Constructing Teacher Identity: A Constructivist Study of Chinese Pre-Service English Teachers' Professional Development

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Abstract

This study examines Chinese pre-service English teachers' professional identity construction in a four-year undergraduate teacher education program at a private university. Framed within constructivist theory, the research examines how identity develops through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of teaching. A qualitative research design was employed, involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty final-year pre-service teachers. Data were collected in two stages, focusing first on academic development and then on practicum experiences. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. The findings reveal a four-phase journey of identity development, with identity construction beginning at program entry through foundational coursework and evolving through simulated teaching, classroom practice, and guided reflection. Emotional engagement and social validation emerged as critical drivers of identity consolidation. The study highlights how identity formation is recursive, shaped by both motivation and feedback. It also emphasizes the unique challenges faced by non-native English-speaking student teachers in navigating linguistic legitimacy and self-efficacy. The findings carry significant implications for teacher education, suggesting the need for early reflective scaffolding, emotionally responsive mentoring, and identity-focused curricula. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Chinese pre-service English teachers, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of teacher development in EFL contexts and supports more inclusive approaches to teacher preparation.

Keywords: Constructivist theory, identity development, pre-service English teachers, teacher professional identity

Introduction

Teaching is often described as a vocation, requiring sustained emotional, psychological, and physical investment, as well as conscientiousness and a high level of responsibility (Greenier et al., 2021; Shakeel et al., 2023; Troesch & Bauer, 2020). Throughout their professional journey, teachers frequently encounter emotional dilemmas and psychological challenges (Frenzel et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020). These challenges are particularly pronounced during the pre-service phase, a critical period for developing foundational teaching competencies and cultivating self-awareness, professional commitment, and a sense of belonging within the profession.

The professional identity construction of among pre-service teachers has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Haghighi et al., 2020; Manara, 2018; Nguyen & Loughland, 2018; Nue & Manara, 2022; Torres-Cladera et al., 2021). Existing studies have examined this process from various perspectives, with particular emphasis on practicum experiences (Choi & Park, 2022; Haghighi et al., 2020; Siahaan & Subekti, 2021), and to a lesser extent, coursework and school placement periods (Torres-Cladera et al., 2021). Much of the literature centers on the later stages of teacher preparation, offering limited insight into how identity construction unfolds across time, beginning from the earliest stages of a pre-service teacher education program. Investigations of the entire pre-service teacher

education program is important because the professional identity of a teacher is not an outcome which emerges at the end of their training; rather, it is an evolving process shaped by cumulative experiences, shifting contexts, and recursive reflection. Recognizing this temporal dimension allows for the critical examination of how the professional identity of pre-service teachers are contested and renegotiated over time. This contention is supported by the work of Chen et al. (2023) who undertook a temporal investigation of the professional development of novice English language teachers pursuing their postgraduate studies. They argue that a longitudinal study allows for greater insights into the trajectories of teacher identity development. Similarly, Ozbay Ozdemir (2024) problematized time by examining the narratives of preservice preschool teachers in order to capture life experiences which shaped their professional identities.

With increasing global economic integration, English has become a dominant international language, driving demand for English teachers at all levels (Trudgill & Hannah, 2017). Although NNES teachers comprise most of this workforce (Comprendio & Jindapitak, 2025), they face ongoing challenges in forming confident professional identity. These difficulties are intensified by the opinion that native English speakers (NES) are inherently superior teachers (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009), often leading to marginalization and professional self-doubt (Pirro, 2024).

In China, English being taught as a foreign language, pre-service teachers frequently experience professional anxiety and uncertainty. The absence of a fully immersive English environment, dependence on non-standardized teaching materials, and limited authentic language exposure collectively contribute to a pervasive sense of apprehension and reduced self-efficacy. Consequently, these student teachers face challenges not only in developing their instructional competencies but also in establishing a stable professional identity (Lamote & Engels, 2010).

Scholars argue that pre-service teacher education must both develop practical teaching skills and foster a strong professional identity (Kumar, 2024). Beyond competence, programs should assist teachers in constructively managing emotional demands and challenges by addressing psychological and emotional growth (Flores, 2020; Lutovac & Flores, 2021). These setbacks are especially striking in China, as well as in many other EFL contexts. Feng and Lin (2013) highlight that identity tensions, such as role ambiguity and psychological strain (Christou et al., 2024), can affect cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, influenced by limited linguistic exposure and low teaching confidence.

Therefore, effective strategies to support the development of the professional identity among Chinese pre-service English teachers must be explored, especially during the initial stages of their teacher education. The gap is addressed in this study by asserting that professional identity construction begins upon entry into academic programs, rather than being limited to the often-explored practicum and in-service phases. The investigation of Chinese student teachers' construction and negotiation of their evolving identity within an EFL context allows this research to offer a more nuanced context-sensitive understanding of teacher identity construction.

Literature Review

Beyond the technical acquisition of pedagogical skills, becoming a teacher is a deeply personal and socially mediated process of constructing a professional identity. This complexity is especially salient in the context of English language teaching, where linguistic issues such as language ownership and legitimacy inadvertently intersect with the evolving identity of educators.

Teacher Professional Identity among Non-Native English-Speaking (NNES) Teachers

Teacher professional identity is a complex conceptualisation as it manifests both personal and professional self-conceptions (Beijaard et al., 2004). Scholars define it as teachers' evolving self-understanding, shaped by contexts, i.e., personal and social factors (Gee, 2005; Murphey, 1998; Singh & Richards, 2006). Hoffman-Kipp (2008), for instance, regards teacher professional identity as emerging from the intersection of personal beliefs, pedagogical practice, and political engagement within a broader sociopolitical framework.

