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Forged in Struggle, Shaped by Negotiation: Dynamics of Identity Development among Chinese Pre-service EFL Teachers

Wenjie Wu¹, Norhakimah Khalessa Binti Ahmad², Nooreen Noordin³ and Chao Du⁴

¹ Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia. School of Foreign Languages, Handan University, Handan, Hebei 056005, China; 920178626@qq.com; <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0631-7676>.

² Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia; norhakimah@upm.edu.my; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0788-4553>.

³ Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia; nooreen@upm.edu.my; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4970-2682>.

⁴ Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia; duchaoemail2021@163.com; <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0170-7229>.

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Address for Correspondence:

Norhakimah Khalessa Binti Ahmad. Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia. (norhakimah@upm.edu.my)

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Abstract This qualitative case study investigates identity development among four Chinese pre-service EFL teachers during their teaching practicum through the lens of Possible Selves Theory and Identity Conflict Theory. Findings highlight the dynamic, context-dependent nature of teacher identities, emphasizing the pivotal role of core identities in influencing emotional experiences, professional actions, and career intentions. The study identifies three distinct identity trajectories: identity withdrawal due to constrained agency and limited support; negotiated reconstruction enabled by reflective adaptation; and ideal identity expansion in supportive contexts. A dynamic model of identity development is proposed, recommending structured support from teacher education programs to help pre-service teachers recognize core identities and navigate diverse practicum contexts, promoting sustainable professional growth.

Keywords Pre-service EFL teachers, Teacher identity development, Possible Selves Theory, Identity conflict, Teaching practicum

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Reviewers

Dr. Michael Onyeisi Ejiodu, Department of Languages, University of Delta, Agbor, Nigeria; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8019-2502>; Email: michael.ejiodu@unidel.edu.ng

Dr. Wisdom Ezenwoali, University of Delta, Agbor, Nigeria; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0776-1385>; Email: wisdom.ezenwoali@unidel.edu.ng

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1. Introduction

Teacher identity is broadly defined as teachers' understanding of their professional roles and the self-image they project to others (Meyer et al., 2023). In recent years, teacher identity has emerged as a central theme in the field of teacher education, with a growing body of research emphasizing its multidimensional, dynamic, and context-dependent nature (Pishghadam et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021; Coombs et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the internal processes that drive teacher identity development are still not well understood and are often regarded as a complex area that has yet to be thoroughly explored (Lee, 2021). This lack of clarity is particularly evident during the teaching practicum stage of pre-service teacher education, where limited attention has been paid to how identity evolves in response to real classroom experiences and interpersonal interactions.

Contemporary teacher education programs have increasingly adopted school-based models, where the practicum serves as a critical bridge between theory and practice (Weerakoon & Careemdeen, 2023; Ilya, 2022). Within this complex school environment, pre-service teachers are expected not only to apply pedagogical knowledge and instructional skills in the classroom but also to engage in ongoing interactions with mentor teachers, students, parents, colleagues, and school administrators. These interactions often provoke intense self-examination and identity negotiation as student teachers strive to reconcile their actual selves with their ideal teacher selves. Thus, investigating how identity develops during the practicum is essential to understanding the broader process of teacher learning and professional growth.

Existing research suggests that the teaching practicum significantly shapes and reshapes pre-service teachers' identities (e.g. Seyri & Nazari, 2023; Huang & Wang, 2024). However, how identity is enacted, negotiated, and transformed within authentic teaching contexts remains insufficiently explored. To address this gap, the present study focuses on four pre-service EFL teachers enrolled in a teacher education program at a university in China. Using a qualitative case study approach, it examines the inner dynamics of identity development throughout their practicum experiences.

This study is theoretically informed by Possible Selves Theory and Identity Conflict Theory, exploring how the interaction, negotiation, and tension among multiple identities influence pre-service teachers' professional learning and development. Prior studies (e.g., Yuan, et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2024; Rushton & Reiss, 2021) have shown that teaching experiences and social interactions often activate a range of identity dimensions, including actual, ideal, ought, and feared selves. These identities significantly impact pre-service teachers' professional cognition, emotions, and behaviors. However, limited attention has been paid to how such identities interact in specific school contexts and how these processes shape the broader trajectory of professional growth and teacher learning. Therefore, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the inner mechanisms and dynamic patterns underlying identity development during the practicum, while also offering practical implications for teacher education programs to support intentional and sustainable professional identity formation among pre-service teachers.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Possible Selves Theory and Identity Conflict Theory to construct a theoretical framework for understanding the inner dynamics of identity development among pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum.

