

# Approaches to Construct Pre-service EFL Teacher Identity from the Perspective of Synergy Theory

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## Abstract

**This paper focuses on the identity construction of pre-service EFL teachers, in which the factor affecting teacher identity construction are discussed. Based on the social and psychological attributes of identity construction, this paper explores the approaches to construct identity from the perspective of the Synergy Theory. Through the cooperation and integration of several subjects like universities, internship schools and government, four approaches of construction are put forward to contribute to better teacher education and English education: adjusting the curriculum, providing consultation courses for identity construction, creating a professional community of pre-service EFL teachers and improving the capacity of self-reflection.**

## Keywords

**Pre-service EFL teacher, Identity construction, Synergy Theory.**

## 1. Introduction

Teacher identity construction is of great importance to the cultivation of the qualified teachers. Researches have shown that the teacher identity has an impact on the career choice, career efficiency, career development, and even the ability and willingness to deal with educational reform and implement reform in the teaching practice [1]. In addition, the construction of teacher identity lays a solid foundation for the the professional development of a teacher. For a teacher, professional development happens and continues during the period of pre-service, in-service and post-service, of which pre-service time plays a fundamental and critical role for it determines the sustainability of the teacher's professional development [2]. Therefore, research into the pre-service teacher identity is essential.

English as a foreign language and a subject, still takes up the dominant position in Chinese education system in primary education period or even in higher education. While the newly issued English Curriculum Standards in 2022 require the teachers to do some changes to achieve new goals of teaching. Facing this situation, the pre-service EFL teachers, of whom most of them may pursue the career of teaching in the near future should take this responsibility to equip themselves with professional knowledge and transform their identity of student-teachers to teachers. Base on this reality, this paper aims to explore the approaches for EFL teachers to construct their profession identity in the context of society. The theory used in the construction process is Synergy Theory since identity cannot be constructed in isolation but it should be developed within the interaction with many subjects in the context of society [3].

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Teacher Identity and EFL Teacher Identity Construction

#### 2.1.1. Definition of Teacher Identity and Teacher Identity Construction

Teacher identity has been widely researched in the field of social science since the 1950s. It is one of the core concept in teacher education, which influences teaching decisions, teaching

content and even the relationship between teachers and students [4]. Researchers define teacher identity differently. For Beijaard, teacher identity mainly focuses on the questions like who am I, and what the meaning I give to myself [1]. Johnson defines teacher identity as the construction of relationship which happens by the way I view others and other view me during the interaction with other people through sharing personal experiences or negotiations [5]. Lasky argues that teacher identity is the way a teacher defines himself. This is the self-concept that develops constantly during the whole career of a teacher, which is usually affected by the educational institution, reform and even the political environment [6].

In general, definition of teacher identity can be divided into two aspects: the psychological and the social one [7]. From the psychological aspects, researchers presented by Erik Son holds the beliefs that teacher identity is a self-conceptual structure related to cognition, which is the self-imagination in the actual world, and it featured with stability and consistency. While researchers in sociology like George Mead believes that identity is a concept of social context that transcends the selves. Identity construction is related to the social role acquired by individuals in the process of social interaction [8]. There are also scholars who have made more detailed dimension of teacher identity. For language teacher's identity, Varghese et al divided it into two parts: identity in practise and identity in discourse. The former is constructed through practice and the latter is constructed by consultation with others [9]. Although scholars' definition and classification of teacher identity differ from each other. There are still some similarities. For example, most of the scholars agree that teacher identity can be affected by various factors including society, culture, politics and history. Identity can be constructed and reconstructed through narrative [10].