Although there is no single agreed-upon definition of teacher professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2004), scholars broadly recognise its significance. It plays a pivotal role in shaping teachers' decisions about instructional practices, content selection, and classroom relationships (Beijaard et al., 2004), as well as their dedication towards professional development (Hammerness et al., 2005).

Literature emphasizes that professional identity is not fixed or innate (Beijaard et al., 2004; Maclean & White, 2007; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), but dynamic and continuously shaped through the teaching-learning process (Trent, 2010). Both internal factors – such as motivation and emotional engagement (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002; Olsen, 2008; Rodgers & Scott, 2008), and external influences, including institutional context and prior experiences (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002; Smagorinsky et al., 2004; Findlay, 2006), critically shape a teacher's evolving identity.

The process is more complex for NNES English teachers and student teachers, who navigate a dual identity as both language learners and teachers within a field historically dominated by native-speaker norms (Choi, 2007). The prevailing native-speaker ideology often undermines their legitimacy and competence, regardless of qualifications or pedagogical expertise (Duran & Saenkhum, 2024; Nauryzbayeva, 2024). Native-speaker bias, embedded in institutional structures and learner attitudes, reinforces feelings of inadequacy among NNES teachers (Nigar, 2024). Against the backdrop of such perceived preference for NES teachers, the tension between linguistic proficiency and pedagogical legitimacy leads NNES teachers to feel pressure to prove themselves, often at the expense of recognizing their actual strengths (Braine, 2010; Luk & Lin, 2017)." As a result, NNES student teachers often struggle to reconcile their professional aspirations with perceived limitations imposed by their non-native status.

The professional identity construction of pre-service teachers is shaped by the institutional environment and the education programs it offers. Programs may aim to foster identity development by promoting critical reflection and embracing linguistic diversity (Ajayi, 2011) or perpetuate deficit discourses by aligning content and assessment with native-speaker norms. For NNES Chinese student teachers, particularly, this dynamic can exacerbate anxiety, self-doubt, and persistent comparison to native-speaker ideals (Yang & Forbes, 2024; Zheng, 2025).

A critical but overlooked aspect of professional identity formation for NNES teachers is emotional labor, that is, emotional tensions, ranging from pride to frustration which is crucial in identity work (Gedik, 2016). This process is marked with complexities as it involves navigating competing expectations, balancing personal and professional values, and managing conflicts at the personal and societal levels (Schutz & Lee, 2014). Unfortunately, much of the investigations on NNES teachers have focused on cognitive and pedagogical competencies, treating the emotional dimension as secondary rather than integral to professional growth. The lesser focus on emotional labor is also because it tends to be hidden behind wider discourses of language proficiency, and native-speaker comparisons (Wolff & De Costa, 2017). In addition, the temporal unfolding of professional identity means that the recursive nature of emotional labor which surfaces at various junctures is a challenge to document and theorize (Brown et al., 2014).

Therefore, the process of professional identity formation among NNES English language student teachers can be said to be context- and emotionally bound, constructed by ongoing negotiation in the form of sociolinguistic hierarchies and individual agency. The field needs more nuanced, locally grounded studies exploring how NNES teachers navigate, resist, or transform diverse identity positions in their path to professional maturity.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is guided by constructivist theory, a paradigm that views identity as constructed through experience, reflection, and social interaction (Kolb, 2014; Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). For non-native English-speaking (NNES) pre-service teachers, constructivism offers a particularly powerful lens because professional identity is shaped not only by pedagogical training but also through the "process of discovering, constructing and reconstructing knowledge, attitudes, competence and values on the basis of one´s own activity and existing experience" (Spilková, 2011, p.118). Unlike native English-speaking peers, NNES pre-service teachers must construct their identity while reconciling their dual roles as language learners and teachers, integrating disciplinary knowledge with lived experiences of linguistic insecurity, and negotiating their place within sociolinguistic hierarchies (Yuan, 2019). Constructivist theory accounts for these complexities by emphasizing how learners actively build knowledge and identity through cumulative experiences, scaffolded reflection, and interaction within social and institutional contexts. Recent longitudinal studies confirm this perspective. For example, Chen, Zhang, and Zheng (2023) illustrate how NNES teachers' professional identities are incrementally constructed through evolving experiences of literacy, self-efficacy, and community engagement, while Uştuk and Yazan (2024) shows how identity is continually renegotiated over time. These studies reinforce that identity construction is an iterative, time-sensitive process, and highlight why the earliest phases of teacher education are crucial for NNES pre-service teachers, as these foundational experiences set the direction for later development in both cognitive and affective domains.

Anchored in the constructivist tradition, professional identity development follows a four-phase model that integrates experiential learning (Kolb, 2014), social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), and self-regulated learning (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002). The phases, namely (i) experiential, (ii) assimilation and adaptation, (iii) social interaction, and (iv) internalization and self-regulation, are cyclical and iterative, highlighting the dynamic nature of identity. Each phase involves three interconnected dimensions: cognitive (knowledge acquisition and processing), emotional (affective responses, motivation, self-efficacy), and behavioral (actions, practices, participation).

The Experiential Phase marks pre-service teachers' initial exposure to English language education. Anchored in Kolb's (2014) experiential learning model, it involves engaging with new content, concepts, and role expectations through foundational coursework, observations, and classroom activities. Learners begin forming

foundational understandings of teaching through disciplinary content (e.g., grammar, phonetics) and pedagogical exposure. This aligns with Piaget's (1972) notion of schema development, whereby learners organize new information into mental structures. Emotionally, this stage is marked by curiosity, uncertainty, and anxiety, shaping motivation (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990) and sparking an "initial emotional connection" to teaching. Behaviorally, learners begin professional participation through lectures, tasks, and observing teacher models, albeit in a low-stakes environment.

