



Professional Identity Development of Chinese EFL Student Teachers through Practicum

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 24 March 2023

Received in revised form: 21 August 2023

Accepted: 17 September 2023

DOI: 10.14689/ejer.2023.107.014

Keywords

Professional Identity, EFL Student Teachers, Practicum.

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Against the backdrop of China's demand for highly qualified EFL teachers, this study investigates the dynamic development of professional identity among Chinese EFL student teachers before, during, and after their teaching practicum. Pennington and Richards' framework of competences of language teacher identity serves as the conceptual basis. Within this framework, the study investigates eight categories of language teacher identity specifically in the context of the Chinese practicum. Four EFL student teachers were selected as participants, and data collection involved in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. **Findings:** The findings suggest

that the teaching practicum has multiple benefits for EFL student teachers in terms of enhancing their competences as language teachers and developing their professional identities. Additionally, this study reveals the dynamic nature of professional identity development among EFL student teachers at different stages. The professional identities of Chinese EFL student teachers evolve from imagined identities prior to the practicum to identities in practice during the practicum, and then to reconstructed identities after the practicum, leading to a progressive understanding of themselves and the teaching profession. **Conclusions and Recommendations:** The discussion concludes with implications for EFL student teacher education within the Chinese educational landscape.

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1. Introduction

Due to the globalization and internationalization, languages are seen as “crucial to economic achievement” (Byram, 2008). China’s economic growth has led to a growing need for English language proficiency among domestic learners. Proficiency in English opens opportunities to participate in global markets, attract foreign investment, and engage in cross-cultural exchanges. To meet the growing demand for English language talent, China has implemented various measures and policies to improve English education. One important initiative is to increase the number of student teachers in English education. According to the national statistics, the total number of Chinese student teachers amounted to 2.6 million as of October 2021 (Huai, 2021), however, the poor quality of English teachers and English teacher education has become the main obstacle to the development of ELT in China (Liu & Fisher, 2006). Consequently, taking full advantage of EFL pre-service education in facilitating the English proficiency of millions of EFL learners becomes a prior challenge in teacher education in China.

On the other hand, it is noticed that language serves not only to drive economic growth but also plays the role of helping people establish social groups (Byram, 2008). Therefore, language teaching involves not only practical skills in a language but also values and identities which are in a social context. It is widely acknowledged that language teachers’ professional identity is intricately linked to their teaching approaches and their dedication to the profession (Richards, 2023; Tsui, 2007). Consequently, it is valuable to delve into the professional identity of language teachers in the new era of globalization. However, research on language teacher identity in China is currently quite limited (Shi & Cheng, 2020), particularly concerning the professional identity of Chinese EFL student teachers (Zhong & Li, 2020).

In the field of teacher education in China, the issue of student teachers’ professional identity is often overlooked by teachers, administrative staff, and policy-makers (Zhang, 2013). One of the ways to help student teachers construct their professional identity is teaching practicum which is the initial step for student teachers to assume the role of teachers in an authentic teaching context. Existing research indicates that some authors (Cattley, 2007; Trent, 2013) emphasize the significant role of the teaching practicum in shaping student teachers’ emerging teacher identity. However, there is a lack of comprehensive exploration of the dynamic development of student teachers’ professional identity before, during, and after the practicum in the context of Chinese EFL teacher education. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by examining the professional identity development of EFL student teachers through the practicum in a Chinese setting.

2. Student Teachers’ Professional Identity and Language Competence

It is acknowledged among academics that understanding identity is a complicated task, which is partly owing to a lack of consensus on how identity is defined and conceptualized (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), and partly due to the various contextual factors that shape an individual’s identities. Erikson (1968) believes that identity formation is “a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental

functioning". Gee (2000) recognizes identity as a "certain kind of person" at a specific time in a given context and can be unstable and ambiguous. In agreement with Gee (2000), and Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) argue that identity is socially constructed throughout one's entire life span, as individuals communicate with the other people around. In other words, identity differs from context to context and from time to time. Although identity has been given various definitions in previous studies, what's shared in common is that identity is the product of interaction rather than a fixed property of human beings.

Highly qualified EFL teachers should not only obtain professional knowledge, but also have an acute insight into teachers' identity which would greatly impact teachers' professional development and teaching effect (Xun, 2015). Student teachers' professional identity is unique, in that their beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions regarding teaching have been established long before entering the teacher education program (Korthagen, 2004; Sugrue, 2004), whereas owing to short of teaching experience these formed beliefs and assumptions are always simplistic and idealistic in nature, and are in conflict with the complex realities of teaching. Thus, student teachers' professional identity is not stable and unchangeable, it is a dynamic process inserted with significant others and critical events (Li & Xu, 2022).