Identity construction is the self-formation in the broad sense of social activities and common cultural experiences [11]. For teachers, constructing their identity means the self-formation in the social background, which is featured with both psychological and social attributes. Since the definition of teacher identity differs from each other, the way to construct teacher identity are differently shaped. In the west, three theoretical orientations of constructing teacher identity are the mainstreams. Till now, western existing studies mostly discuss the construction from the perspective of the interaction between social structure and individual initiative. Different construction orientations are presented according to their different focuses. The sociological perspective tends to discuss the negotiation between social structure and individual initiative, and regards the construction of teacher identity as the process of socialization. Researchers concerned about the consistency of teacher identity tend to view teacher identity construction as an internal process of consultation and unity of individuals from the perspective of psychology. Researchers interested in the specificity of teachers' work use relevant learning theories as a basis for understanding the construction of teacher identity.

Based on the various definitions of teacher identity, the author of this paper hold the view that teacher identity is the self-cognition of themselves in the context of the whole society, which indicates that it has both the personal and social attributes. In this case, the construction of teacher identity is the process that a teacher understand, recognize and develop himself through interactions with different subjects in the environment of society to be a professional teachers in the end.

### **2.1.2. Researchers about EFL Teacher Identity and the Construction**

Research about EFL teacher identity has expanded to many aspects both at abroad and at home. In general, most of the explorations about EFL teacher identity are various. Researchers mainly use the approaches that have the pre-service teachers' words or voices. These includes interviews, journals, questionnaires and other self-reflection documents. For example, at abroad, Anderson Hidarto and Chindy Christine seeks to find out how pre-service language teachers regarded their professional selves as potential EFL educators following their

participation in Camp EPIC (a program aimed to enhance teachers' quality in Indonesia) and the program's role in this process of identity construction [12]. Before and after the program, these pre-service teachers were asked to offer descriptions of themselves as instructors, which were then qualitatively analyzed using theme analysis. Lee Jin Choi and Mi Yung Park used the reflective journals and classroom observations to examine how pre-service teachers' professional development and perceptions of teaching practice and profession were impacted by the new type of teaching practicum, which was brought about by the pandemic outbreak [13]. It looks at how student teachers' professional identities as teaching practitioners are affected, for better or worse, by teaching practicums carried out in unforeseen situations. Ufuk ATAŞ adapted case study to examine the pre-service Turkish EFL teachers' opinions regarding their educational experiences and to explore whether there are any changes in those beliefs over time in order to identify their professional development as future instructors [14]. From the perspective of research topics, the research of EFL teacher identity presents the characteristics of diverse topics and diverse contexts. Specifically, at the early days, the research pays more attention to the identity of EFL teachers and the identity in the training of pre-service teachers. In the recent 10 years, along with globalization development and accelerated world population, the number of cross-context teachers (English teachers whose mother language is not English in the world) increased gradually, identity transfer, identity negotiation, overseas experience and cultural adaptation and other related topics are gradually becoming hot topics. In addition, with the rise of postmodernism, critical realism and other ideas and the context of English prevailing in the whole world and also the background of multilingual, scholars began to pay attention to the relationship between English and non-English ethnic division and the construction of teacher identity.

In China, teacher identity construction is a focus of many scholars. It has developed rapidly in the educational sector, the field of literature and even the industrial engineering area. In the educational sector, there are researchers about identity construction of teachers of different subjects like physical teachers and maths teachers. And there are also researchers who have studied the identity construction in the rural areas and the cities. The experienced teachers and novice teachers have also been the subjects of the scholars' research on identity construction. While only few researches about the construction of EFL teacher identity construction can be found. Guo Xinjie and Wang Qiang applied the case study to explore the relationship between teaching practicum and professional development of pre-service English teachers [15]. They found that in the teaching context, the teacher changed and reconstructed his identity. There are also scholars studied how pre-service EFL teachers construct their identity during the practicum and summarized the main factors influencing the construction [16]. It turns out that the teacher in this research constructed multiple identities during the whole process to develop himself. The factors include both personal and social ones. Construction of identity can also be achieved through a teaching activity or program. Through an online "cross-border interaction" between Chinese and American teachers and students which aims to improve students' writing ability and enhance the mutual communication, scholars investigated how American pre-service ESL teachers can develop their professional identities from three aspects of discourse, practice, and social activities [17]. In addition, teachers' discourse and the relationship between the mentor teachers and the pre-service teachers also contribute to the identity construction.