The Assimilation and Adaptation Phase involves integrating new knowledge into existing beliefs, guided by Piaget's dual processes of assimilation and accommodation. Cognitively, pre-service teachers refine concepts and reconcile theory with simulated practices like peer and micro-teaching, adapting their mental frameworks to new challenges (Seo & Creed, 2002). Emotionally, growing self-confidence and positive feedback strengthen their sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1997), though cognitive dissonance may arise when beliefs clash with experience. Behaviorally, pre-service teachers experiment with teaching methods, adapt lessons, and reflect on practice, showing early professional agency.

The Social Interaction Phase, grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, emphasizes that learning and identity are shaped through social mediation. Cognitively, understanding deepens via discussion, collaboration, and mentor feedback, enhancing pedagogical reasoning. Emotionally, social validation fosters self-efficacy and a sense of belonging, as recognition from peers and mentors strengthens professional identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Behaviorally, pre-service teachers emulate observed practices, adopt peer strategies, and engage in professional communities, taking on complex tasks like lesson planning, classroom management simulations, and co-teaching.

The Internalization and Self-Regulation Phase marks the shift toward professional autonomy and self-directed learning, based on self-regulation and metacognition theories (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002). Cognitively, teachers consolidate knowledge and tailor strategies for diverse classrooms. Emotionally, this phase features confidence, satisfaction, and reflective maturity, fostering intrinsic motivation and long-term commitment. Behaviorally, pre-service teachers set goals, monitor progress, adapt strategies, pursue professional development, develop personal teaching philosophies, and plan their careers.

Constructivist theory and the four-phase model underscore the dynamic, reflective nature of identity development and inform more responsive teacher education programs. By acknowledging the complexity and continuity of identity formation, this framework promotes more holistic, responsive, and empowering approaches to teacher preparation.

Research questions

Anchored to this theoretical framework, the present study is guided by the following research questions:
   i. How do pre-service English teachers in China construct their professional identity during their four-year undergraduate teacher education program?
   ii. What cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions characterize the professional identity development of Chinese pre-service English teachers at different stages of their training?

Methodology

This qualitative study examined how pre-service English teachers in China develop their professional identity during teacher education. Using in-depth interviews with students in an English education program, it explored their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral experiences during coursework and practicum. The constructivist theory and the four-phase model underscore the dynamic, reflective nature of identity development and inform more responsive teacher education programs. By acknowledging the complexity and continuity of identity formation, this framework promotes more holistic, responsive, and empowering approaches to teacher preparation.

Participants

Twenty pre-service English teachers participated in the study. All were undergraduate students at the same private college in China where the researcher works. The table below summarizes their demographic data. To ensure anonymity, each pre-service teacher is represented by the prefix "S".

Table 1

Participants' demographic data

No.	Name	Gender	Date of Birth	Current Residence	English Score (out of 150)
1	S Song1	Female	2002-02-07	Zibo	102
2	S Xu	Female	2002-11-15	Linyi	110
3	S Jia	Female	2002-02-06	Dongying	106
4	S Cui	Female	2001-08-28	Binzhou	115
5	S Zhu	Female	2002-09-20	Jining	121
6	S Lu	Female	2000-12-05	Zhenjiang	114
7	S Sun	Female	2000-11-22	Weifang	118
8	S Wang	Male	2002-05-04	Liaocheng	116
9	S Song2	Female	2002-12-06	Heze	103
10	S Shi	Female	2002-04-28	Huhehaote	99
11	S Shen	Male	2001-09-10	Guang'an	120
12	S Xia	Female	2002-11-04	Linyi	111
13	S Zhang	Male	2000-03-10	Jining	90
14	S Li	Male	2001-08-07	Tai'an	117
15	S Gao	Female	2001-11-18	Liaocheng	128
16	S Kong	Female	2002-10-05	Liaocheng	120
17	S Liu	Female	2002-11-07	Zaozhuang	110
18	S Zhou1	Male	2002-06-26	Jinan	115
19	S Zhou2	Female	2002-07-20	Lianyungang	130
20	S Chong	Female	2001-11-14	Jinan	127

The present study was conducted at a university in Shandong, China. The participants were 20 pre-service English teachers who were randomly selected from the 2020 cohort of 88 students majoring in English. The students were undergoing an English education program with the of qualifying as English teachers at primary and secondary schools. Using a random sampling method, 20 students were selected from the 88. However, it should be noted that the sample exhibits a gender imbalance (16 females, 4 males), reflecting broader trends in Chinese language education, where women predominate, likely due to greater interest in language-related fields (Lavador et al., 2024; Li et al., 2021; Redjala & Rebbeh, 2020).

The participants' English scores in the National Higher Education Entrance Examination ranged from 90 to 130, with an average score of approximately 113.6, indicating relatively strong proficiency – a prerequisite for admission into the English education program in a university.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Twenty final-year pre-service English teachers were individually interviewed to explore how they interpreted and internalized professional identity. Although data collection for the present study involved final-year pre-service teachers, the interviews were designed to elicit rich retrospective narratives that spanned the entire four-year experience of teacher education. By inviting participants to reflect on their experiences from the initial coursework phase through simulated teaching, and culminating in the practicum, the study was able to capture the temporal unfolding of identity construction across multiple stages of training. This design aligns with definitions of longitudinal qualitative research that emphasize the tracing of processes and changes over time, whether through repeated observations or through reflective accounts that reconstruct developmental directions (Saldana, 2003). Recent research on NNES teacher identity supports the legitimacy of this approach. Chen, Zhang, and Zheng (2023), for example, employed in-depth interviews to trace identity shifts of non-native English-speaking teachers across different academic milestones, while Uştuk and Yazan (2024) similarly relied on extended interview

accounts to demonstrate how identity negotiation unfolds through program participation and lived experiences.