There is no definite conclusion on how student teachers construct their professional identity. Coldron and Smith (1999) believed that the formation of teachers' professional identity is a process in which teachers constantly reflect and adjust their own teaching according to the social context. Olsen (2008) explored student teachers' professional identity development from five aspects: teaching motivation, teacher education experience, previous practical teaching experience, personal experience, and career planning. Johnson (2003) stated, "every experience is a moving force" to student teachers' subsequent identity development, for the enrichment of experiences to some extent contributes to the transformation of self-perceptions that directly relate to identities.

Despite the large body of research on professional identity, there is a lack of inquiry into EFL student teachers' identity underpinned by teachers' competences. Pennington and Richards (2016) has filled the gap by putting forward the concept of "Foundational Competences of Language Teacher Identity" and "Advanced Competences of Language Teacher Identity", aiming to promote language teachers' professional development by emphasizing the multifaceted competences of language teachers. They re-conceptualized the teacher identity based on the competences required for language teaching, and divided the language teacher identity into two levels: the foundational competences of language identity, including language-related identity, disciplinary identity, context-related identity, self-knowledge and awareness, and student-related identity (student knowledge and awareness) and the advanced competences of language identity, including practiced and responsive teaching skills (knowledge into practice), theorizing from practice (practice into knowledge), and membership in communities of practice and profession. The conception of language teacher identity proposed by Pennington and Richards (2016) is utilized as the theoretical framework of the study. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

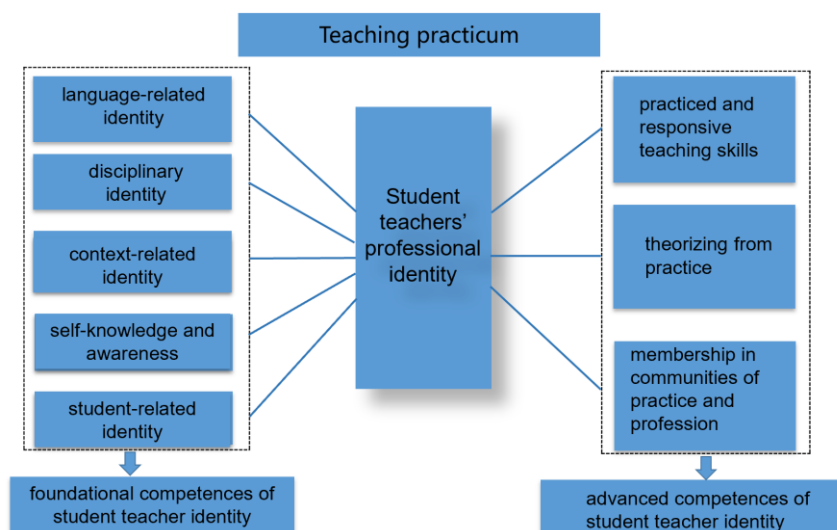


Figure 1: The Development of EFL Student Teachers' Professional Identity.

This figure shows the eight aspects of student teachers' professional identity. The study tries to investigate the dynamic development of Chinese EFL student teachers' professional identity underpinned by the conception of the foundational and advanced competences of language teacher identity in the context of teaching practicum.

3. Methodology

3.1 Practicum in The Context of This Study

As an important pre-service stage for potential teachers, teaching practicum plays a significant role in the student teachers' professional development (Othman & Senom, 2018). In the context of Chinese teacher education, practicum is a compulsory course for all student teachers. During the teaching practicum, student teachers have the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired in their training program within an authentic teaching context. It involves actively engaging with teaching, planning and delivering lessons, and gaining hands-on experience in managing a classroom. In this study, a cohort of 20 English majors from S University (pseudonym) was designated as intern teachers at Xinhua Senior High School (pseudonym), which is a mid-sized boarding school situated in a county town. These student teachers embarked on their practicum in their seventh semester, serving as intern English teachers and assistant class teachers for a duration of 12 weeks. The students they taught were Grade One (Year 10 in the UK) senior high school students. The student teachers' responsibilities at the placement school encompassed observing English classes, conducting their own English lessons, classroom management, attending regular meetings, and performing various other tasks.

3.2 The Participants

The participants in this study were senior English majors from the Foreign Language Department of S University who participated in a teaching practicum at Xinhua Senior High School. The selection of participants was based on purposeful sampling. Throughout

the practicum, these student teachers received guidance from both a mentor assigned by the placement school and supervisors from the university. The participants' demographic information is illustrated in Table 1. All names of individuals in this study are pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Name	Age	Gender	Mentor	Class teacher	Supervisors
Ping	21	Female	Ms. Zhou	Mr. Huang	Mrs. Zhu
Xia	22	Female	Mrs. Zhao	Mrs. He	Mr. Wu
Fang	22	Female	Mr. Wang	Ms. Qian	Mrs. Deng
Tian	23	Female	Miss. Zhang	Mr. Zhou	Mrs. Yang

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

In this research, multiple data collection methods were employed to ensure data triangulation (Merriam, 2009), including interviews, observations, and document analysis. A series of four interviews were conducted with the four participants, capturing their experiences at different stages, namely before, during, and after the practicum. In addition to the interviews, observation played a crucial role as an important source of data. Through direct observation, the researchers witnessed the occurrence, development, and changes in student teachers' teaching behaviours throughout the practicum. Furthermore, various documents were collected and analyzed, including practicum plans, student teachers' journals, teaching plans, teaching reports, field notes, class observation notes, class schedules, and any other relevant materials that the researchers were able to obtain. To enhance the credibility of the study, data collection was continued until data saturation was achieved.

