

Investigating the Formation of Professional Identity of the Pre-Service to Novice English
Teachers in China: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

The ongoing curriculum reform in China in the context of teaching English as a foreign language considered public expectations and the demand for talent, emphasizing that pre-service English teachers should become increasingly involved in teaching professional knowledge and skills. However, upon entering the teaching profession, where pre-service English teachers often lacked expertise, they had to confront various challenges, such as bridging gaps in subject knowledge and teaching experience. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the transformation process of English teachers' professional identity across three critical stages: before the teaching practicum, after teaching training, and at the onset of novice teaching. This study was conducted at a selected university in Hebei province, China. Guided by sociocultural and activity theory, it employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' identity transformation and construction. The findings of this study provided references for policymakers to revise the training mode and optimize the curriculum of Chinese universities for teacher-training English students. It also proved helpful for novice English teachers in integrating English language proficiencies with English teaching skills to enhance their professional identity as English teachers.

Keywords: English teacher, Teachers' professional identity, Pre-service teacher, Novice teacher

1. Introduction

Over the past forty years, professional identities such as gender identity, political identity, cultural identity, and ethnic identity have once again become a hot topic in society due to the effects of economic globalization and postmodern trends such as feminism and post-colonialism. Some scholars have even called this phenomenon an extensive explosive identity study (Favaretto, 2020). Teachers' professional identity influences teaching efficiency and teachers' attitudes toward education reform (Liu & Hu, 2020). Numerous psychologists and educators view teachers' professional identity as a **continuous process, requiring teachers to balance the "self and other" while growing into mature professionals** (Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2019). In China, Tao and Li (2018) analyzed the changes and characteristics of university English teachers' professional identity. Despite the growing interest in this area, a critical research gap remains in understanding how pre-service English teachers in China navigate their professional identities as they transition into novice teachers. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how pre-service English teachers in China develop and reconstruct their professional identities. By providing insights into this identity transformation, this study will contribute to the broader field of teacher education, supporting targeted interventions and fostering a deeper understanding of teachers' professional development needs.

1.1 Research Problem

Forming a professional identity is a complex, lengthy process of challenges and problems. Since the 1980s, the world's education development has entered a new era. It can always be emphasized that teachers are the critical factor affecting the quality of school education and directly determine the success or failure of education (Jiang, 2016). According to the

Educational Statistics Yearbook of China 2021, a shortage of qualified and competent English teachers has negatively impacted the quality of English teaching. Moreover, the report presented the shortage of qualified English teachers and the increasing attrition rate of teachers. When pre-service teachers finish their preparation programs, they step into the teaching career as novice teachers. They need to identify with their role as a teacher and find it difficult to accommodate themselves to the teaching surroundings. They are bound to be disappointed by this profession and subject to quitting their career (Rao & Chen, 2020). As seen from previous literature concerning English teachers' professional identity, most of them emphasized either the pre-service teachers' professional identity or the novice teachers' professional identity; few focused on the transformation stage from the pre-service stage to the novice stage. Therefore, there is a need for more attention to the identity transformation from student to teacher, which is essential for novice teachers' professional development.

1.2 Research Question

Against this background, this study draws upon qualitative research to investigate English teachers' professional identity development from the pre-service stage to the novice stage, helping English teachers better understand their teaching profession and explore their identity formation process and identity-changing path. Hence, the following research questions were formulated for the study:

- (1) How do English teachers experience identity transformation from the pre-service to their novice stage?
- (2) What factors influence identity construction and identity transformation among the pre-service to novice stage English teachers?

2. Research Background

Teachers' professional identity occupies an essential place in teacher professional development because the ultimate goal of teacher development and education is to help teachers better

understand who they are and the nature of their work (Sprott, 2019). In China, several Chinese scholars have provided more comprehensive and insightful assessments of teachers' professional identity development orientations (Han & Ji, 2022; Tao et al., 2019; Zhang & Wang, 2017). These scholars suggest that teachers' professional identity development can be divided into three aspects: development of knowledge and skills, self-understanding, and ecological change. In support of this perspective, Zheng et al. (2019) analyzed teachers' subjectivity and emphasized that their role in educational practice is becoming increasingly prominent. In line with this, what teachers know and how they know it determines their role construction and corresponding role behavior.