The first round of interviews, undertaken prior to the students beginning their teaching practicum, were conducted in quiet classrooms or cafés of the participants' choice, and lasted about 60 minutes each. A follow-up interview, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, was conducted eight weeks later with the same twenty participants, focusing on the impact of their practicum. Refer to appendix A for the interview questions. Following Li et al. (2021), data collection ceased when no new themes emerged. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim in Mandarin before being translated into English. Both versions were returned to participants for verification. The English translated interviews, from both the first and second rounds, were 123,048 words in total for two session interviews.

Transcriptions were thematically analyzed using qualitative methods, supported by NVivo14.0. Reliability and validity were ensured through inter-rater checks, member validation, and triangulation with curriculum documents. Interview questions, guided by Feng & Lin (2013), Bradford (2018), and Dannels (2000), explored identity construction across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions.

Formal interviews were supplemented by informal exchanges via WeChat and QQ, enabling refinement of questions and collection of spontaneous insights. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin for clarity, then translated into English for analysis. Combining formal and informal interviews enriched the dataset and captured a broader range of participant perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was prioritized throughout data collection and analysis, following established qualitative research guidelines to protect participants' rights, dignity, and well-being.

Informed consent was obtained from all twenty pre-service English teachers before the study began. Each received a clear information sheet explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw at any time. Consent forms were signed and collected before interviews.

As participants were student teachers from the same institution, participation was strictly voluntary. To prevent perceived coercion, recruitment was conducted outside class hours, no incentives were offered, and students were assured that participation would not affect their academic standing or relationship with the institution.

Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained. All participants were assigned pseudonyms using the prefix "S" followed by a unique identifier (e.g., S Song1, S Xu), ensuring that individual identity could not be traced. All personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and publication materials. Audio files and transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected device, accessible only to the primary researcher. Data will be retained for five years before secure deletion.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated from Mandarin into English. Translated transcripts were returned to participants for member checking, allowing for corrections or clarifications, which enhanced the study's credibility and upheld participant autonomy.

Given the sensitivity of identity-related topics, participants were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable with. The researcher remained alert to signs of discomfort and allowed participants to pause or skip questions deemed distressing, as needed.

Findings

The Professional Identity Construction Process of Pre-service English Teachers

Based on interviews with the 20 pre-service English teachers, distinct stages in their professional identity construction emerged. One group of participants (e.g., S. Gao, S. Kong, S. Liu, S. Sun, S. Xia, S. Xu, S. Jia, S. Shi, S. Song1, S. Wang, S. Zhu, and S. Zhou1) described three stages while another group (e.g., S. Cui, S. Lu, S. Chong, S. Zhou2, S. Shen, S. Li, S. Song2, and S. Zhao) described four. Despite the variation, both groups expressed clear conceptualizations of how their professional identity evolved throughout their undergraduate studies.

Stage 1: Acquisition of Foundational Knowledge
In the first stage, nearly all participants focused on acquiring essential disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge. This foundational phase involved mastering core English skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing, through courses like Comprehensive English, Extensive Reading, English Listening Comprehension, English Grammar, English Phonetics, and Basic English Writing. At the same time, they began engaging with fundamental concepts in English education.

Excerpt 1 (S. Jia):
(trans.) "First of all, in the initial phase, I focused on acquiring foundational knowledge for English majors, including grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. At the same time, I began to engage with and understand English education theories, such as English teaching theory and course design concepts. The main objective of this phase is to build a solid foundation in both language skills and pedagogical theory."

Several peers echoed this view. S. Kong, for example, described the sophomore year as a time for grasping basic knowledge and understanding the English major, while S. Cui highlighted forming a systematic knowledge base combining English proficiency with educational theories.

Excerpt 2 (S. Li):
(trans.) "At the same time, I began to study educational theories such as pedagogy and psychology, laying the groundwork for future teaching practice."

While many participants regarded this stage as a necessary period of knowledge accumulation, others revealed that this foundation was less stable than it appeared.

Excerpt 3 (S. Zhou1):
(trans.) "Although I gained a preliminary understanding of English education theories while studying the foundational courses, I encountered significant gaps when trying to apply these theories to actual teaching situations. This discrepancy left me puzzled about how to effectively use these theoretical insights in practice."

Insights like Li's (Excerpt 2) suggest that pre-service English teachers were clearly aware of the foundational competencies needed for their future roles. Yet, Zhou1's reflection shows that these competencies were not always easily transferred into practice, exposing an early tension between theoretical learning and pedagogical application. This indicates that identity construction at the foundational stage was not a linear accumulation of knowledge but was also marked by doubt, discontinuity, and a search for coherence. Learning together nevertheless fostered social bonds, mutual respect, and growth toward professional self-actualization, even as participants grappled with unresolved questions about the practical utility of their training.

Stage 2: Deepening of Knowledge and Initial Teaching Practice

The second stage centers on expanding pedagogical knowledge and developing practical teaching skills. After building foundational competencies, participants applied their knowledge in simulated settings like micro-teaching and peer evaluations, gaining initial teaching experience without real students. Some also pursued formal teaching certificates for primary, junior high, or senior high levels, further solidifying their professional identity.

Excerpt 4 (S. Lu):
(trans) "We also began to participate in peer evaluations, teaching observations, and virtual micro-teaching to gain a preliminary understanding of future teaching practice. As our learning deepened, we gradually formed our educational beliefs and teaching approaches and tried to apply these in virtual teaching."