2.1 Possible Selves Theory

Possible Selves Theory emphasizes individuals' internal cognitive representations of their future selves, including both ideal selves they hope to achieve and feared selves they strive to avoid (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These imagined futures not only reflect personal aspirations and anxieties but are also shaped by situational contexts, social interactions, and one's current sense of self (Alstam & Forkby, 2024). In the context of teacher education, this theory highlights the interplay between teachers' lived experiences, current teaching practices, and the values embedded in their ideal professional selves, all of which are deeply context-dependent (Maddamsetti & Yuan, 2024).

During the practicum, pre-service teachers often construct four distinct types of identities: actual identity (how they perform and perceive themselves in real teaching situations), ideal identity (the kind of teacher they aspire to become), ought identity (expectations imposed by professional roles), and feared identity (what they dread becoming as teachers) (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987). These identities may interact in either harmonious or conflicting ways, which in turn influence teaching behaviors and professional growth (Gong & Gao,

2024). For instance, when institutional constraints hinder the realization of ideal identities, pre-service teachers may be forced to adjust or even abandon their aspirations, weakening their professional agency and commitment (Le, 2024).

2.2 Identity Conflict Theory

Baumeister's (1986) Identity Conflict Theory offers a valuable lens through which to examine how pre-service teachers manage internal conflicts that arise during identity development. Upon entering the practicum, pre-service teachers often face new environments and responsibilities that challenge their multiple identities, resulting in either identity deficit or identity conflict (Baumeister, Shapiro & Tice, 1985). Identity deficit occurs when there is a misalignment between a teacher's core identity and the practical demands of the teaching context, compelling the individual to renegotiate or reconstruct their sense of self. Identity conflict, on the other hand, arises when pre-service teachers struggle to balance competing identity commitments, often leading to tension, compromise, or the abandonment of certain roles (Baumeister, 1986).

Although identity conflicts can provoke emotional distress, Baumeister (1986) also emphasizes their developmental potential. Such conflicts may catalyze growth when pre-service teachers actively exercise agency to negotiate and reconstruct meaningful professional identities (Arvaja & Sarja, 2021). Through identity negotiation, pre-service teachers can bridge gaps between their actual and ideal selves, thereby increasing their engagement in teaching practice and reflective learning (Huang & Wang, 2024 ; Le, 2024).

By integrating Possible Selves Theory and Identity Conflict Theory, this study investigates how pre-service teachers construct, negotiate, and transform multiple identities within the situated realities of the teaching practicum. This framework underscores the context-sensitive and interactional nature of identity development, while also highlighting the agentic strategies employed by pre-service teachers in navigating identity tensions. The theoretical lens not only clarifies the inner mechanisms of identity interaction and conflict but also provides practical insights for teacher education programs to support pre-service teachers in managing identity challenges and sustaining long-term professional growth.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach (Creswell, 2007) to explore the central research question: **How do Chinese pre-service EFL teachers construct and develop their professional identities during the teaching practicum?** This method is particularly well-suited for investigating how individuals make sense of their experiences within specific sociocultural contexts (Mulcahy et al., 2021), and for capturing the nuanced processes and influencing factors involved in identity development.

As Yuan et al. (2019) has noted, qualitative case studies have become an important methodological approach in teacher identity research, as they allow for a rich and authentic representation of teachers' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral practices within real educational contexts. Through in-depth descriptions and triangulation of multiple data sources, this study seeks to understand the complexity and contextuality of identity development during this critical stage of teacher preparation.

Accordingly, four pre-service EFL teachers from a Chinese university were selected as focal participants. Drawing on classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals, the study analyzes how these student teachers performed and negotiated their professional identities in real teaching contexts, aiming to uncover the processes and mechanisms underlying their identity (re)construction.

3.2 Research Context and Participants

This study was conducted within a four-year pre-service EFL teacher education program at a teacher-training university in China. The program integrates theoretical coursework, teaching practicum, and graduation research, aiming to equip future English teachers with both academic knowledge and practical competencies. The program is broadly divided into three phases:

Teacher Education Coursework (Semesters 1–5): During the first five semesters, pre-service EFL teachers complete a range of content-specific courses in English teaching, classroom management, instructional methods, as well as

foundational subjects such as pedagogy and educational psychology to enhance their teaching ability and instructional skills.