Pre-service English teachers, also called student English teachers, have gained increasing attention from researchers due to their dual roles. On the one hand, pre-service teachers are still students participating in formal educational programs. On the other hand, some are future teachers, and formal educational programs play an essential role in their teaching perceptions, methods, and choices. As they transition from students (in the pre-service stage) to in-service teachers, they construct their own professional identities (Huang & Wang, 2021).

Research on pre-service teachers' identities can be classified into the following groups: A prominent line of research highlights the importance of teacher education programs in shaping the professional identity of pre-service teachers. For instance, Zhang and Fang (2016) conducted a quantitative study on 606 pre-service teachers in mainland China and found that professional identity significantly influenced their performance during teacher education programs. However, few studies explore how pre-service teachers construct their professional identity once they begin teaching. Another strand of research focuses on the formation of pre-service teachers' professional identity. For example, Yuan (2016) explored the identity construction of pre-service language teachers and found that pre-service teachers' ideal identity and "ought identity" significantly impact their future teaching practices. Despite this, there remains no consensus on the sub-identities within pre-service teachers' professional identity, as

researchers have yet to arrive at a definite understanding of how this identity is formed. Finally, there is a need for more research on the identity transformation that occurs as pre-service teachers transition to the novice stage.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Studies on Pre-service English Teachers' Professional Identity

Based on existing literature, research on pre-service English teachers' identity focuses on several key aspects. First, some researchers emphasize the critical role of pre-service teacher education programs, arguing that these programs make a significant contribution to pre-service teachers' identity construction (Haghighi et al., 2020). As Ly and Tran (2019) noted, pre-service teacher education has increasingly become school-based, with teaching practicum serving as a critical component that greatly impacts identity development. While most pre-service teacher education programs offer opportunities for teaching practice, pre-service teachers often have limited practical classroom experience. Thus, although the construction of pre-service teachers' identities is largely shaped by their life histories, it is inevitably influenced by their emotional investment in who they aspire to become (Barkhuizen, 2016).

Some scholars have explored the relationship between pre-service teachers and the teacher community and found that pre-service teachers construct their identity when immersed in a teacher community. Pre-service teachers shape their identity by participating in negotiations on meaning and discourses presented in practice schools they attended (Trent, 2013; as cited in Arvaja & Sarja, 2021). Pesonen et al. (2021) stated that the act of being recognized as a teacher by colleagues and students constructs a sense of belonging. During their professional experience, pre-service teachers have to deal with the relationship with their mentors, but the relationship is only sometimes as fruitful as expected (Walters, 2020). Thus, when considering pre-service teachers' identity construction, previous studies have focused on the role of teaching practicum, which is also a very important stage for a teacher.

3.2 Studies on Novice English Teachers' Professional Identity

Novice English teachers, also called beginning teachers, faced many challenges when exposed to the transition from students to formal teachers. They need help to be accountable for classroom management, class organization, motivating students, after-class feedback, and relations with parents (Mintz et al., 2020). All these factors significantly affect novice teachers' professional identity development, which can threaten their commitment to teaching.

Although many scholars and researchers have conducted studies on novice English teachers' professional identity, many focus on the resources that form a novice teacher's professional identity. For example, Nordin and Samsudin (2021) conducted a study to investigate the potential factors that influence the formation of professional identity among novice teachers in Malaysia. He found that personal experience, professional context, and external political environment impact novice teachers' professional identity. Novice teachers' personalities and values also influence professional identity development (Hong et al., 2017). From this sense, previous studies have emphasized the dynamic development of novice English teachers' identity development within internal and external factors.

Another strand of literature focuses on the emotion or the struggle novice teachers experience in their beginning years of service. Dvir and Schatz-Oppenheimer (2020) claimed that beginning teachers undergo a “reality shock” when moving from pre-service education to novice teachers. Novice teachers are prone to tension and negative emotions, such as feeling helpless and angry or being aware of shortcomings (Lindqvist, 2019).

3.3 Factors Affecting English Teachers' Professional Identity

Various individual and institutional factors play a role in teacher identity development.

Individual factors include teacher knowledge, learning, reflection, agency, and emotions. On the other hand, institutional factors include the school context, educational reform, and socio-political and cultural context (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). It is vital to note that these aspects interact and collaborate, each of which plays an essential part in forming and developing teacher identity.