Excerpt 5 (S. Song2):
(trans.) "This phase involved deepening our understanding of teaching theories and methods, practicing teaching design, classroom management, and student interaction through daily presentations. We also explored multimedia use and cross-cultural communication by studying English-speaking cultures."

Excerpt 6 (S. Shen):
"Through teaching exercises, I applied theoretical knowledge to real teaching scenarios, explored methods and management strategies, and gradually developed my own teaching style. These activities increased both my interest and sense of achievement."

These simulations helped student teachers shift from theory to practice. While not replicating real classrooms, they provided valuable opportunities for skill development, motivation, and feedback (Joshi & Bodkha, 2021), addressing higher-level psychological needs. Participation in structured activities reduced uncertainty, boosted confidence, and deepened emotional ties to teaching. Social identity theory supports this, suggesting that engaging in professional group activities enhances self-recognition and group belonging (Fan & Xie, 2024; Anjewierden et al., 2024). Many participants reported a growing sense of self-efficacy and professional pride as they internalized their teacher identity.

At the same time, however, this stage revealed underlying tensions. While participants like Shen experienced a sense of achievement and the beginnings of a personal teaching style, others noted gaps between

the simulated exercises and the unpredictable realities of authentic classrooms. This indicates that identity development during this stage was not a straightforward transition from theory to practice but an uneven process that combined moments of confidence with lingering doubts about readiness.

A recurring theme in interviews was the use of interactive games in the teaching skills course. The potential of gamification in boosting student participation and knowledge retention was evident in activities like "beating drums and passing flowers" and "driving a train". These activities promoted student-centered teaching and enhanced pre-service teachers' understanding of teaching. Gamification also improved confidence, with participants feeling better prepared in terms of classroom management, as they could imagine using game-based techniques in real teaching. Such confidence is imperative for them to construct resilient professional identity and pursue long-term career goals since they are more likely to see themselves as competent educators (Guerrero et al., 2024; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019).

This stage made the internalization of the teacher's role possible. By applying skills, interacting with peers, and receiving instructor feedback, participants began to see themselves as emerging professional teachers who transmit knowledge, manage classrooms, and support students.

Stage 3: Practicum and Reflective Practice

The third stage of identity construction emerged during the teaching practicum, an eight-week internship conducted in the final semester at either centralized internship (as assistants to lecturers in training institutions) or decentralized placements (contract teaching in schools). The student teachers experienced authentic teaching duties and submitted weekly reflective journals during the practicum.

This stage marked a critical juncture where theory met practice, e.g., real-life teaching. Pre-service English teachers faced challenges with classroom management and interaction. Immersion helped polish their understanding and skills in their professional role. Reflection was also significant for them to deepen their understanding of their experiences and learning, as well as adapt their teaching philosophies to real teaching practice. When teaching practice and reflection intersect, many of them transformed their perspective about the teaching profession. Their idealistic expectations were tested by real classroom practice, a critical moment exemplifying identity realignment

Excerpt 6 (T. Shi):
(trans.) "During the practicum, I deeply realized the gap between theory and practice. In class, I found that I was not as proficient in the content as I had imagined. Especially when students asked questions, I often felt at a loss. This made me realize that pre-service teachers need to continually hone their classroom response skills. Additionally, students' varied learning styles highlighted the need for flexible teaching methods. I began preparing lessons with these differences in mind and also became aware of the importance of classroom management. Overall, the practicum exposed me to the complexities and challenges of teaching and strengthened my determination to become an excellent teacher."

From an attribution theory perspective, these realizations show a positive pattern: participants attributed difficulties to the need for professional growth rather than personal inadequacy (Weiner, 2012). This mindset boosted their sense of self-efficacy, helping them see challenges as opportunities for development. Such growth-oriented attribution reduced feelings of failure and increased motivation and long-term commitment to teaching.

Excerpt 7 (T. Sun):
(trans.) "Through communication with instructors and colleagues, I became more aware of my weaknesses and clarified areas for future improvement. These internship experiences deepened my understanding of the teaching profession and motivated me to continuously grow."

As shown in Excerpt 7, feedback loops improved both teaching competence and professional commitment. Internships also acted as social integration, helping pre-service teachers feel a stronger belonging in the educational community. Nevertheless, some of them reported self-doubt, frustration, and anxiety, particularly when facing conflicts during classroom instruction.

Excerpt 8 (T. Shen):
(trans.) "During my practicum, I encountered some unpleasant experiences that affected my enthusiasm for teaching. I found myself slow to respond in unexpected situations, like student conflicts or resistance to activities. This sense of helplessness made me anxious. I also struggled to be innovative and flexible in lesson planning, which led to less effective classes. These negative experiences affected my confidence and deepened my awareness of the profession's challenges."

Excerpt 9 (S. Zhou2):
(trans.) "During the practicum, I faced many challenges that made me question my teaching abilities. However, through reflection and guidance from mentors, I gradually found solutions to these problems. This experience taught me that the development of teacher identity is a process of continuous exploration and adjustment, rather than a smooth journey."

Collectively, these reflections reveal that the practicum was not experienced as a uniform stage of linear growth, but rather as a site of contradictions where confidence, doubt, enthusiasm, and anxiety co-existed. While some participants, like Shi and Sun, used challenges as catalysts for growth, others, like Shen and Zhou2, recalled the fragility and provisional nature of their professional identity growth during this period. These accounts illustrate that identity construction in practicum is less about straightforward progression and more about navigating setbacks, negotiating feedback, and making sense of fluctuating emotions. Such differences suggest the need for practicum mentoring that legitimizes both struggles and successes as integral parts of identity development.

