

A Review of Pre-service EFL Teacher Students' Identity Research

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Abstract

Teacher identity is vital for the growth and development of teachers, and the formation of teacher identity is indispensable for pre-service teachers, who are candidates for the teacher. This paper explores the importance, influencing factors, and challenges faced by pre-service English teachers' sense of identity by reviewing and synthesizing the previous studies. Based on what has been acquired from the above literature, the author makes three suggestions for developing pre-service English teachers' sense of identity: enhancing the role of educational narratives in teacher education, improving the language quality and critical thinking of pre-service EFL teachers, and strengthening practical teaching.

Keywords

Pre-Service Teacher, Teacher Education, Teacher Identity, EFL Teacher.

1. Introduction

Teacher identity is a crucial component of teacher excellence. According to research, a teacher's identity affects their resiliency, effectiveness, motivation, dedication, and job satisfaction [1]. People have gradually realized the significance of teacher identity for teachers and students. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council proposed to give the majority of teachers the position of happiness, career, a sense of accomplishment, and honor in society. However, many studies show that today's pre-service teachers need more clarity about self-orientation, utilitarian motivation for teaching, and a lack of educational sentiment. Only pre-service teachers with a positive identity can get into the swing of teacher education and actively learn educational knowledge and skills [2] to become qualified, even excellent teachers. Learning and teaching English is somewhat complex and different from other subjects. Student teachers majoring in English education are supposed to have a more professional identity and trained teaching techniques facing the situation that English is a language instead of a specific skill.

Therefore, this paper reviews existing studies on pre-service EFL teachers' identity to show readers the significance of teacher identity and how to foster pre-service EFL teachers' identity. By comparing and contrasting previous studies, this review can help researchers to identify the gaps.

2. What is Identity?

Erik Erikson, a psychologist, put out one of the development theories that has stood the test of time. Erikson split the lifecycle into eight stages, each featuring a conflict that had to be resolved for personality to develop. According to Erikson, the conflict that arises during adolescence is "identity versus role confusion[3]." Erikson also stressed that adolescence is when identity creation is at its most intense, yet the process continues well into adulthood. Self-definition may become a lifelong endeavor when a new function, like parenthood, is assumed [3].

As the pioneer of the Psychoanalysis School, Freud [4] proposed the definitions of the id, ego, and superego. From his point of view, the mind is made up of three parts: the id, which is

motivated by instinct and want; the superego, which is motivated by morals and values; and the ego, which balances the two and defines an individual. Insight, agency, empathy, and purpose help the ego function [4]. In the 1980s, H. Tajfel defined identity as "The individual recognizes that he or she belongs to a specific social group and also recognizes the emotional and value significance that being a member of the group brings to him or her [5]." Owens and Goodney thought identity is a cognitive schema that can filter information from the person's external environment [6].

In general, identity is inseparable from one's internal and external environment. The group a person belongs to impacts their identity, and from a constructivist viewpoint, identity is also progressively created by society's subtle influences.

3. What is Teacher Identity?

The topic to be discussed should be pre-service EFL teachers' identity, but only some of the research can be found. This paper talks about this topic from teacher identity.

Teacher identity has been explored through sociocultural theory and communities of practice [7]. According to Beauchamp, teacher identity is a dynamic construct characterized generally as complex, evolving, and emergent. Researchers from China, Song Guangwen and Wei Shuhua, held similar opinions: identity, as people's understanding of who they are and who others are, has both a constructed dynamic and a relatively continuous static nature [8]. He Shengzhong made up the definition of teacher identity from two perspectives: static, which means the individual's perceptions, feelings, intentions, expectations, and values of the occupation or the role; dynamic, which refers to the process of individuals engaging in a profession or establishing a role when doing something [9].

4. Previous Studies on Pre-service Teachers' Identity

Although there is no universally accepted definition of pre-service teachers' identities today, academics domestically and abroad maintain that pre-service teachers' identities are multi-dimensional.