Teachers' professional identity comes from teachers' position within society, their interactions with others, and their interpretations of their experiences. Furthermore, many factors affect how teachers interact with others and interpret their experiences (Jones & Kessler, 2020). As for pre-service teachers, the most rapid changes in professional identity development happen when they graduate from universities and enter authentic classrooms (Delgado et al., 2020). During the pre-service stage, pre-service teachers develop a Pre-Teaching Identity. This identity is developed based on the models of their teachers, their initial beliefs and concepts of what makes a good teacher, and their vague teaching theories.

Moreover, commitment to the profession is predictive of students' choice to enter into teaching and their positive feelings about future work (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). These results imply an association between pre-service teachers' higher professional identity and positive job-related behaviors. As teachers' professional identity is created and recreated over time and influenced by various factors, teachers are confronted with multifaceted, constantly shifting, and unstable definitions of themselves (Yip, 2021). Although these processes occur throughout their working life, it is in pre-service and early-career stages where identity is most volatile, and tensions experienced in teacher education commonly continue into beginning service practice (Resch & Schritteser, 2023).

Among studies that focus on the factors influencing pre-service teachers' identity, practicum is considered the main factor because, during the practicum, pre-service teachers' identity is least

stable (Ulum, 2020). It is a stage when pre-service teachers engage in processes of self-positioning and repositioning. During the practicum, they can experience contradictions between different teacher identities and personal and professional identities (Setlhako, 2019). Besides, Yuan (2019) found that social context, school culture, and community culture affect pre-service teachers' identity. By focusing on practicum, Yuan (2019) concluded that the key events play an important role in constructing pre-service teachers' identities. Zhang (2023) used enrollment incentives as the breakthrough point and found that, compared to male pre-service teachers, female pre-service teachers exhibit a stronger teacher identity. Furthermore, coming from a non-only-child family proved to be more advantageous in enhancing pre-service teachers' identity. Lastly, urban pre-service teachers were found to have relatively lower teacher identity compared to their rural counterparts.

From the above studies, it is evident that various factors influence teachers' professional identity and previous studies underlined the quantitative method to have a full-scale understanding. However, owing to professional identity being composed of complex respects, including professional cognition, professional emotion, professional agency, a qualitative research method is more suitable for profoundly understanding the interrelationships of these different aspects.

4. Underpinning Theories

4.1 Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

The social-cultural theory believes that cognition is produced in nature and the social-cultural environment, which comprises history, society, and culture that affect people's cognitive and psychological development. Therefore, this theory is important to explain the dynamic identity of pre-service English teachers. Pre-service English teachers rely on intermediary tools, such

as the English learning experience during their student period, the school's regular curriculum, and the evaluation of teachers from society (Naka, 2023). Based on the social-cultural theory, the identity of pre-service English teachers is systematic and structural. The identity results from the interaction between pre-service teachers and social practice activities (Pathan, 2018). These identities are from multiple dimensions, such as student and teacher and professional and social identities. This identity also affects other activities, such as learning motivation and job willingness. Thus, Sociocultural theory can help researchers better understand the identity construction process of a particular group of teachers (Zhang & Yuan, 2019).

However, SCT may not fully capture the complex interplay of identity formation for pre-service teachers, as other factors also play a determining role. Based on this construct, Subryan (2021) examined how beginning physics teachers in England negotiated and constructed their professional identities and how external mentors of secondary science teachers mediated this process. In a similar vein, Zhang and Yuan (2019) investigated 139 Chinese English teachers' self-perceived identities. The study participants reported being situated in a hybrid space with multiple roles and conflicting demands. Additionally, research has also conceptualized and examined language teacher identity by drawing on Wenger's communities of practice theory (Almad et al., 2019). However, in Karimi and Mofidi's (2019) study, the personal characteristics of pre-service teachers play a vital role in the process of identity formation, contrasting principles of activity theory that prioritize the social origin of identity. Therefore, to uncover the complex nature of pre-service English teachers in identity formation and interdependent relationships, the Activity Theory is also adopted.