Data analysis of the study involves the following steps. Firstly, the interviews were transcribed verbatim into written text and carefully reviewed and cross-checked. The transcriptions were then provided to the participants for their review, ensuring the accuracy of the text. Secondly, the collected data were categorized into different categories based on the framework of language teacher identity. Thirdly, within each category, the themes were identified and extracted. These themes captured the overarching significance of important concepts, perspectives, or phenomena that emerged from the data. Finally, the researchers conducted a comparative analysis by comparing, contrasting, and synthesizing the themes identified across different cases. This enabled the identification of commonalities, differences, and patterns that shed light on the development of student teachers' professional identities.

4. Findings

The EFL student teachers' professional identity development through the practicum was investigated based on the previously mentioned framework. Through the account of the four participants' experiences and feelings, their dynamic development of professional development before, during, and after the practicum was explored within eight categories respectively.

4.1 Language-related identity

In the context of TESOL, English serves as both the medium of instruction and the object of learning, making language proficiency a vital aspect of a teacher's professional identity (Richards, 2023). Othman and Senom (2018) also highlight the importance of language

proficiency for pre-service ESL teachers. In this study, it was discovered that prior to the practicum, the participants exhibited a lack of confidence in their language proficiency, specifically in oral English and grammar. For instance, Ping and Xia expressed their shortcomings in English:

"I am not confident about speaking in English, and I am afraid that I would make mistakes. My English grammar also needs to be strengthened." (Ping)

"I think my pronunciation was not very good, sometimes I felt it's hard to read long words accurately and smoothly" (Xia)

Their lack of confidence in language proficiency is not an isolated case; rather, it is a prevalent phenomenon in the Chinese foreign language learning context. In China, limited exposure to the target language poses challenges to learners in achieving overall mastery of the language. Yan and Gu (2020) found that the language proficiency of Chinese English major freshmen does not meet the international standards for adolescent (age 18-19) foreign language proficiency, with reading, spoken interaction and writing skills at the B1 level, whilst listening and spoken production skills at a lower A2 level of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Insufficient language proficiency among EFL student teachers has become a big challenge in China (Shu, 2015).

To overcome the shortcomings in language proficiency, the participants strived to practice their classroom English and strengthen grammar learning during the practicum. Ping acknowledged that her deficiency in language made her feel stressed to be a good English teacher, thus she defined herself as a language learner instead of a language teacher during the practicum. She expressed that "I am learning to use some classroom English...I am still a language learner...only with profound knowledge of English, can you teach your students better."

The three-month teaching practicum provided student teachers with a great chance to gain field experience which greatly enhances their language proficiency and professional skills. After the practicum, the four participants all reported that their English proficiency improved. The excerpts are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Excerpts Demonstrating Student Teachers' Improvement in Language Proficiency

Participants	Excerpts
Ping	<i>My English pronunciation is better. I seldom speak English at the university, but now in the placement school, I have to speak English in class, thus I speak more and my pronunciation is improved.</i>
Xia	<i>In the beginning, I would feel embarrassed when I couldn't speak instructional English. Now I can use some classroom English, such as routine greetings, responding to students' answers, and explaining the sequence of lectures in English.</i>
Tian	<i>My English pronunciation is improved. I speak English more fluently. And I am more confident about saying English.</i>

When student teachers improve their language proficiency, it not only enhances their teaching effectiveness but also boosts their confidence and strengthens their professional identity. As they witness their ability to communicate effectively, model language skills, and engage in professional growth opportunities, their sense of professional competence and identity as teachers are significantly reinforced.

4.2 Disciplinary Identity

According to Pennington and Richards (2016), disciplinary identity is underpinned by “specific knowledge of the content of the field gained not only through experience teaching but also through formal education” (p. 9). There are two types of content knowledge, including disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. In the context of language teaching, disciplinary knowledge is closely related to professional recognition, while pedagogical content knowledge is the knowledge that provides a basis for language teaching (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

Before the practicum, the EFL student teachers admitted that they lack enough pedagogical content knowledge. Though they had learned some theories about language teaching, they expressed that this knowledge was too abstract for them. Ping’s perception of teaching theories was “it can help design an activity”, but she didn’t know about the specific teaching skills. Xia was able to express some terms such as situational learning, communicative language teaching, and task-based teaching, but she also admitted that she lacked the practice to apply the theories into practice.