Stage 4: Preliminary Maturity and Independence

The final stage of professional identity construction among student teachers could be witnessed during the extended practicum or extended internship option. Based on institutional policies, with supervisors' approval, the student teachers were allowed to continue with internships in the final eight weeks of the semester while also completing their thesis.

After sixteen weeks of real-time teaching, many pre-service teachers reported gaining confidence, autonomy, and competence in lesson planning as well as classroom management and engagement. This stage displayed the teachers' transformation from mere dependent learners to semi-independent practitioners. Participants began developing personal teaching styles, adjusting well to classroom realities, and creating routines that cater to classroom instruction and student needs. Despite challenges like disruptions and student diversity, they felt more capable of managing and adapting their strategies.

Excerpt 10 (S Song2)
(trans.) "During the extended practicum period, which lasted for eight weeks, I felt like I was finally starting to find my own voice as a teacher. After the initial 16 weeks of teaching, I had gained so much confidence in my ability to plan lessons that truly engaged my students. I remember one particular lesson where I introduced a new interactive activity to help students understand a complex concept. It was a bit risky, but it worked so well that the students were actively participating and retaining the information better than ever before. This success made me realise that I could trust my own judgment and creativity in the classroom."

Excerpt 11 (S Liu):
(trans.) "Although I made substantial progress in my teaching skills, I realized that my development as a teacher was far from complete. Each time I encountered different students and classroom situations, I faced new challenges. This made me understand that teacher identity development is an ongoing process rather than a static destination."

These reflections suggest that while participants gained a sense of maturity and independence, they also recognised the provisional nature of this stage. Song2 described the exhilaration of finding her teaching "voice" and exercising creativity, whereas Liu highlighted continuous challenges, emphasising professional identity as a continuous process of renegotiation. This stage thus goes beyond skill acquisition to mark the partial internalisation of the professional role. Pre-service teachers see themselves not only as knowledge transmitters but also as reflective practitioners, mentors, and facilitators. Yet, Liu's account (excerpt 11) suggests that professional identity evolves with new contexts and responsibilities. By showing both confidence and humility, participants in Stage 4 illustrate that professional identity remains dynamic, contested, and always in motion.

Intersecting Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioural Dimensions in the Identity Development of Pre-Service English Teachers

This section records the construction of Chinese pre-service English teachers' professional identity using a constructivist learning framework. The framework represents four interconnected phases, namely experiential, assimilation and adaptation, social interaction, and internalization and self-regulation. Each of the phases has distinct but interrelated cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics, as summarized in the following table.

Table 2

Stages of Identity Construction of Pre-Service English Teachers Mapped Against a Constructivist Framework

Constructivist Phase	Stage of Identity Development	Cognitive Dimension	Emotional Dimension	Behavioural Dimension
Experiential Phase	Stage 1: Acquisition of Foundational Knowledge	Understanding grammar, phonetics, pedagogy	Initial curiosity; emotional attachment forms	Attending lectures; passive engagement
Assimilation and Adaptation Phase	Stage 2: Deepening Knowledge and Initial Teaching Practice	Integrating theory and simulated teaching	Confidence, enthusiasm, professional curiosity	Peer teaching, feedback, lesson design
Social Interaction Phase	Stage 3: Practicum and Reflective Practice	Refining strategies through experience	Validation, doubt, reflection, and reconceptualisation	Authentic teaching; feedback; journal writing
Internalisation and Self-Regulation Phase	Stage 4: Preliminary Maturity and Professional Independence	Consolidation of teaching identity	Professional pride, resilience, career direction	Curriculum design, classroom management, mentoring

Phase 1: Experiential Phase – Acquisition of Foundational Knowledge

This foundational phase is commensurate with pre-service teachers' early exposure to disciplinary knowledge and pedagogy. Cognitively, participants engaged deeply with English language components and education theories. S. Jia described "acquiring foundational knowledge" in grammar, phonetics, and course design, while S. Cui regarded it as a time of "initial cognition and emotional investment." Emotionally, this phase involved growing curiosity, anxiety, and uncertainties about becoming a teacher, thus reflecting that identity construction begins before practical teaching. Students formed early mental models of the teacher role and recognized the importance of the profession. Behaviorally, participants displayed passive but engaged learning, attended lectures, read foundational texts, and participated in discussions. This shows that this stage sets the cognitive and emotional foundation for future consolidation, even though the process of constructing teaching identity was still ongoing.

Phase 2: Assimilation and Adaptation Phase – Deepening Knowledge and Initial Teaching Practice

The student teachers moved to Phase 2, a more active phase of identity construction, as they experienced teaching simulations and conducted micro-teaching. Cognitively, they began linking theory with practice. S. Lu reflected on shaping "educational beliefs and teaching approaches" in simulated classrooms. Emotionally, there was a greater personal connection to the profession. S. Kong described a growing "emotional identity," while others noted increased confidence and awareness of their strengths, as well as a growing sense of agency. Behaviorally, participants carried out peer evaluations, created lesson plans, and explored gamified strategies, all of which contributed towards owning the teacher role. These early acts of pedagogical agency reflected a heightened sense of self-efficacy and professional pride. Gamification, which served as both a motivator and reflective tool, reinforced their pedagogical beliefs and classroom engagement techniques.