Generally, researches about EFL pre-service teacher identity construction are mainly qualitative. The factors influencing construction and teachers' changes during the process of construction are the primary focus. However, comprehensive explanation of how to construct pre-service EFL teacher identity has rarely been implemented.

## **2.2. Synergy Theory**

### **2.2.1. Definition of Synergy Theory**

The Synergy Theory was founded by Hermann Haken, a well-known German scientist. In a talk at the University of Stuttgart in Germany in 1970, Haken expanded on the idea of synergy. He formalized the idea of synergy and studied it as a formal science in 1971 by working with his student Graham to publish the book *Synergy: A Collaborative Science*. Haken published several monographs on synergy between 1976 and 1994, assembling them into a largely comprehensive system of collaborative philosophy. Synergy theory is a science that attempts to explain how structures form and how different components of a system interact. It is mostly based on a universal law of cooperation that Haken discovered while during the process of researching laser theory.

As the laser beam forms an orderly arrangement through self-organization, and as similar coordination and cooperation laws can be found in different ordered systems of different disciplines, Haken believes that synergy is the science of coordination and cooperation, that is, the system moves from disorder to orderly self-organization. Haken was the first to deduce synergy laws from physical phenomena. Later, the Synergy Theory was used to explain many collaboration phenomena in the academia and provide solutions to many cooperation difficulties in the fields of chemistry, biology, economics, and even society. Its study and application areas are extremely broad and include both the social and scientific sciences. Synergy theory, which is both scientific and universal, has surely expanded the field of educational researches.

### **2.2.2. Researches Based on Synergy Theory in Education**

The education community has been interested in the application of Synergy Theory to education, and recent growth of attention connected to collaborative education has further shown that this area of academic study has gained great significance. Many researchers have currently used Synergy Theory in higher education and vocational education. For instance, Cai Xiaokui researched the collaborative mechanism of ideological and political education in higher education from a Synergy Theory perspective [18]. Zhang Yiwen investigated the meaning and development of the “double-teacher structure” teaching team in universities and vocational institutions based on this idea [19]. The use of collaborative theory in research on compulsory education is quite uncommon. From the standpoint of research content, researches of talent training mode and curriculum system construction, which focuses on a wide range of research fields and builds a vast research content system, are where Synergy Theory is most commonly implemented. There is, however, no research on the application of this theory in EFL teachers education.

## **3. Factors Influencing Pre-service EFL Teacher Identity Construction**

### **3.1. Personal Factors**

Personal factors influencing pre-service EFL teachers include the pre-concept of teacher identity, personal learning experiences, and emotion, among which some of them may be overlapped with each other.

#### **3.1.1. Pre-concept of Teacher Identity**

Day points out that the construction of a teacher's identity often goes through a continuous shift from the identity of pre-teaching (a self-defined image of being a teacher and a hidden pedagogical concept) to a reshaped professional identity, during which the process is moving forward [20]. Pre-service teachers are in a constant process of finding the point of convergence between themselves as students and as teachers. This is a process that is characterized by the confirmation, adaptation and reconstruction of the pre-concept of teachers' identities. The pre-

concept of teacher identity is the understanding of the teaching profession that pre-service teachers already have before entering the university, which is the basis for the construction of their identity as teachers, but usually many pre-service teachers are not aware of the existence of their own pre-concept of teachers' identities [21].