This suggests that the theoretical course failed to make a significant impact on the student teachers, preventing them from effectively applying it to their teaching practices. Research has shown that pre-service teacher education plays an important role in enhancing students’ reflective awareness and theoretical knowledge of language education, but it is difficult for students to acquire practical knowledge (Wright, 2010), as the acquisition of practical knowledge is closely related to “teacher identity awareness” and “understanding of students” (Zhou, 2019).

During the practicum, the EFL student teachers were aware of learning pedagogical content knowledge in practical teaching. Ping learned to plan an effective lesson, “Via writing the teaching plan, I am more familiar with the teaching process. Lesson preparation can not only improve the quality of teaching but also promote the development of teachers and enhance my self-confidence.” Fang stated that her knowledge of vocabulary and grammar learned in senior high school was renewed and her teaching skills were promoted. Xia discovered the ways to attract students’ attention, such as playing videos and asking close-ended questions.

After the practicum, the four participants all agreed that their content knowledge increased. Through observation, reflection, and feedback from their mentors and peers, student teachers developed their professional skills, such as classroom management, lesson planning, and assessment, for instance,

“Lesson planning is essential for a teacher, you need to master the teaching content yourself and make sure that the students can understand it, what’s more, an active classroom atmosphere is very important. When preparing for the class, you have to prepare something that can attract students’ attention, such as videos, or classroom activities.” (Xia)

“When assigning homework there are many aspects to consider, such as the quantity of homework, the relevance of the content, the diversity of the assignments, and the level of difficulty.” (Ping)

The increased professional skills made the student teachers more confident in teaching, and get them more prepared for their future teaching careers. They learned how to navigate classroom dynamics, address individual student needs, and manage various classroom

situations. This hands-on experience provided them with valuable insights and practical knowledge that could enhance their professional identity.

4.3 Context-Related Identity

The context of the practicum includes various aspects, including the environment of the placement school, the duration of the practicum, the relationship between the student teachers and mentors, the management of the school, the culture of the school and so on. Among them, the relationship between student teachers and mentors is highlighted (Izadinia, 2018). Research has shown that a supportive relationship can assist student teachers in strengthening their identities (Hoy & Spero, 2005). The mentor-mentee relationship is a critical factor in constructing self-knowledge, especially in constructing the "most ideal self-knowledge", which can help improve self-efficacy (Kim & Schallert, 2011).

The result of this study showed that participants who experienced favourable mentoring relationships perceived positive changes in their professional competence, which corroborated with the previous study of Liu and Fisher (2006) who found that positive changes were observed in student teachers' understanding of their teacher identities and teaching performance with mentors' help.

Ping gained big progress in her professional competence with her mentor's support and genuine feedback. Besides, both academic and emotional support from her mentor brought positive changes with respect to Ping's teacher identity such as her enhanced confidence, improved teaching stance and increased motivation in teaching. As for Xia, her mentor also gave her useful suggestions on teaching and helped her grasp the teaching rhythm at the beginning. Among those influences of mentors, the role modelling of mentors should be highlighted (Izadinia, 2015). It was her mentor's excellent teaching competence and great teaching enthusiasm that deeply stimulated her teaching enthusiasm and instilled in her a strong sense of teacher identity.

Conversely, the negative mentoring relationship was found to inhibit pre-service teachers' identity formation in the case of Tian. In this study, Tian's expectation for supportive mentoring was not met because her mentor was a novice teacher who had little teaching experience herself, which greatly hindered her opportunity to learn from her mentor. However, this negative influence prompted her to seek help from other members of this school community because of her strong commitment to teaching. By observing other expert teachers' classes and discussing with expert teachers of the placement school, Tian also made great progress during the practicum.

It is found a good mentor-mentee relationship can have a positive impact on the formation of a professional identity, while a negative mentoring relationship is not necessarily a hinder to professional identity, if the student teacher is highly motivated and committed, it can paradoxically contribute to the development of a positive professional identity. This finding aligns with the research of Chen and Qu (2021), who stated that a negative relationship doesn't invariably prohibit student teachers' learning and growth.

4.4 Self-Knowledge and Awareness

It was observed that the participants developed distinct identities at various stages, and as the practicum progressed, they gained a deeper understanding of themselves. This self-discovery significantly influenced their teaching styles and self-expectations.

Xia, an outgoing girl, thought she would be an “active teacher” in class. Her ideal class was like “a relatively relaxed class with active students, where I can impart knowledge while maintaining a relaxed and enjoyable classroom atmosphere.” Fang is a shy girl who labelled herself as a person “unsuitable to be a teacher”. She imagined that teachers should be talkative and outgoing, with a personality of sociability, but she is timid to express herself loudly. Ping said she would be a “multifaceted teacher” who plays different roles in front of the students.