4.2 Activity Theory (AT)

Within the Activity Theory, identity formation is no longer a solitary matter but a sociocultural product arising from the dialogue and negotiation between teachers and their situated work

contexts (Arvaja & Sarja, 2021). In this study, the pre-service English teachers can negotiate their identities through their agencies (Cross, 2020). Their activities will be influenced by the sociocultural context within which they construct and negotiate their identities interchangeably. As English teachers, they may have multiple responsibilities, including adapting to curriculum reform, becoming familiar with interdisciplinary knowledge, designing a qualified English course, and ultimately forming a robust English teacher identity. To achieve the goal of robust identity formation, teachers may employ various resources such as lesson plans, language, educational theories, personal beliefs and technology (Richards, 2023). Lastly, the community consists of not only pre-service English teachers but also other individuals who engage in the teaching and learning processes, such as colleagues, students, and administrators. However, these stakeholders may have either a supporting or hindering impact on English teachers' identity formation under different circumstances.

Based on the discussion above, Engestrom's (2008) Activity Theory is relevant in explicating the actual development or change of an individual or a group of individuals over a certain period (Erbil, 2020). Therefore, it is vitally important to examine how the subject - the pre-service English teachers - makes sense of, acts upon, and engages with their self-positionings within the activity (Cross, 2020). A concept as complex as identity can only be fully understood by examining the genesis of a culturally specific and historically situated activity. Activity Theory thus allows us to examine the relationships between the interpersonal and the larger social community involved in identity development. In other words, it affords the possibility of looking at the English teacher's identity.

4.3 Theoretical Framework

According to the theories discussed above—Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Engeström's Activity Theory—this study adopted an integrated framework supplemented by Trent's concept

of multiple identities. Teacher identity is viewed as 'relational, negotiated, constructed, enacted, transforming, and transitional' (Miller, 2008; as cited in Golzar, 2020). It includes personal and social dimensions that evolve and change as teachers gain experience, consolidate professional knowledge, and develop plans for personal and professional growth (Sancar et al., 2021). There is a profound connection between identity and practice (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019), a process influenced by cultural and socio-political contexts in which teachers live and work. Therefore, the theoretical framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 2.1.

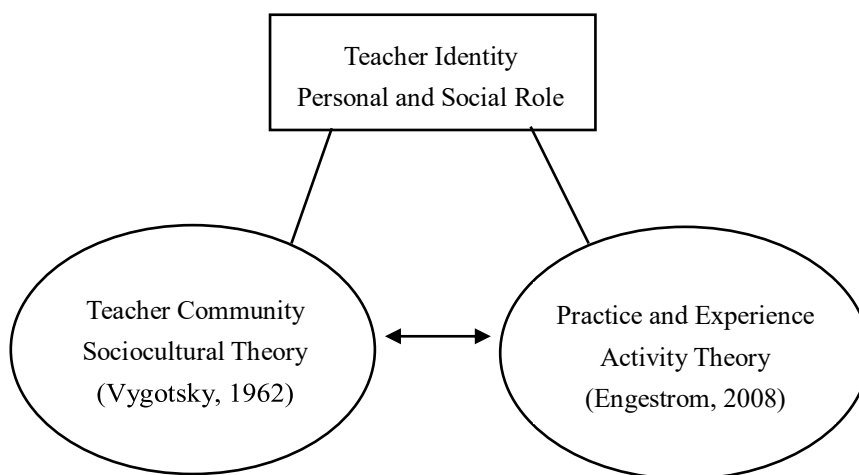


Figure 2.2 Theoretical framework of this study

5 Conceptual Framework

Based on an analysis of existing research and theories relevant to professional identity, the researcher proposed the conceptual framework for this study. In the conceptual framework diagram, teacher identity encompasses two teacher roles: pre-service and novice teacher. The study posits that teacher identity development is influenced by both institutional and individual factors (Marschall, 2022). Key institutional factors include school culture, while individual factors comprise teacher learning, knowledge, emotions, agency, and reflection. These key concepts are used to explore teacher identity, as illustrated in Figure 2.2.