Hamman et al. [10] investigated pre-service teachers' identities using the possible selves theory and psychological identity development. He believed there are two dimensions to identity: the self that is expected and wants to be and the self that is dreaded and frightened to be. According to Thomas and Beauchamp [11], conceiving oneself as a professional was a crucial stage in forming an effective teacher identity. At the same time, Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate [12] emphasized the organization's commitment to the identity development of pre-service teachers. Despite overseas studies, the research in China was late but also reasonable. Zhao Mingren used the quantitative research method to examine the identities of pre-service teachers from the perspectives of pre-endowed identity, institutional identity, and constructive identity [13]. Pre-service teachers' cognition and assessment of their self-image, teaching position, professional knowledge, and surroundings were highlighted by Feng Hong [14]. Zhao Hongyu et al. and Ma Hongyu both similarly put pre-service teachers' identities into several dimensions. Zhao Hongyu et al. categorized the identity of free-tuition pre-service teachers into three categories: intrinsic value identity, extrinsic value identity, and volitional action identity, while three dimensions—professional value identity, professional willingness, and professional preparation tendency—were proposed by Ma Hongyu [15].

Several studies about pre-service teachers have been demonstrated through a survey of relevant domestic and overseas studies. However, in the field of language teacher education, as noted by various scholars, insufficient research has been carried out to understand the process

of identity construction within the context of language teaching and teachers [16] Therefore, the identity of pre-service EFL teachers will be covered in the following contents.

5. Previous Studies on Pre-service EFL Teachers' Identity

Although building teacher identity in pre-service teachers is widely acknowledged to be important, research has yet to explain in detail how teacher identity develops over time. Blending the professional and personal selves leads to developing the teacher's identity.

5.1. Significance

Many researchers agree that identity (or professional identity) is crucial for pre-service EFL teachers. The construction and development of preservice teachers' professional identities are significantly influenced by their diverse ideas, attitudes, and motivations about teaching, learning, and other aspects of the teaching profession, according to numerous studies on teacher cognition [17][18]. Making pre-service EFL teachers ponder and consider who they are and how they envision themselves as instructors in the near future is crucial throughout this learning-to-teach process [19]. What's more, teacher identity provides guidance on how to convey one's professional self in the context of their teaching and helps them comprehend the "complex, contextual, and fluid traits that individuals bring to the study and practice of teaching." [20] Teachers build their self-images and professional identities based on their "beliefs, values, and emotions about many aspects of teaching and being a teacher" [21], as well as an interactive process to interpret values and experiences [22]. This process is ongoing rather than concluding.

The above discussion of teacher identity applies to many other subjects, but Braine explores the importance of identity from the perspective of a non-native EFL teacher. According to Braine [23], the term non-native English speakers for pre-service EFL teachers has a sense of "otherness," suggesting that they may struggle with their identities as teachers. Based on the opinion of Velez-Rendon [24], the professional identities of pre-service EFL teachers who are non-native English speakers were formed by their educational and personal backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences with challenges and problems. Thus, understanding the process and significance of non-native English speakers was crucial, especially for teacher educators.

5.2. Influencing Factors

A variety of variables shapes the identity of pre-service EFL teachers. In this section, this paper will review previous studies on the factors influencing pre-service EFL teachers' identity from both internal and external sources.

5.2.1. External Factors

Currently, the social environment such as universities, policies, and global trends as external factors can influence pre-service EFL teachers' identity construction.

Many pre-service teachers attend normal universities or colleges, so their experience on campus is essential and crucial. Johnson [25] asserts that teacher identity is socially formed and developed via involvement in a variety of contexts as former students, participants in teacher education programs, and members of various communities of practice. The Initial Teacher Education (ITE) or training process is of great importance to pre-service EFL teachers [26]. Teacher preparation programs often include both theoretical and practical components. The teaching practicum gives pre-service teachers the chance to get prolonged teaching experience before beginning their careers as teachers. Many researchers understand different categories of teacher preparation programs or training. Richards [27] pointed out that there are six fields of core knowledge based on second language teacher education theories of teaching, teaching

skills, communication skills, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning, decision making, and contextual knowledge.