Tian assumed herself as a “caring and diligent teacher”, but she also believed that a teacher should be authoritative in front of the students. She stated, “If you are too gentle to the students, they may not respect you and make trouble in class.” Her ideal image of an English teacher was “good-looking, speaking standard English, giving lectures in a funny way, open-minded and fashionable”.

During the practicum, they encountered reality shock, thus some of their original self-knowledge was reinforced while some were shattered. For example, Xia’s awareness of an “active teacher” was challenged by the real situation. She expressed, “I hope that my class would be active, so I introduce the communicative method in the class...but the students could hardly understand what I said, let alone express their ideas in English, thus it was hard to produce effective communicative activities.” She said she was not satisfied with her current state of teaching because of students’ negative reactions in class.

Fang’s imagined identity of “not suitable to be a teacher” was reinforced due to the cumbersome work with regard to class management and practical teaching. She expressed her discontent about loads of chores, “Most of the time I was a gofer. I don’t know why I am so busy, why I have so much work to do.” This negative perception of the teaching profession made her even more determined not to pursue a career as a teacher in the future.

Tian maintained her identity as being both a “caring and diligent” and “authoritative” teacher during the practicum. She prepared her classes seriously, handled the student-teacher relationship cautiously, and established a positive awareness of professional identity.

Nevertheless, regardless of whether their self-knowledge and awareness were reinforced or shattered, the participants reported having gained a clearer understanding of themselves and their professional identities. Xia expressed her deeper understanding of the profession with regard to her commitment to EFL teaching, “With the accumulation of teaching experience, I felt more comfortable in making interactions with students and less fidgety with sufficient preparation before class.”

Though Fang held a negative view of the teaching profession, she admitted that she knew more about professional skills and had a sense of achievement when she completed the practicum. She stated, “After the practicum, I realized that although the process of teaching can be exhausting, the feeling of accomplishment you get from seeing your students learn something makes it all worth it.”

In all, in the process of teaching practicum, the EFL student teachers acquired the opportunity to identify their strengths and weaknesses and gained a more comprehensive understanding of their professional teacher identity in language teaching.

4.5 Student-Related Identity (Student Knowledge and Awareness)

Joyce and Showers (2002) emphasise the importance of facilitating student learning in

teachers' professional development. "The essence is teaching students to be more powerful learners, a function of our professional repertoire in curriculum, instruction, and ways of building social climate in our schools. (p. 59)" Therefore, it is important for teachers to have knowledge about their students to scaffold student learning.

Prior to the practicum, the student teachers had limited knowledge of their students as they had not yet met them and were unfamiliar with their English proficiency levels. Therefore, the student teachers had to imagine the students' learning attitudes, learning styles, learning environment, and learning motivation based on their own learning experiences. Some of their imagined student-identity would match students' real situations, while some may vibrate reality.

Ping assumed that the life of Year 10 students would be relaxing as "the first year of senior high school is a time for students to adapt to the new stage, transitioning from junior high school to senior high school", but Ping's imagination did not match the reality of students' learning status. Actually, students' academic lives were very stressful, and they experienced a great deal of study pressure at school.

During the practicum, the student teachers had a better understanding of their students. The teaching practicum allows EFL student teachers to gain first-hand experience in working with diverse learners and adapting their teaching strategies to meet their students' needs (Lin, 2009). Ping got more familiar with students' language proficiency by checking their assignments and exercises, and she learned to assign the homework according to students' academic levels. She said, "It would be better to let different students have different choices since students' abilities differ from each other. Therefore, assigning homework also requires teachers to be considerate."

Tian found that she could not grasp the difficulties of teaching materials when she had the first few classes. As Tian gradually got more familiar with the students, she realized that "by focusing on the students' learning difficulties I can teach them better." This situation was also dressed by Tang (2014), who noted that it is challenging for student teachers to anticipate the difficulties that students may encounter before teaching since these difficulties cannot be simply deduced from textbooks. After teaching, most student teachers are able to recognize the learning difficulties when teaching a particular topic.

After the practicum, the participants all reported that they had a more comprehensive knowledge of the students. Ping acknowledged that she knew more about the students and learned to interact with the students. Xia expressed that the major factor affecting her choice of teaching method was the students' learning ability. Fang stated that she was more student-centred in class design. Tian said her teaching style changed after the practicum. The excerpts are listed in Table 3.

The four EFL student teachers had limited information about their students prior to the teaching practicum, but the practicum provided them with an opportunity to gain knowledge about the students. Following the practicum, they increased their knowledge about students and were able to improve their teaching approaches according to the language proficiency of their students. Their student identities are strengthened with the process of teaching practicum.