Teaching Practicum (Semester 6): In the sixth semester, pre-service teachers are placed in local primary and secondary schools for an 18-week practicum. During this period, they conduct English teaching under the supervision of both university and school-based mentors.

Graduation Research (Semesters 7–8): In the final year, student teachers undertake an independent research project in the field of English education and complete a bachelor's thesis under the guidance of a university advisor.

At the beginning of the study, an open invitation was sent to all 70 pre-service EFL teachers scheduled to begin their practicum. Fifteen volunteered to participate, from which four were purposefully selected for in-depth exploration of their identity development trajectories. The four selected participants—pseudonymized as Lee, Chan, Hao, and Lynn—demonstrated high levels of engagement and reflective capacity during the initial interviews and offered experiences that were strongly aligned with the research focus. As such, they were selected as the key cases for this study.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected across three phases of the teaching practicum—pre-, mid-, and post-practicum—with ethical approval obtained from the researcher's institution and informed consent secured from all participants. Three primary sources of data were used: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals. This triangulation aimed to enhance the credibility and richness of the data (Creswell, 2007).

First, three rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted (before, during, and after the practicum), each lasting approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the participants' native language (Mandarin), recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The interview questions were adapted from Bloomfield (2010) and Timoštšuk & Ugaste (2010), focusing on participants' motivations for entering the profession, practicum experiences, and identity perceptions and changes. Second, two classroom observations were conducted for each participant—one during the early and one during the later phase of the practicum. The observations focused on instructional strategies, classroom interactions, emotional expressions, and enacted identities. These observations complemented the interview data and provided insight into how identities were performed and adjusted in practice (Burri & Baker, 2021). Finally, reflective journals were collected as part of the practicum requirements. Each participant submitted nine biweekly entries over the 18-week practicum. These journals documented teaching experiences, reflections on practice, and thoughts on identity, offering a valuable primary source for tracking identity development.

Together, the triangulated data provided a multidimensional foundation for understanding the complex and evolving nature of identity development among pre-service EFL teachers during the practicum.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative interpretive analysis approach (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013), combining theory-driven coding with inductive reasoning to uncover patterns of identity development during the teaching practicum.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, all interview transcripts and journal entries were thoroughly reviewed to construct individual "identity profiles" for each participant, tracing their identity trajectories across the practicum. Second, drawing on Possible Selves Theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and Identity Conflict Theory (Baumeister, 1986), the researcher identified and categorized participants' ideal, ought, actual, and feared identities, with particular attention to how these identities interacted and conflicted within their specific teaching contexts (Yuan et al., 2019). Third, a cross-case comparative analysis was conducted to synthesize identity development trajectories, highlight commonalities and differences, and explore how the participants used agency and negotiation to navigate identity tensions and reconstruct their professional selves.

Through this process, the study revealed core mechanisms of identity development and illuminated diverse strategies of identity negotiation, grounded in the sociocultural logic of the practicum setting.

4. Findings

Lee: "From a Respectable Aspiration to Complete Withdrawal"

Lee's initial motivation for enrolling in a teacher education program stemmed from her perception of teaching as a "respectable and stable" profession. In the first-round interview, she frequently expressed her admiration for the role of an English teacher and viewed it as a secure career path: "I think being an English teacher is great—it's a stable job and has a good social status" (Interview 1).

Lee's ideal identity was that of a professionally competent English teacher who held a stable position and enjoyed public recognition. However, during the practicum, her identity development was significantly disrupted and distorted. She was assigned the role of a "mobile English teacher" and "assistant homeroom teacher," without any systematic teaching responsibilities. Instead, she was frequently tasked with supervising self-study sessions, invigilating exams, or substituting for absent teachers.

In one classroom observation, Lee was asked to take over a lesson without prior notice or preparation. She appeared visibly anxious and passive, relying solely on the teacher's guide to deliver the content. In her reflective journal, she wrote: "I was informed last-minute to cover another class today—again, completely unprepared. I feel like I'm not here to teach, but to 'put out fires'... There's no sense of belonging, no sense of presence." (Week 4 Reflective Journal)

This actual identity of a "last-minute substitute" created a strong tension with her ideal identity. Lee began to question her place in the school and increasingly felt marginalized. In a follow-up interview, she stated bluntly: "I don't think the school sees me as an English teacher at all—I'm just an intern they can send anywhere at any time." (Interview 2) This feeling of marginalization reinforced a "passive ought identity"—that of a compliant subordinate and stopgap—while significantly diminishing her motivation and commitment to the teaching profession.