In comparison, Hamer argued that along with the previous six domains, there are three additional excellent knowledge sectors that EFL teachers must possess: learners and teachers, managing classroom learning, testing, and evaluating. Each school or program trains and develops pre-service teachers according to the competency needs of EFL teachers, and the theoretical education (educational philosophy, educators, Etc.) and practicum provided to students during this period can enhance their teacher identity. For example, a new study by Chien [28] showed that educational or English teaching quotes could be effective and appropriate materials during the practicum of pre-service ELF teachers, which will strengthen their teacher identity. Meanwhile, Minh-Hue and Denchai proved that pre-service teachers could develop their teacher identity during teaching practicum through qualitative research, respectively, in Australia and Thailand. Besides, conflicts among paired instructors or placement schools can help to shape pre-service EFL teachers' identity [29]. There are different demands of English teachers in placement schools and different paired instructors have personalized teaching styles and professional competence, which can influence those student teachers' teaching practice. Thus, those student teachers adopted, resisted, and rejected various identity views during their teaching profession.

On the other hand, external factors such as society and culture also have impacts on pre-service EFL teachers' identity. Marietjie and Mariechen argued that one of the reasons for the weak effect of education reform is that the significance of teacher identity needs to be considered more due to the limitation of the economy in South Africa. In Turkey, it was concluded that emerging information communication technology (ICT) has been changing the educational environment and pre-service EFL teachers' identity development can be fostered [30]. Differences in political and economic contexts between regions lead to an educational environment that can inevitably be affected by the professional identity of teachers and pre-service teachers. Despite the material conditions, Jiang Lianjiang et al. [31] found that exam-oriented culture also affects pre-service EFL teachers' identity based on the qualitative interpretive analysis in Macau. Some students may be inspired by previous teachers, which results in the student teachers can be generally categorized into two types: knowledge-oriented and exam-oriented.

5.2.2. Internal Factors

Besides external factors such as the environment, pre-service teachers' backgrounds, styles, beliefs, and experiences also impact their formation of teacher identity. The pre-service teachers' personal beliefs and critical incidents are generally more influential among them. According to the study of Egmir and Çelik [32], with the exception of essentialism, there is a strong and positive correlation between educational beliefs and teacher identities. Furthermore, different student teachers have variable characteristics. The findings imply that there are significant gender, grade, and departmental differences in the educational attitudes and teacher identities of pre-service teachers [33]. Jiang et al agreed with the point but illustrated from a more specific view, imagined identity, which is shaped by pre-service EFL teachers' personal beliefs and learning or training experiences. For example, in the empirical study of Qian Xiaofang et al. , they collected data from first-year students pre-service EFL teachers at Beijing Normal University, and over 90% of participants of the survey agreed that they gave positive comments on the teacher, this vocation. In that case, the importance of personal belief can be noted as it reflects the pre-service EFL teachers' motivation.

Many other researchers have studied pre-service teachers' experiences and found that critical incident plays an essential role in constructing their teacher identity. A sort of mobility that entails changes to one's identity and agentic affiliations is known as a critical incident (CI).

Many of the critical incidents of participants have an impact on self-efficacy. The finding of Kiliç and Cinkara [33] indicated that early learning experiences of pre-service ELT teachers included a few critical incidents and positively affected teacher identity. Megawati et al [34] proved that critical incidents allow potential teachers to reflect more. The study by Serna-Gutiérrez et al. [35] showed how teachers evaluated their teaching practices and how the crucial incidents aided their analysis and evaluation. Iranian EFL instructors' professional identities were studied by Abednia [36] during a teacher education course, and the results confirmed that no changes to their teaching methods had been noticed.

Some other factors such as reflection and language proficiency of pre-service teachers may also affect their teacher identity. In order to explore within themselves and their courses [37], reflective practices "enable preservice teachers to consciously control the development of their identity, their inspiration, and their enthusiasm for their vocation" [38]. With journal writing, reflective thinking can be encouraged [39][40], which helps teachers get insights into teaching theories, approaches, and procedures as well as self-awareness and teaching-related questions. There is a study that pre-service EFL teachers' identity is grounded on language proficiency just as teaching practice [41][42].