Table 3*Excerpts Demonstrating Student Teachers' Increased Knowledge of The Students*

Participants	Excerpts
Ping	<i>I learned to strengthen the interaction with the students, checking whether they have grasped the knowledge. Compared with the initial stage when there was minimal interaction, I performed better now.</i>
Fang	<i>Before the practicum, I would design the class according to my understanding of the content, but after the practicum, I learned to design the class based on my student's abilities. I would change my strategies according to students' feedback.</i>
Tian	<i>Previously, I held the belief that English teaching solely involved teachers imparting knowledge to students, but now I believe the focus of teaching should be students rather than teachers.</i>

4.6 Practiced and Responsive Teaching Skills (Knowledge into Practice)

The teaching practicum serves as a vital bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application for student teachers (Wang, 2001). It provides them with an opportunity to put their acquired knowledge, teaching strategies, and pedagogical approaches into practice in a real classroom setting. This study found that before the practicum the student teachers' theoretical knowledge mainly came from textbooks and they had very limited teaching skills.

Teacher education programs often prioritize the acquisition of theoretical knowledge in the initial stages. While this theoretical foundation is essential, it may not directly translate into immediate teaching skills. Student teachers had participated in micro-teaching sessions at the university and observed experienced teachers during their learning period, but these settings could not fully replicate the day-to-day realities of a classroom environment. The absence of real students and the dynamic nature of classroom interactions could impact the development of teaching skills.

The four participants admitted that they had limited knowledge about teaching skills before they went to the placement school. As an inexperienced student teacher, Ping admitted that she lacked practiced and responsive teaching skills and did not know how to transform theoretical knowledge into teaching practice. Like Ping, Tian admitted that she had limited knowledge of teaching skills, as her knowledge from the textbooks was insufficient.

The teaching practicum offers student teachers a valuable opportunity to develop and enhance their teaching skills. It was found that student teachers enhanced their teaching skills after their practicum. Ping acquired teaching skills through effective class observation. She reflected on her journal,

"I found that observing a class as a teacher is very different from observing a class as a student. As a student, I only paid attention to the language points, but as a teacher, I had to observe the structure of the lesson, the connection between different parts of the lesson, the important and difficult points, the teacher's language, the student's feedback, and so on."

Through the class observation, Ping gained valuable insights into teaching skills and student behaviours. She realized that good instructional design was important for teaching, meanwhile, teachers should also pay attention to students' reactions and feedback in class.

Repeatedly engaging with the teaching procedure was also an effective way to gain teaching skills. Tian stated,

"I didn't notice that there were procedures like lead-in, in-class drills and homework in class. But now when I am preparing lessons, I will grasp these important steps, and all these procedures must be included. I may not pay attention to it before, but now I know without the necessary process, a lesson won't be perfect."

Overall, the teaching practicum is a transformative phase in the development of teaching skills for student teachers. Through active involvement in classroom observation, lesson planning, instructional delivery, and reflection, student teachers gain valuable experience and develop the necessary skills to become effective and competent educators.

4.7 Theorizing from Practice (Practice into knowledge)

Language teachers should actively participate in developing their own theories in addition to the existing theories in the field of language teaching and learning. (Pennington & Richards, 2016). The teaching practicum offers student teachers a chance to derive theoretical insights from their practical experiences, allowing them to develop their own unique teaching philosophies. It is found that before the practicum, the participants had an obscure comprehension of teaching theories, let alone having their own teaching philosophy.

During the practicum, student teachers developed their individual philosophies of teaching by reflecting on their teaching practice (Othman & Senom, 2018). This reflective practice enables them to critically analyze their teaching experiences, identify strengths and areas for improvement, seek feedback, make adjustments, and set goals for ongoing professional growth. Ultimately, reflective skills enhance their ability to make informed instructional decisions and continuously improve their teaching practice. Ping reflected on her drawbacks and accordingly figured out solutions,

"My lack of experience and fear of making mistakes often resulted in my reliance on reference books, thus hindering my own critical thinking skills. To improve, I plan to invest more time in reading the textbook and critically analyzing its contents. By taking a holistic approach to the textbook, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of its objectives and create a more comprehensive lesson plan that aligns with these goals."

Tian believed that reflection was crucial for improving her proficiency in teaching English. She reflected on her lessons from the perspective of emotion, knowledge, and ability. Concerning the emotional aspect, she prioritized the students' involvement in class. She said, "I am concerned about whether my students are happy and interested in my lesson. I will evaluate this from the interaction between my students and me." With regard to the knowledge aspect, she focused on assessing the student's comprehension of the content, "...whether my students understand the content that I presented in my lesson is important for teaching reflection." Regarding the aspect of ability, she honed in on the student's language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Through this reflective process, she aimed to refine and polish her teaching methodology continually.

After completing the practicum, the participants gradually developed their own teaching philosophies. Ping stated her philosophy as being "student-centred". Ping firmly believed that a student-centred method could empower students with greater autonomy, leading to increased motivation in English language learning. Similar to Ping, Tian also

described her teaching philosophy as “student-centred”. However, she acknowledged that she had not yet fully implemented this approach in her lessons due to a lack of confidence in managing the classroom. Nonetheless, she believed that the student-centred approach would serve as a guiding philosophy in her future teaching.