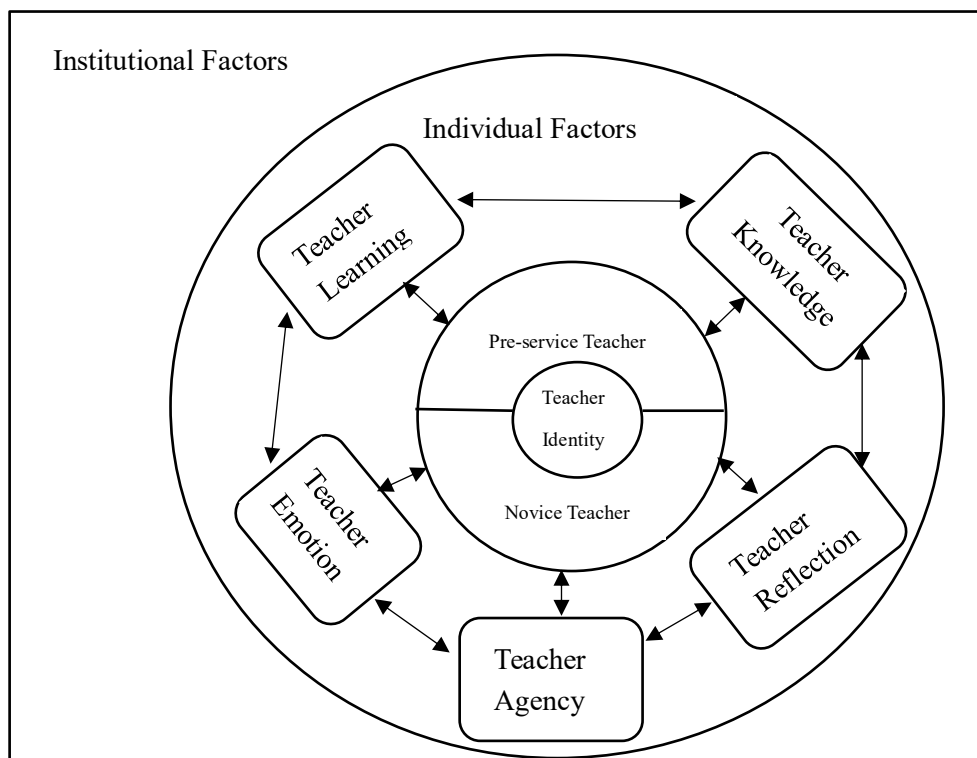


Figure 2.2 Conceptual framework of this Study

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research method to investigate the transformation process of English teachers from their pre-service stage to the novice teaching stage. Qualitative research starts with assumptions, a worldview, and the possible use of a theoretical lens (Creswell, 2017). Semi-structured interviews are believed to provide rich descriptions of participants (Ahlin, 2019). However, semi-structured interviews have certain limitations. Since responses are open-ended, data analysis can be time-consuming and subject to interpretive biases, as the researcher must sift through detailed narratives and identify key themes. Despite these limitations, semi-structured interviews remain the most suitable approach, as they offer insights into how pre-service English teachers in China navigate the challenges and changes in their professional

identities as they transition into novice teaching roles. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews enabled participants to discuss their experiences and explore in-depth issues that might not have been discovered through the previous questions.

This study employed a purposive sampling method, which was conducted in the School of English Education at a selected university in Hebei province, China. This study recruited eight participants through interviews as they began their education practicum. The participants in this study were fourth-year teacher-training English students who were asked to participate in an education practicum for three months. The university could assign a practicum school, or students could find the practicum school by themselves.

6.2 Procedures

The qualitative research was conducted as follows:

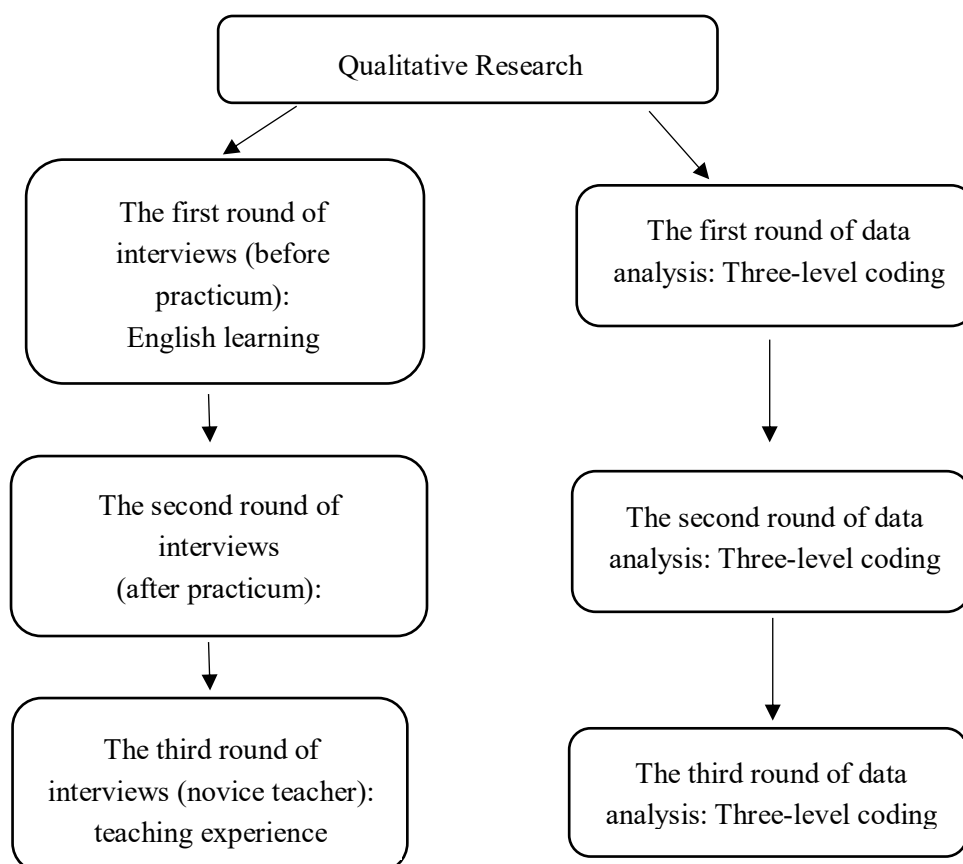


Figure 2.3 Process of The Qualitative Research

6.3 Data Collection

From the participants before the teacher education program to the first month of being novice teachers, the researcher conducted three rounds of individual interviews ranging from thirty minutes to one hour with each participant. The first round of interviews was conducted in November 2023 before the participants began their teaching practicum. The interview questions in the first round centered on the participants' English learning experiences, the most impressive English teacher, and their motive for choosing English Education as their major. More detailed questions were also added according to participant responses. The second round of interviews was conducted in February 2024, after the participant teachers completed their teaching practicum. The third round of interviews was conducted in September 2024, when the participants began their in-service teaching. The interview questions in the third round were similar to those in the second round of interviews, whose purpose was to obtain identity transformation from pre-service teaching to novice teaching. The interview questions were open-ended so participants could express their free will without limit.

It should be noted that specific questions varied to a certain extent from the general ones as the researcher tried to contextualize these general questions in each interview. Participants' understandings and comments helped explore their identity transformation, and the critical events they offered gave the researcher much insight into their identity construction process. All interview sessions were recorded with permission and then transcribed and proofread.

6.4 Data analysis

Data analysis refers to the coding process of the qualitative method (Oun & Bach, 2014). This study analyzed both open-ended surveys and semi-structured interviews using NVivo (Version

11). The procedures of the data analyzed using this software include three-level coding as proposed by Creswell (2017), explained below (See Figure 2.4).

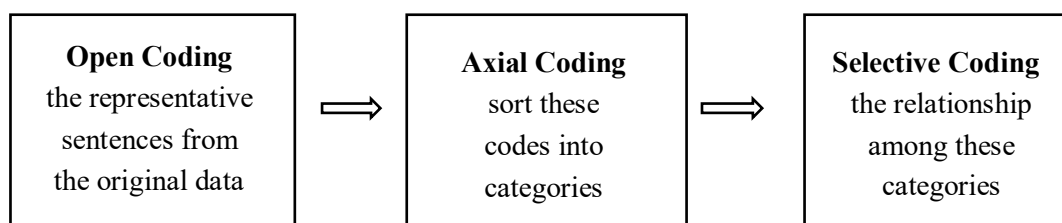


Figure 2.4 Coding Process in Data Analysis

7. Discussion

This study investigated the process of English teachers' professional identity from their pre-service stage to the novice stage. In general, pre-service English teachers' professional identity was rooted in their images of the teaching profession, and these images were built upon the patterned social cognition, exemplar teachers' modelling influences, and pre-service teachers' position. However, during the pre-service period, they seemed to have unclear concerns about their teaching profession (Jiang et al., 2021). Some of them possess a largely passive role in teacher-student interaction, lesson design, and the teaching community (Robinson, 2022).