In brief, the influencing factors of pre-service EFL teachers usually come from university experience, social environment, and student teachers themselves. However, it is rather unfortunate that more influential factors such as family environment [43], their students [42], and even gender difference [44] on pre-service EFL teachers' identity are less studied concerning each other. In the future, researchers can explore more in the above directions.

In addition to the above reasons, some Chinese researchers [9][31] have studied teacher professional identity of students at different levels of normal universities by comparing them, and they found that the teacher identity of students in local colleges and universities is lower than that of those directly under the Ministry of Education. There may be two reasons for this. One is that the religious teacher training institutions have better faculty and research strength, which can help students form their own teacher identity better and faster, and students have better overall ability and employment. In contrast, local universities, in addition to their low conditions, most of their students come from rural areas, the quality of students is not as good as in urban areas, and students' economic conditions are relatively backward, leading to students' lack of optimism about their career prospects and identity.

5.3. Challenges in Identity Formation

In recent years, with changes in the social environment, such as the COVID-19 pandemic leading to a large number of people taking the teacher recruitment test, changes in supply and demand in the teacher market have led to an unpromising employment situation for pre-service teachers and a crisis in the professional identity for some of them. The difficulties in identity learning are dual in nature, affecting not only pre-service, new, and experienced teachers as they learn about their profession and place within it, but also teacher educators who must identify the learning that is or may be available to teachers and direct their development [45].

In the context of "de-teaching" and "comprehensive" talent training, normal universities have been "alienating" teacher education, the characteristics of teacher training are becoming less and less distinct, and pre-service teacher training is becoming more and increasingly weakened.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In the previous sections, this paper has reviewed the literature on pre-service English teachers' identity in terms of importance, influencing factors (both internal and external), and challenges. The author discusses the topic in terms of what the literature presents, giving some humble opinions about the identity stem cultivation and development of professional teachers.

Enhancing educational narratives in pre-service teacher education is crucial. This is better practiced in China, where pre-service or in-service teachers have many platforms to watch and tell the educational stories of different people. Nevertheless, telling teachers' experiences is not simply about telling stories; it is about constructing, reconstructing, and co-constructing through stories the individual teachers' and group experiences of practice and deepening their understanding of the meaning of education [46]. Based on educational narratives, pre-service or in-service teachers can form their communities to share experiences and transmit methods together and encourage each other and enhance professional identity. Thus, educational narratives should be oriented to disciplinary identity, social identity as an effect, educational institution identity as a norm, and personal identity as an emotional breakthrough [47].

Improving critical thinking disposition and language proficiency is essential. There is the study [48] has shown that critical thinking disposition is one of the crucial predictors of improving pre-service English teachers' self-efficacy. Improving language proficiency sounds more straightforward here. Strengthening critical thinking seems more complex. However, the increasingly complex environment at home and abroad, where multiculturalism is the backdrop for today's students and teachers, makes it even more critical for former teachers to think critically.

Strengthening practical teaching is significant. Practice is the only way identity is formed, and self-understanding and reflection through practice are essential ways of Self-understanding and reflection through practice is meaningful way of identity for teacher education students (Chong& Low, 2009). Although many pre-service teachers enter schools on placement, the process is still at an intellectual level and needs to provide more practical opportunities for student teachers. It needs to be revised in terms of the university curriculum design and guidance for their placements, enhanced mentorship, and peer assessment to deepen their understanding of education in theory and practice. During the teaching practicum, it is even more critical for pre-service EFL teachers to enhance their reflective teaching and to keep a record of their journey and changes in competence by keeping a teaching journal to enhance their overall competence.

In this paper, the author analyzes and synthesizes relevant research on preservice EFL teachers' identity, with most studies focusing on the years 2010 to 2022 and a small number of studies focusing on the beginning of this century. Most of the studies are empirical, mostly from Europe and Asia, with Turkish scholars shining relatively bright in their research on pre-service English teachers within the last three years. In general, there are more studies related to pre-service teachers' identity, and those for EFL are quite abundant. There are still many problems with this article, such as the fact that the literature is not systematically reviewed, that some keywords are not clearly defined and that the article does not make a distinction between teacher identity and teacher professional identity (but in fact, there is a distinction) due to space constraints.

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