The pre-concepts that influence the development of a professional identity exist for EFL teachers who are in the pre-service stage. Three major aspects shaped their pre-concept. The first is their own preconceived notion of what a teacher should be. They have no experiences of teaching English and have never played the role of an EFL teacher completely and independently, so the imagination of EFL teacher is relatively simple and incomplete, or in other words, their internal perception of the profession is not formed comprehensively. The second way is the impression their EFL teachers made in the primary and middle schools, which can be divided into two kinds. One is the positive and the other one is the negative. If their EFL teachers are charming and attractive in some way, it may gradually enables the student to establish the idea of becoming an EFL teacher. In the other case, on the contrary, the previous unpleasant English learning experience made them form a rigid image of an EFL teacher, which will result in insufficient motivation and passion to become an EFL teacher. The third method is how the society wants a teacher to be, which means that the society shapes the image of EFL teachers. For instance, society has cultivated a positive perception of the EFL teacher, the students who want to be teachers in the future will have one at this point. If the majority of the information offered by society is unfavorable, then the perception of EFL teachers may detract from their enthusiasm for the profession. For example, after the reform of the curriculum standard, there have been some new changes in the content and objectives of students' English learning, which also requires EFL teachers to make appropriate adjustments to promote the development of students. For pre-service EFL teachers, this may be a great challenge to face in the future, so there will be a lack of longing for the profession of teachers, which leads to some side-effects of the pre-concept of EFL teachers.

### 3.1.2. Personal Learning Experiences

EFL teachers learning experiences includes their personal learning experiences during primary and middle school, professional learning during college years and learning experiences of the language English.

The experience of being students is an important influence on the construction of teachers identity, which will be brought into the role of teachers' self-construction. When interpreting the role of teachers, they will be guided by the past learning experience [22]. Flores and Day indicates that the key events and important persons in the early personal learning experiences often provide behavior models and teaching motivation for the pre-service teachers to construct the identity [23]. For example, some EFL teachers may adapt the methods that their English teachers have used during their learning of English in the past, which is presented in the way of teaching method or even the teaching beliefs. There are also empirical studies demonstrate that during the process of teaching, some pre-service EFL teachers will instinctively imitate the teaching methods and relationship of teachers in their study period, forming their own teacher images. Besides, some teachers said that the reason why they would firmly embark on the road of teaching is because that they have been influenced by several teachers in their own study period.

After the professional learning during college years, the identity construction of pre-service EFL teachers will undergo important changes. Compared with the time when they get to know the fragmentary pre-concept of EFL teacher identity, learning in college is the time they construct teacher identity systematically, which is also the beginning of the construction of teacher identity. In this period of time, the theoretical knowledge learned from the curriculum play an significant role in the construction of teacher identity. In the college, pre-service EFL teachers

have to leaning a large number of course. These course contribute to better understanding of teacher. For instance, course of education will equip them with the knowledge of teaching methods and teaching beliefs, which may make them realize the gap between the theoretical knowledge and personal experiences gained from previous life. The experiences of learning English will also influence the EFL teacher identity construction. If it is easy for someone to learn English, and he feels pleasant in this process, he may have a positive image of EFL teachers. On the contrary, if the English learning is not satisfying for someone, the competence of the language will not be equal to the qualifications of EFL teachers, thus, his desire and passion to be an EFL teacher will be reduced gradually.

### 3.1.3. Emotion

Hargreaves has ever done the research on the nature of teachers' work , which shows that "emotion" is the key factor leading to teachers professional life and identity. In the study [24]. Thomas et al. also stated that teacher emotional reactions to educational change are closely related to their professional identity and its construction [25]. When faced with educational changes full of ambiguity and uncertainty, teachers emotional reactions will affect their responsibility to take the risk, learning and development, and the process of identity construction. These emotions come from the interaction with the outside, for example, in the context of the school or the society. In the stage of pre-service, EFL teachers get the chance to practise teaching in the school, where their emotions are variously and complexly showed. The contradictions with the faculty in school will be the main problem for EFL teachers' negative emotions. Besides, The emotional rules embedded in cultural expectations, social standards, and professional norms, defines the types of emotional expression and identity that teachers should or should not have. Maintaining and controlling complex emotions has become a request in the process of teacher identity construction, which produces teachers emotional labor, while excessive emotional labor may lead to teachers emotional exhaustion, and then the identity crisis may occur. In this case, it is difficult for the teachers to construct a positive teacher identity.