Before the teaching practicum, due to the lack of classroom teaching experience, pre-service English teachers held some traditional notions about the teaching profession, such as the belief that a teacher's role is limited to subject knowledge. This perspective negatively influenced their career motivation toward the teaching profession (Curran & Chern, 2017). Furthermore, their English learning experiences and the opinions of significant others played a role in shaping their professional identities (Lomi, 2020). To achieve further professional development, they must deconstruct outdated thought patterns and re-evaluate their perspectives on the teaching profession (Alsina & Mulà, 2019).

The pre-service English teachers participated in the teaching practicum, and the new stage of their professional path began. However, the beginning of the teaching practicum could have been more satisfying. The new environment changed their teaching beliefs and their stereotype. When English teachers completed their teaching practicum and became in-service teachers, they officially acquired the teacher role, and their professional identity tended to be more practiced. As such, the specific social-cultural context, including regulations, norms, values, and cultural cognition in an institution, influenced teachers' perceptions of their identity and ways of working (Li et al., 2023).

For teachers, after their professional development undergoes the process of the initial thinking change, accepting the new idea, and beginning to change themselves, teachers themselves are also inclined to shift their former prior knowledge belief system and practical experiences by reconstructing their development system based on new organization principles. The novice teaching period is a new stage for novice teachers, requiring them to adapt positively to the new context (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020). Likewise, novice teachers realize their professional development through self-reflection on the teaching practices and reshape their professional identity as routine performers (Shwartz & Dori, 2020). Novice teachers struggle between the teaching routines and the school trifles. They needed to deal with the teaching routine; meanwhile, they also needed to deal with the chores. Their positive mental state and strong self-regulation ability are critical to their professional development.

As a result, given the complex and dynamic nature of the profession, there was no doubt that novice teachers were confronted with various challenges and institutional constraints in their pursuit of becoming qualified teachers. Given this phenomenon, this study employed semi-structured interviews. This method focused on exploring a problem or issue by talking directly with people, going to their places of work, and allowing them to tell their stories without disruption. Hence, it was an appropriate method for investigating the process of identity

construction since it sought to understand the situations, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and experiences of participants (Skilling & Stylianides, 2020). Based on the above rationale, combined with the two research questions of this study, the semi-structured interview proved to be the most suitable method to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' identity transformation process from the pre-service period to the novice period.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary

The objectives of this study were to investigate the identity transformation of English teachers who completed their education practicum and the factors that influenced identity construction. In conclusion, this study enlightened pre-service English teachers' understanding of the teaching profession; meanwhile, it encouraged them to engage in active self-reflection to adapt to new environments and changing situations, which greatly impacted their future professional development. Furthermore, this study helped pre-service English teachers identify the factors that influenced their teaching practices, enabling them to be better prepared and reduce conflicts in teaching activities. Therefore, for novice English teachers transitioning from the role of students, it was evident that completing the transformation from students to teachers posed significant challenges.

8.2. Implications of the study

Based on the findings, several implications can be identified. English teachers' professional identities have a significant impact on teachers' professional development, which may offer some suggestions for universities and education departments. Firstly, universities should attach more importance to the teaching practicum. By doing so, pre-service English teachers can better

understand the gap between teaching theories and practical teaching while also rethinking and adjusting their old thinking patterns, thereby establishing a new knowledge system. Furthermore, for policymakers and educators, the issue of how to raise teachers' English language ability has not received adequate attention in many countries where English is a second language. Therefore, in the absence of an English-speaking environment in China, it is necessary to create conditions for English language learning, address the learning needs of novice English teachers, and develop the curriculum to suit the needs of teacher-training English students. In addition, it is suggested that educators ensure institutions provide opportunities for novice English teachers to learn from experienced English teachers by observing their lessons and attending related lectures. Institutions could also conduct seminars on English teaching, offering novice English teachers more opportunities to reflect on their daily classroom teaching.

9. Proposed frameworks for future study

The research could offer reasonable career expectations and career planning to enhance pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher professional development, teacher emotions, and teacher motivation. Furthermore, such research could help schools further enrich novice teachers' teaching knowledge and educational philosophy and improve their professional identity to support their development of a stronger sense of identity. Overall, further research on teacher identity will help English teachers more effectively complete their identity construction and improve the mentoring framework in schools.

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