In addition, Lee was assigned the role of assistant homeroom teacher, responsible for maintaining discipline and handling routine administrative tasks. During a class meeting observation, she took attendance, assigned moral education tasks, and kept order—none of which involved any instructional content. In her reflective journal, she noted: "All these tasks make me feel more like a disciplinarian or administrator. I want to be a teacher, not someone doing odd jobs." (Week 6 Reflective Journal)

As Lee's role in teaching diminished and her perceived professional value eroded, a feared identity began to take shape: that of a suppressed intern with no teaching opportunities, ultimately becoming "not a teacher at all." She explicitly rejected the prospect of becoming a teacher burdened with non-teaching responsibilities and, eventually, began to question the profession itself: "To be honest, I no longer want to be a teacher. I used to think it was a great career, but now I don't want to pursue it at all. I just don't think I'm suitable for it." (Interview 3)

Lee's practicum journey thus illustrates a typical trajectory of identity rupture—from an aspirational ideal identity to a starkly divergent actual identity, and finally to the emergence of a feared identity. In her journals, she described the experience as "disappointing," "a waste of time," and "meaningless." In her final interview, she confirmed her decision to leave the profession and pursue a different career path. This identity withdrawal signals not only a breakdown in her identity development but also reflects structural deficiencies in the practicum school's role allocation and support mechanisms.

Chan: "Staying Committed under Interdisciplinary Pressure"

Chan entered the teacher education program with strong enthusiasm for becoming an English teacher, viewing it as a career that aligned with both her personal ideals and sense of social contribution. In her first interview, she emphasized her lifelong passion for English and her belief in the influential power of English teachers: "I've always wanted to be an English teacher. I think it's amazing to be able to speak English all the time and to influence students' lives." (Interview 1) This statement reflected her ideal identity—a passionate and competent English teacher capable of making a meaningful impact on students' development.

However, during the practicum, Chan was unexpectedly assigned to teach both English and Geography due to staffing shortages, which left her feeling confused and frustrated. As she noted: "The practicum school lacks teachers, so I have to teach Geography in addition to English. Honestly, I don't like it, and I'm not good at teaching Geography." (Interview 2) This shift marked a change in the school's expectations regarding Chan's ought identity, from a subject-specific teacher to a "multi-tasking teacher." The expansion of her teaching responsibilities beyond her expertise and interest directly challenged her sense of professional identity.

Classroom observations revealed a stark contrast between her performance in the two subjects. In English lessons, Chan demonstrated confidence, fluency, and strong student engagement. In contrast, her Geography classes appeared tense and rigid, heavily reliant on the textbook with minimal interaction. After one such lesson, she reflected: "Teaching Geography makes me feel like an outsider. I just follow the textbook mechanically. It feels completely different from teaching English—I lack both confidence and motivation." (Week 4 Reflective Journal) This mismatch between subject and identity led to a growing cognitive burden and fluctuating self-perception, momentarily activating a feared identity—that of an ineffective generalist teacher who "teaches everything but teaches nothing well."

Unlike Lee, however, Chan did not withdraw from the profession. Instead, she engaged in reflective practice and identity negotiation to find positive meaning in her teaching. She viewed her English classes as a space for self-recovery. During one classroom observation, she led a role-play activity in her English class that sparked lively participation. Afterward, she wrote: "Every time I teach English, I feel like I'm reconnecting with myself. It feels like something I can be proud of." (Week 6 Reflective Journal) This contrasting experience deepened her attachment to her ideal identity and prompted her to adapt to interdisciplinary teaching pressures by integrating methods from English teaching into her Geography lessons. For instance, she reported: "I tried to get students to say Geography terms in English. It felt strange at first, but they actually became more interested." (Interview 2)

Such pedagogical blending illustrates Chan's ability to negotiate identity tensions and exercise agency. By actively seeking connections between her actual identity and ideal identity, she was able to reduce the negative impact of the expanded ought identity and maintain her teaching motivation. By the end of her practicum, Chan expressed a clear commitment to the English teaching profession: "Although there were many challenges, I still love being an English teacher. At least now I know what I really want to do." (Interview 3)

