, do you feel there are any other areas where you lack experience or skills?

Respondent A: I think one area where I lack experience is balancing the relationship with students and my teacher's authority. If you treat students as friends, you essentially lose some of your teacher's authority. But if you're too strict with students, they won't like you, and they won't want to listen to your class. There's a balance between the two, and I haven't mastered it yet.

4. Situational Identity

Interviewer: How was your relationship with the students during your internship?

Respondent A: During class, I would strictly require the students. After class, I would treat them like friends and maintain a relationship of being both a teacher and a friend. I remember at first, I didn't dare to walk to the front of the class because I felt like I didn't belong to the class and wasn't a teacher yet. But later, I became very proficient and could walk to the front to care for them and observe them.

Interviewer: Did your mentor teacher provide you with any help?

Respondent A: My mentor provided me with a lot of guidance and teaching suggestions. They also recommended some high-quality teaching videos from the school for me to watch.

(II) Factors Influencing the Identity of Pre-service English Teachers

1. Personal Factors

Interviewer: Before educational internships, what aspects of knowledge and ability do you think pre-service English teachers need to strengthen in order to better cope with the internships?

Interviewee A: Firstly, it's the aspect of instructional design. Although everyone uses the Grammar-Translation Method, we have been educated with a focus on core competencies. I still strive to incorporate core competencies into our instructional design. Secondly, while at school, we should try to present more often and cultivate a confident and influential presence on stage, without feeling intimidated. The third point is something all English majors pursue, which is pronunciation. But this is very difficult to change and can't be altered overnight.

Interviewer: Why did you switch from Business English to wanting to pursue a degree in English Education?

Interviewee A: It's because at that time, it was difficult to find job opportunities in Business English. Our options were basically either to work in foreign trade or to become teachers. And during the pandemic, the foreign trade industry was not doing well, so I decided to become a teacher instead.

Interviewer: During your undergraduate and graduate studies in English, which course had the greatest impact on you or was the most beneficial to you?

Interviewee A: It should be Professor Wang Juan's course on Teaching Theories and Schools. The Creative Workshop can also be counted as one. Firstly, Professor Wang's course is more theory-oriented. Before practice, it's definitely necessary to have a solid grasp of certain theories. I felt that we hadn't studied such systematic English teaching, or teaching methodologies of different schools before. I benefited a lot from her course. The Creative Workshop, on the other hand, is more practice-oriented. It required us to prepare lessons of different types many times and even go through the process of lesson polishing, which was very beneficial for our subsequent internships and work.

Interviewer: From the beginning of your internship until now, have you encountered any confusion or difficulties? Such as in classroom teaching, student-teacher relationships, or interactions with mentors and colleagues. How did you resolve these issues during the internship?

Interviewee A: There are many things I can't get involved in because I'm not qualified to. So I feel that some areas haven't been adequately exercised for me. For example, how to get along with parents, how to interact with colleagues around me, and how to deal with special needs students in the class are all issues.

2. External Factors

Interviewer: Did the working environment, student-teacher relationships, and colleague relationships at the internship school have any impact on your teaching work? Are there any other factors that affected your teaching work?

Interviewee A: My mentor teacher was very kind to me. At least, she supported and understood the various confusions and immaturities I had as a novice. We even discussed students' homework together, making me feel that my mentor and I were on the same team. The work atmosphere in this school is particularly good. All the English teachers in the office are proactive and diligent. No one complains about the hard work and they all work diligently. The office atmosphere is positive.

Interviewer: Please describe your relationship with the students in the class where you interned. How do the students behave in front of you?

Interviewee A: The class discipline is relatively poor, but since I'm not the homeroom teacher of this class, I don't manage the discipline too much. If they become too unruly, I will intervene because it will affect the progress of my class.

Conclusion

The process of teacher identity construction is dynamically complex, involving exploration and growth across multiple stages and aspects. The role cognition stage: Before beginning their teaching careers, pre-service teachers first form a preliminary cognition of the teacher role. This often stems from their educational background, familial influence, societal perceptions, and personal expectations of the teaching profession. The theoretical learning stage: Pre-service teachers receive systematic education in educational theories and teaching methods at universities or colleges of education. The practical exploration stage: During internships or educational practice, pre-service teachers begin to apply the theoretical knowledge they have acquired to actual teaching. The identity recognition stage: In the context of teaching practice, pre-service teachers start to recognize their identity as teachers. During educational internships, the identity construction of pre-service English teachers is influenced by both personal and external factors. Personal factors include teaching experience, professional proficiency, and motivation to teach. External factors encompass significant others and the school environment. Analysis shows that the factor of "significant others" plays the most prominent role in the identity recognition construction of pre-service English teachers, followed by professional proficiency, school environment, motivation to teach, and teaching experience.

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