Phase 3: Social Interaction Phase – Practicum and Reflective Practice

The practicum phase allowed participants to be immersed in real classroom settings. Cognitively, they applied, tested, and adjusted prior knowledge to meet the realities of classroom instruction. According to T. Shi, the gaps between theory and practice suggested the need for more flexibility in lesson planning. Emotionally, the stage is marked by both support and struggle. Some participants experienced professional validation (as in T. Sun's statement about clarity of goals following feedback) as well as doubt and anxiety, particularly during challenging classroom moments (T. Shen). This emotional turbulence revealed identity realignment, which aligns with Vygotsky's view of identity shaped through social mediation. Behaviorally, participants demonstrated high levels of engagement in terms of teaching, prompt adaptation, and feedback. Weekly reflective journals fostered structured introspection. This intermingling of action and reflection addressed the gap between self-perception and practical demands, therefore contributing to deeper identity commitment.

Phase 4: Internalisation and Self-Regulation Phase – Preliminary Maturity and Professional Independence

In Phase 4, the final phase, pre-service teachers developed a sense of professional ownership. Cognitively, they reinforced instructional knowledge and displayed strategic flexibility in addressing diverse classroom needs. This occurred concurrently as their teaching philosophies were established. Emotionally, they reported heightened confidence, legitimacy, and long-term career focus. T. Cui, for example, viewed herself as an "official English teacher," and others could envision their future teaching practice. Behaviorally, they exercised more autonomy in terms of curriculum design, classroom leadership, and career growth through certifications or thesis work. This phase reflects metacognitive awareness and emergent self-regulated professional development, all of which are key markers of established teacher identity.

Discussion

The study investigated the construction of the professional identity of pre-service English teachers over a four-year undergraduate program at a private university in China. Guided by constructivist theory and informed by rich qualitative interviews, the findings reveal a phased yet fluid developmental journey. The four emergent phases, namely initial knowledge and cognitive development, deepening and skill development, practice and reflection, and preliminary, maturity and independence, capture the iterative process of becoming a teacher.

The findings support the constructivist view that knowledge and identity are constructed through cycles of experience, reflection, and social interaction (Kolb, 2014; Nilson & Zimmerman, 2013). Each phase marks an increasing internalization of the teacher role, hence supporting Beijaard et al.'s (2004) view of teacher identity as context-specific and dynamic. At the same time, the narratives show that identity development was not linear but recursive, with participants moving back and forth between phases depending on feedback, context, and self-efficacy. This confirms recent longitudinal research on NNES teachers, which emphasizes identity as a process of constant negotiation rather than a staged outcome (Chen, Zhang, & Zheng, 2023; Uştuk & Yazan, 2024).

This phased progression, from theoretical learning to real-world practice, exemplifies how identity is constructed and negotiated across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. This tri-dimensional framing challenges overly cognitive models by also emphasizing the emotional and behavioral dimensions of teacher development. For NNES pre-service teachers, these dimensions are particularly salient, as linguistic insecurities and perceived native-speaker biases often intersect with professional growth (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009; Duran & Saenkhum, 2024). The practice and reflection phases, in particular, highlight the significant impact of affirming and challenging emotional experiences of self-efficacy and career commitment.

The initial knowledge and cognitive phase reveal that identity construction begins at program entry, but is often overlooked. Early exposure to linguistic and pedagogical content sparks both cognitive scaffolding as well as emotional affiliation with teaching. As Olsen (2008) argues, motivation and affective investment are central to emerging professional identity. However, early identity development can be unrealistic as they are shaped by idealistic views untested by real classroom contexts. This resonates with Rodgers and Scott's (2008) caution that such narratives require reflection to withstand future dissonance. As such, professional identity development in the early stages should be scaffolded through reflective examination of emerging beliefs.

In the deepening and skill development phase, identity construction becomes more striking as participants are found to put theory into practice through micro-teaching and peer evaluations. These practices support pedagogical growth and deepen emotional investment in teaching. As Trent (2010) suggests, such simulated teaching spaces are vital incubators for identity exploration. Participants also begin positioning personal values and cultural backgrounds in alignment with their emerging pedagogical identity. This finding is in line with Sfard and Prusak's (2005) narrative model of evolving self-stories. However, the simulated nature of this phase raises concerns about transferability. To what extent does identity formed in controlled environments endure in authentic classroom settings? The findings of the present study highlight the need to help pre-service teachers bridge the gap between imagined and enacted selves.

The practice and reflection phase marks a turning point as real classroom experiences may support or disrupt earlier identity conceptions and construction. In line with Flores and Day's (2006) reference to a reality shock, participants found real-world teaching tested their self-efficacy, adaptability, and resilience. The phase revealed a key bifurcation. Participants who saw challenges as growth opportunities developed stronger, more negotiated identity. In contrast, pre-service teachers who viewed setbacks as failures, experienced declining confidence. These findings highlight the need for structured, mentor-led reflection to assist student teachers in reframing difficulties constructively.

Social feedback from mentors, peers, and students is imperative in reinforcing professional legitimacy. This view aligns with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, emphasizing how identity is relationally constructed. However, unconstructive feedback could be debilitating. This suggests the need for well-supported practicum experiences and well-trained mentors who can offer holistic guidance, both evaluative and developmental.

In the preliminary maturity and independence phase, participants showed increased autonomy, confidence, and professional commitment. They articulated personal teaching philosophies, explored advanced strategies, and planned career paths. This aligns with Lave and Wenger's (1991, p.29) "legitimate peripheral participation," as student teachers began occupying more central roles within professional communities. However, this maturity is provisional. The term "preliminary" signals that identity construction is on-going. As Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) note, identity evolves across career stages and is continually re-negotiated. Therefore, teacher education must equip graduates for sustained identity development through mentorship, professional communities, and ongoing reflection.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined how Chinese pre-service English teachers construct professional identity over a four-year undergraduate teacher education program. Drawing on constructivist theory and qualitative interview data, the study identified a four-phase developmental trajectory. Each phase reflects a dynamic, recursive process shaped by cognitive growth, emotional engagement, and behavioral participation. The findings reaffirm that professional identity is not static but evolves through lived experience, social interaction, and critical reflection.