Chan's practicum journey illustrates a path of identity development through tension. Her ideal identity was consistently challenged by contextual demands, but through critical reflection, pedagogical adaptation, and emotional investment in English teaching, she overcame internal conflicts and strengthened her professional commitment. Her identity development was not a linear progression but an ongoing negotiation among ideal, ought, and actual identities. Although interdisciplinary teaching briefly triggered a feared identity, Chan's emotional attachment to English teaching and proactive engagement with practice allowed her to reconstruct a coherent professional self, ultimately demonstrating a stable trajectory of identity integration in the face of contradictions.

Hao: "Dual Cultivation between Teaching and Administration"

Hao was the only male participant in this study. He entered the English teacher education program with the intention of challenging traditional gender stereotypes and becoming a "professional yet approachable" male English teacher. In his first interview, he articulated this aspiration clearly: "I actually really like the idea of being a teacher—especially an English teacher. There aren't many male teachers in schools, and I hope I can show students that male teachers can also be gentle and have effective teaching methods." (Interview 1)

This statement reflected Hao's ideal identity as a male English teacher who is both professionally competent and emotionally approachable—someone who not only values instructional expertise but also seeks to embody a positive gender image in the eyes of students. However, his identity development during the practicum took an unexpected and complex turn. Due to a shortage of administrative staff, Hao was assigned to assist the Academic Affairs Office while also teaching English. Over time, his daily schedule became heavily skewed toward administrative duties, leaving limited time for teaching. In his reflective journal, he admitted: "Every morning I have to take care of administration work—sending out class schedule updates, handling last-minute changes—only in the afternoon can I teach English. Often I've just finished preparing a lesson when I get called away for something urgent." (Week 3 Reflective Journal)

In this context, the ought identity imposed on Hao was that of an "administrative assistant + substitute teacher," rather than a full-time English teacher. He also expressed his concerns in the second interview: "I know the school is really understaffed, and I understand the situation. But I'm starting to worry that I'm slowly turning into an 'administrator,' and English teaching is becoming a side task." (Interview 2)

Despite this mismatch between his ideal identity and his actual responsibilities, Hao did not reject the dual role. On the contrary, he recognized the value of administrative work as a way to better understand school operations. He explained: "Actually, working in the academic office has taught me a lot—how to arrange schedules, how to coordinate with other teachers... this will definitely help if I work in school leadership someday" (Interview 3). This

perspective illustrates Hao's agentic stance—his ability to activate agency within his actual identity by transforming administrative experiences into assets for his teaching development.

During a classroom observation, Hao delivered a well-organized grammar lesson to a junior secondary class. His classroom management and time control were notably effective, and students responded positively. He later reflected: "Now I pay more attention to time allocation and pacing in class. Maybe my experience in the office taught me how to structure a lesson more efficiently" (Week 8 Reflective Journal). This experiential transfer not only helped bridge the gap between his administrative and teaching roles but also contributed to the formation of a "dual professional identity," in which he integrated both domains into his self-concept as an educator.

Nonetheless, Hao also experienced moments of feared identity in the challenging practicum environment marked by insufficient teaching resources and frequent time conflicts. In one journal entry, he expressed concern: "I worry that I'll always be asked to do admin work and eventually forget that I came here to teach. My biggest fear is ending up as a teacher who's valued not for teaching, but for being 'good at handling tasks'" (Week 10 Reflective Journal).

This reflection reveals Hao's awareness of potential identity drift. However, rather than being overtaken by this fear, he continuously reaffirmed his teaching aspirations through reflective practice and engagement in the classroom. In the final interview, he reaffirmed his professional commitment: "I still want to be a teacher—an English teacher. I don't mind doing admin work, but teaching is what I really want to do." (Interview 3)

Taken together, Hao's identity development demonstrates a trajectory of cross-boundary integration. While his ideal identity was challenged by administrative responsibilities, he actively engaged in self-adjustment, transforming administrative tasks into opportunities for professional growth. His case reflects the integrative potential suggested by Possible Selves Theory, whereby actual identity and ideal identity can be reconciled through active negotiation and reflective learning.