The teaching practicum was instrumental in helping the student teachers develop their own teaching philosophies. Prior to the practicum, they had no clear sense of their personal teaching philosophies. However, through reflective practice during the practicum, they gradually gained a deeper understanding of teaching. After the practicum, all participants developed their own teaching philosophies, which contributed significantly to their professional identities. The practicum experience helps student teachers shape their teaching philosophies, setting the foundation for their future practice as educators.

4.8 Membership in Communities of Practice and Profession

As Pennington and Richards (2016) mentioned, “identity as a language teacher includes a sense of having specialized knowledge and expertise of being part of a larger profession and what this represents, such as certain standards, ethics, and accountability for performance in teaching.” Therefore, being part of a community of teachers also impacted the EFL teachers’ commitment to their profession. Being willing to join a community of practice implies agreement with the profession and dedication to the teaching career.

The teaching practicum provides EFL student teachers with a valuable opportunity to better understand their membership in communities of practice and the teaching profession as a whole. During the practicum, student teachers become immersed in the teaching community, working alongside experienced teachers and interacting with students, colleagues, and other professionals. This immersion allows them to observe and experience the norms, values, and practices of the teaching profession firsthand. They gain insights into the expectations, responsibilities, and collaborative aspects of being a member of the teaching community. What’s more, student teachers typically work closely with mentor teachers during the practicum. These mentor teachers serve as guides, providing support, feedback, and guidance throughout the teaching experience. By collaborating with experienced educators, student teachers learn from their expertise, observe their instructional practices, and gain a deeper understanding of the professional knowledge and skills required to be an effective teacher.

During the teaching practicum, the participants gained a better understanding of the community of practice. Ping and Fang reported receiving assistance from members of the community of practice, including peer students, mentors and supervisors. The following excerpt indicated Fang’s positive attitude towards the community of practice:

“The community of practice deepened my knowledge of teachers’ professional identity, and the cooperation among each other enabled us to form common values. During the teaching practicum, I was able to solve problems in the CoP. Attending Teaching teaching seminars, sharing teaching resources and consulting also help me connect knowledge with practice.”

The community of practice fosters a culture of collaborative learning and support. Student teachers can engage in discussions, share experiences, and seek advice from their peers and more experienced teachers. This collaborative environment allows for the exchange of ideas, problem-solving, and mutual support, which enhances their learning

and professional development during the practicum. Teaching practicum enables EFL student teachers to better understand their membership in communities of practice and profession, resulting in a more profound perception of their professional identities.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As an important pre-service stage for potential teachers, teaching practicum plays a significant role in the student teachers' professional development. It serves as a critical phase during which student teachers acquire teaching skills, as well as develop their professional identity. Practical and reflexive teaching experiences offer pre-service teachers a valuable "hands-on" chance with which they develop the initial repertoire of teaching and competence (Trent, 2013) and obtain a sense of professional teacher identity.

In this study, it is found that the student teachers' roles changed at different stages, therefore their professional identities evolved accordingly before, during, and after the practicum. The dynamic professional identity development is illustrated in Figure 2.

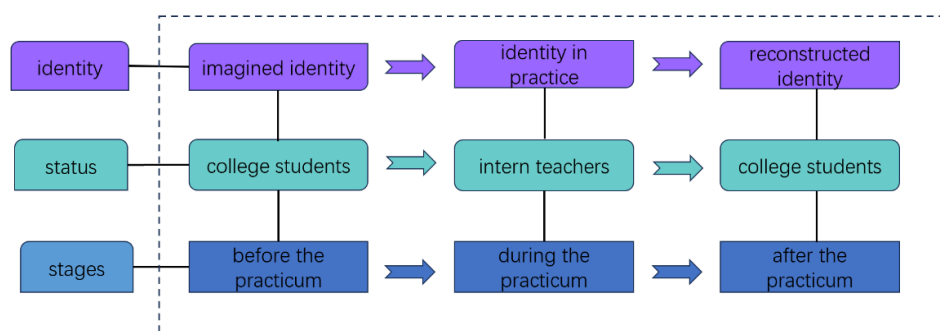


Figure 2: The Development of EFL Student Teachers' Professional Identity.

Before the practicum, their professional identities are imagined identities based on their past experience and their assumption of future teaching. Tsui (2007) states that teachers' experiences as learners can inform beliefs about teaching and learning which continue to exert an influence on teachers throughout their career. The influence of their learning experiences, their teachers, and their teacher education plays a significant role in shaping the imagined identity of the teaching profession among student teachers.