This study carries several implications for teacher education. It highlights the need for a holistic curriculum that integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of learning from the outset. Identity development should be treated as a core element of teacher preparation, not a byproduct of practicum. Early-stage students need structured opportunities to reflect on their motivations, assumptions, and perceptions of teaching to support long-term professional growth. Given the practicum's pivotal role in identity consolidation, mentors must be trained not only in pedagogy but also in supporting identity formation through feedback, emotional support, and reflection. For NNES student teachers, programs must also address identity tensions tied to linguistic legitimacy, native-speaker bias, and confidence, using inclusive and culturally responsive approaches.

Future research should track pre-service teachers longitudinally into their induction and early career stages to examine how professional identity is sustained, disrupted, or reshaped in real classroom contexts. Comparative studies across institutions or national settings could illuminate how sociocultural, institutional, and policy factors shape identity development in diverse EFL environments. Mixed-methods designs, combining reflective journals, practicum evaluations, classroom observations, and interviews, would offer a more holistic understanding. Additionally, as noted by Ye et al. (2025), focused studies on the emotional labor of teaching and its effects on identity and wellbeing could inform more supportive teacher education practices.

This study adds to the growing scholarship on teacher identity by providing a nuanced, context-sensitive account of how Chinese pre-service English teachers develop professionally. Specifically, it contributes to the field by foregrounding the temporal dimension of identity development, demonstrating how professional selves are continually constructed, disrupted, and renegotiated across different stages of teacher education. By illuminating the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of identity construction, the study extends existing models that often privilege cognitive aspects, showing instead how emotional labor, legitimacy struggles, and behavioral practices interact in shaping identity. It urges teacher education programs to go beyond technical instruction and address the complex, human aspects of becoming a teacher. In doing so, the study not only validates the challenges faced by NNES pre-service teachers but also challenges deficit-oriented views by documenting their agency, resilience, and capacity for growth. As global demand for English educators rises, the need to prepare reflective, resilient, and professionally grounded teachers remains both urgent and enduring.

Beyond its immediate findings, the present study contributes to the broader field of teacher identity research by centering the lived experiences of NNES pre-service teachers, a group whose developmental pathway remains under-represented in the literature. By problematizing the temporal dimension of identity, the study demonstrates that identity construction is not confined to practicum or early service but begins at program entry. This insight extends existing research by highlighting how native-speaker bias, linguistic legitimacy, and emotional labor intersect with temporal development, shaping the unique identity journeys of NNES teachers. Future research should build on this contribution by conducting multi-site and cross-cultural comparisons, and exploring how identity formation in NNES teachers can be more effectively supported in teacher education programs.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

Author contribution

Author 1.: Original draft preparation, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing.

Author 2.: Writing, Supervision
Author 3.: Condensing drafts, Reviewing and editing, Formatting.

Data availability statement

The data that has been used is confidential

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Pre-Service English Language Teachers

Round 1: Before Practicum

Part I: Cognitive Dimension – Career Choice and Role Perception
1. After completing the course, would you still choose to become a teacher? In what ways has your perception changed from before the course? What explains this change?
2. Does becoming a teacher align with your personal values and life goals? Did you feel the same before the course, and has this changed afterwards?
3. What do you see as the main responsibilities and obligations of being a good teacher? Do you consciously perform these duties? Have your views on these responsibilities changed since completing the course?
4. Do you feel more positively about teaching now compared to before the course? Why? Share your current views on the teaching profession.

Part II: Emotional Dimension – Career Reputation
1. Compared with other professions in today's society, do you find teaching attractive? What do you think about the social status of teachers? Have your views changed after the course or internship? If so, what influenced this change?
2. Do you believe the teaching profession is meaningful and valuable? Has your perspective shifted since completing the course?
3. During the course, how did you come to know what others around you think of teaching? Did their opinions influence you?

Part III: Behavioural Dimension – Professional Tendencies
1. Briefly describe your overall course experience. How did it feel to you?
2. Did you communicate with your advisor more frequently during the course? What attitudes did your instructor display towards teaching, classroom management, educational research, and teacher–student relationships?
3. What is one way your instructor influenced you the most?
4. How did you interact with your students during the course? Was the teacher–student relationship harmonious? Did students cooperate with your teaching, classroom management, or research activities? Share one memorable example from this relationship.
5. Identify key events or people during the course that influenced your attitudes toward the teaching profession. Explain whether the impact was positive or negative.
6. Of the three core aspects of the course, teaching, classroom management, and educational research, which had the most influence on you, and why?

Round 2: After Practicum

Part I: Cognitive Dimension – Career Choice and Role Perception
1. After completing the practicum, would you still choose to become a teacher? What are your reasons?
2. Do you feel a stronger interest in teaching after the practicum? Why?

Part II: Emotional Dimension – Occupational Environment
1. What do you think of the working environment at your practicum school?
2. Share your impressions of the school leaders and colleagues.
3. What do you think about the management system in the practicum school? Were you able to adapt to it?
4. Describe your vision of an ideal school environment.

Part III: Behavioural Dimension – Professional Tendencies
1. Briefly describe your practicum experience. How did it feel to you?
2. What is one way your practicum instructor influenced you the most?
3. Identify key events or people during the practicum that affected your opinions and attitudes toward teaching.
4. Of the three core aspects of the practicum, teaching, classroom management, and educational research, which had the greatest impact on you, and why?
5. What are your views on the current practicum course design in your programme (e.g., timing, content, monitoring, and evaluation)?
6. Do you have any suggestions for improving the practicum arrangement in your programme?