## 3.2. Social Factors

Teacher identity construction is not an isolated process, it happens during the interaction of many factor in society. To show the impact clearly and reduce the overlapping of each factor, the author here generalizes the social factors into several parts according to different action subjects. These subjects include normal university cultivating EFL teachers, internship schools and the government.

### 3.2.1. Normal University Cultivating EFL Teachers

Normal universities are the bases of cultivating teachers. It takes effects in the way of transferring knowledge to the future teachers. In the universities, the main factor is the curriculum, the college and other departments works as the leading role in deciding how to cultivate the teachers. It works in the way of leading the students to improve the professional ability in the forms of college culture, classroom teaching, class activities, academic evaluation, parents communication and teachers' quality promotion programs. In this context, with the conscious guidance and enlightenment, the students can realize, change and reconstruct the recognition of EFL teachers gradually. To be specific, the universities use college education culture construction, optimization of the courses, the construction of the class organization, and academic monitoring and evaluation system, to interact with the students' learning content, direction and depth, to participate in the formation of the professional quality. In this process, the students get a new cognition of the teacher identity.

### 3.2.2. Internship Schools

Educational practicum is an effective opportunity to help pre-service teachers form their identity. In the internship schools where the practicum is complement, pre-service teachers will be influenced by a lot of factors. During the internship, especially those problems encountered in teaching dilemmas, conflicting expectations, feelings of incompetence, and inconsistent between personal ideal and realistic ability, will have an impact on teacher identity [26,27]. Among all these factor, the instructors of the pre-service teachers play an initial role in the professional development, influencing their identity construction at the same time. The interaction between the instructors and pre-service students include many aspect: like the time, the frequency, the methods, the content and instructors' attitude. And the effect of the interaction of can be demonstrated in three ways: problem-solving, the overall gain and professional identity. After communicating with the instructors of the internship school, most of the interns who solved their problems will be more identified with their teacher status. This is because, if most of the confusion and problems can be solved during the internship, they will be full of confidence in their own work, and the sense of achievement generated by successfully overcoming difficulties can bring them spiritual motivation. When interns become more and more confident in their work, their self-efficacy will increase, and they will naturally become more committed to the profession of teaching. For the overall gain, the more satisfied they are with the internship, the more recognition they will have with the teaching profession. If the interaction process produces more self-efficacy, it produces more emotional energy in the field of interpersonal interaction. Emotion as an important source of teachers identity, will expand or limit their possibilities of teaching.

Other factors like the regulations made by the school, the educational beliefs the school adapt and the interpersonal relationship with other faculties will also impact the construction process.

### 3.2.3. Government

In China, the educational policies are mainly made by the government. The changes of the policies and the regulations of the educational system will also impact teachers. For example, the issues of Double Reduction has made new requests for teachers, and influence the education and training industry, which create the career crisis for the teachers and influence the choices of career in the future. As a result, the pre-service EFL teachers will feel the pressure of this position and plan their future again. In this way, the image society created for EFL teachers will not be so attractive. Then their desire and motivation to be EFL teachers will be reduce gradually. Besides, usually as the leader of educational reform, government will adjust the educational system sometime. For teachers who can not follow the steps, the teaching will be hard, which in return has a negative impact on the work and the identity of teachers gradually.

## 4. Approaches to Construct Pre-service EFL Teacher Identity From the Perspective of Synergy Theory

According to the definition of teacher identity, it can be constructed socially and psychologically. And the factors influencing the construction also work in a whole context. Teacher identity construction is not isolated, which means it is the outcome of the interaction and integration of many factors. Based on this background, the Synergy Theory can be appropriately used to explore the approaches to construct the identity.