In the pre-service stage, student teachers develop an identity that comes from their images of their teachers when they were students, as well as their initial beliefs and concepts of what makes a good teacher (Flores & Day, 2006). The participants in this study generated their imagined identity as an "active teacher", an "unsuitable teacher", a "multifaceted teacher", and a "caring and diligent teacher" respectively. They also imagined the forthcoming teaching experience, the learning methods of their students, the teaching context, their own teaching skills, and the expectations of the community of practice, which greatly influenced their construction of professional identity.

During the practicum, some of their imagined identities disintegrated due to the "reality shock". The teaching practicum is challenging and involves tensions and compromise, making it a stage when identity is least stable (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Henry, 2016). As a result, their imagined identities were reconstructed and transformed

into identity in practice (Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) points out that identity in practice is not a fixed or static entity, but rather something that we actively construct and perform through our daily practices and interactions with others. Varghese et al. (2005) also emphasize the action-oriented features of identity in practice, focusing on concrete practices and tasks in relation to a group and mentors.

Different from the imagined identity based on imagination, identity in practice is generated from one's own practice and constant involvement with the context. It stresses the idea that our identity is not something that we passively inherit or possess, but is rather something that we actively construct and perform through our daily practices and interactions with others. Through practical experience, reflection, and growth, the student teachers transition from envisioning themselves as students to embodying their roles as language educators. This transformation empowers them with the confidence and competence needed to navigate the dynamic and rewarding field of EFL teaching.

After the practicum, the student teachers begin to summarize their gains and reflect on their teaching, then look ahead to their future careers. Therefore, their professional identities are transformed into reconstructed identities. In the context of pre-service teacher practicum, reconstructed identity refers to the process of developing a new or more complex understanding of oneself as a teacher, in response to the experiences and challenges encountered during the practicum.

As student teachers navigate the challenges, they undergo a process of reconstructed identity, in which they re-evaluate and re-shape their sense of self as a teacher. This involves developing new teaching strategies, refining their classroom management skills, or gaining a deeper understanding of their students' needs and perspectives. In addition to practical skills, the process of reconstructing identity also involves developing a more complex understanding of one's own beliefs, values, and motivations as a teacher, and how these relate to broader social and cultural issues in education.

After the practicum, the student teachers reconstruct their professional identity, as some identities are reinforced, some are reestablished, and some are diminished. In summary, the professional identity of Chinese EFL student teachers is initially conceptualized as an imagined identity prior to their practicum, then transforms into an identity in practice during the practicum, and further develops into a reconstructed identity following the practicum.

The findings of the study reveal that the practicum plays an important role for Chinese EFL student teachers in deepening their understanding of the teaching profession and strengthening their professional identity in multiple dimensions. In particular, these findings of the present study hold important implications for enhancing teacher education programs in China. First, there is a need for reformation in the field of EFL student-teacher education programs. As Liu and Wu (2015) state, the number of English teachers in China has increased dramatically in the past 30 years, but the poor quality of English teachers has become the main obstacle to the improvement of English language teaching. The study reveals that the participants demonstrated a lack of competence in language proficiency prior to the practicum. While some progress was observed in their English proficiency after the practicum, there remains a continued need for overall improvement among the student teachers. Highly qualified EFL pre-

service teachers are essential to ensure highly qualified English teaching in the future. Therefore, a top-down reformation of English education in China is needed, focusing on language competence, critical thinking skills, and intercultural competence, rather than persisting in deeply-rooted examination-oriented education.

Second, the cooperation between the universities and placement schools should be strengthened. This study found that the participants lacked familiarity with the placement school before the practicum. To promote a smoother integration of student teachers into the placement schools and enable them to develop a deeper understanding of the students, it is suggested that universities offer additional opportunities for students to visit the placement schools in advance for the purpose of observation and learning. These pre-visits will allow student teachers to familiarize themselves with the school environment, observe classroom dynamics, interact with students, and gain valuable insights into the educational context.

Third, the cultivation of student teachers' professional identity should be the primary focus in pre-service teacher education. Traditionally, pre-service teacher education primarily emphasized the acquisition of subject knowledge and teaching skills, with the assumption that formal education would adequately prepare future teachers for the challenges they would face in their work. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that a student teacher who possesses solid language knowledge and rich teaching skills but lacks professional commitment would not effectively fulfil the role of a novice teacher.

Professional commitment and a strong sense of language teacher identity are equally essential for success in the teaching profession. Therefore, it is essential to prioritise the construction of student teachers' professional identity in teacher education programs, which can lay a strong foundation for their future success and fulfilment as educators.

Finally, it is hoped that more research can be conducted into EFL pre-service teacher education in the Chinese context from sociocultural, psychological, intercultural, and cognitive perspectives. Further research can be extended to the minority ethnic groups of Chinese EFL student teachers who learn Mandarin Chinese as their second language and English as their third language. This area of study holds significant importance as it explores the unique linguistic and cultural dynamics that these student teachers encounter in their language learning journey. It can also provide insights into the role of cultural identity and language attitudes in language development and academic success.

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