### 4.1. Adjusting the Curriculum

According to the research, teachers can be classified as experts in education, subject and teaching. Since teaching is the foundation of being a competent teacher, EFL teachers' identity as a teaching expert is more important than their identities as the other two roles. The English teacher education courses are where pre-service EFL teachers can nurture their pre-service

teaching abilities, gain practical experience, and enhance their teaching, which is the most crucial aspect of building their teaching expert status. Therefore, universities should adjust the curriculum of English education majors, increase the proportion of English teacher education courses, and refine the teacher education courses according to the characteristics of the physical and mental development of primary and secondary school students. In order to achieve the concretization of teacher education courses, it is also important to moderately alter the original teacher education courses and concentrate on the nation's goals of cultivating students. Thus, the student-teachers can carry out the teaching activities with a clear aim and right way. Besides, by strengthening the communication with the internship schools, the students can understand that actual teaching has a strong uncertainty. In this way teachers can improve their teaching ability, so as to lay a foundation for the construction of professional identity.

#### **4.2. Providing a Consultation Courses for Identity Construction**

The pre-concept, which is a process of confirmation, adjustment, or reconstruction, serves as the foundation for the identity construction of pre-service EFL instructors. Pre-service EFL instructors often have idealistic mindsets before entering the field of real education practice, but when they take practical courses in school or begin teaching, they may discover that their original teaching philosophies may not be true in practice. This process is full of contradictions, and it is often difficult for the pre-service EFL teachers to deal with it with ease. Therefore, it is necessary to help them deal with the contradictions. The consultation courses for better identity construction may be helpful. Psychological courses should be offered for them. The consultation of EFL teachers is a process of psychological adjustment, whether it is confirmation based on the pre-concept or adjustment and reconstruction, it will cause painful psychological alterations. If some pre-service EFL teachers do not handle it effectively, they may experience certain psychological issues. In the practicum, instructors in universities should pay close attention to the student-teachers' mental health. The internship schools can also hold the salon for novice teachers to communicate with each other since peer counseling can be more useful sometimes. Besides, in the process of pre-service identity construction of EFL teachers, experienced instructors can offer some solutions to solve the problems smoothly by instructing how to teach and how to manage. The stress and pressure can be released to some extent. Thus, teachers feel more ease in their daily work, and they can be more confident about the future of the profession. The construction of identity can be more smoothly.

#### **4.3. Creating a Professional Community of Pre-service EFL Teachers**

The identity construction of pre-service EFL teachers includes the internal identity construction by individuals and by groups. However, the latter matters more. There are lots of communities about the experienced teachers, however communities for pre-service teachers are rare. Therefore, the government should take the initiative to care the pre-service teacher to help them transform this period. A community focus on knowledge and teaching sharing should be created for their mutual communication. It is possible to prompt teachers' subjectivity through communication, which will also advance their professional growth. Universities should provide a sharing mechanism for pre-service EFL instructors as part of the process of building the teachers' professional community. This should be done in collaboration with the government. A symbiotic consciousness and movement practice wisdom can be formed as a result of members sharing their experiences. Finally, pre-service EFL teachers will build their professional identities as they continually share and revise their identities.

#### **4.4. Improving the Capacity of Self-reflection**

Building a teacher's identity internally is another possibility. Teachers should strive to identify difficulties throughout each lesson, quickly summarize them, and come up with solutions in



order to develop their problem-solving skills. Teachers should take time to think on the entire process in order to internalize and deepen their personal experience and thereby continually increase their capacity for problem-solving. For instance, pre-service EFL teachers usually experience confusion and ineffectiveness in the classroom at the very beginning of teaching, but teachers can continually consider how to learn in the current teaching situation rather than becoming frustrated by it. They should therefore investigate novel ideas and look for fresh approaches to the issue. Teachers have the power to redefine their profession and shift the focus from what I am to what I can be. Teachers should encourage internal discussion during the internship process in order to better understand themselves as trainee teachers and to clarify who they can become through reflection and ongoing teacher identity construction.

## 5. Conclusion

The period of pre-service is crucial to the development of teachers and their identity construction, which need both the external and internal forces to build for EFL teachers. In this paper, the author explores the approaches to construct pre-service EFL teacher identity in the context of society. A conclusion can be drawn that teacher identity can not be constructed independently by oneself, it happens during the interaction and integration with social factors, which can give the educational fields some hints for better education in both the teacher education and English education.

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