Lynn: "From Specialized Aspiration to Interdisciplinary Exploration"

At the beginning of her teacher education journey, Lynn held a firm and idealized expectation of becoming an "excellent English teacher." In the first interview, she repeatedly mentioned her lifelong passion for English and her desire to one day emulate the confidence and inspiration of teachers she had seen on television: "I've always wanted to be an English teacher. I love sharing knowledge with others, and I hope my students will love this language as much as I do." (Interview 1)

This vision clearly shaped her ideal identity—a linguistically proficient, charismatic English teacher capable of inspiring students' thinking and stimulating their interest in language learning. However, the realities of her practicum soon challenged this singular professional aspiration. Upon arrival at her placement school, Lynn was assigned to teach not only English but also Politics and Biology due to a shortage of teachers. She described this unexpected change in the second interview: "As soon as I arrived, I was told I'd be teaching three subjects. I was really confused... I never imagined myself standing in front of a Politics or Biology class. Those are not my strengths." (Interview 2)

The practicum school imposed an ought identity on her as a "multi-subject gap-filler," which diverged significantly from her anticipated role as a dedicated English teacher. In the early stages of teaching, she frequently experienced time pressure, limited subject knowledge, and discomfort—especially in non-English classes. This was often reflected in her reflective journals: "In today's Politics class, a student asked a question I couldn't answer. I had to say I'd check and get back to them. I suddenly felt so powerless." (Week 2 Reflective Journal)

This experience of misaligned competence triggered the emergence of a feared identity—that of an "ineffective teacher" lost in interdisciplinary teaching and lacking a clear sense of professionalism. She reflected: "Sometimes I wonder if I chose the wrong major. It's not that I'm not trying—it's just that this arrangement makes it impossible for me to really be an English teacher." (Week 4 Reflective Journal)

Yet unlike Lee, Lynn did not develop an inclination to leave the profession. Instead, she gradually began to explore interdisciplinary teaching as a new path for growth. In later interviews, she shared how teaching multiple subjects led her to notice differences in content structure, teaching language, and interaction styles, which deepened her reflection on the essence of teaching: "Although preparing for three subjects is exhausting, it made me realize that each subject has different teaching methods... Some Biology and Politics content can actually be integrated with English." (Interview 2)

This approach was also evident during classroom observations. In one lesson, she taught a science-themed English reading passage and guided students to connect its content with biological concepts, while incorporating political knowledge such as national policies. These interdisciplinary linkages not only enhanced student comprehension but also boosted her own sense of accomplishment. In a reflective journal, she wrote: "Today I taught an English reading lesson on biological evolution. The students said it was interesting. I was surprised too—it turns out I can blend several subjects together in one class." (Week 6 Reflective Journal)

This pedagogical exploration contributed to a reconfiguration of her teacher identity—from a narrowly defined "English teacher" to an "interdisciplinary teaching practitioner." This evolving actual identity also led her to reconsider her future career development. In the final interview, she stated: "I still want to be a teacher, but not just for English. I want to get certified in Biology and Politics too, so I'll have more options and be better prepared for different school needs." (Interview 3)

Lynn's identity development illustrates a shift from specialized aspiration to diverse exploration. She demonstrated adaptability and creativity under pressure, gradually expanding her professional identity beyond its original boundaries. Her practicum journey exemplifies how the tension between ideal identity and ought identity can be transformed through agentive teaching practice, leading to the emergence of new identity possibilities. This dynamic reconstruction enabled her to sustain professional enthusiasm despite challenges and opened new avenues for future development.

5. Discussion

Drawing on Possible Selves Theory (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986) and Identity Conflict Theory (Baumeister, 1986), this study explored the identity development trajectories of four Chinese pre-service EFL teachers during their teaching practicum. Although the sample size is limited, the study provides valuable insights into the internal processes of identity transformation, particularly in highlighting the interaction, negotiation, and evolution of multiple identities in the process of "learning to teach."

5.1 The Core Role and Tension of Core Identities

Consistent with previous research emphasizing the multiplicity, dynamism, and contestation of teacher identity (Puchegger & Bruce, 2020; Henry, 2016), the study further reveals that pre-service teachers tend to anchor their self-recognition in a core identity—typically an ideal or feared self—which significantly influences their emotional experiences, professional behaviors, and future career orientations during the practicum.

For instance, Lee entered the practicum with a core ideal identity of becoming a "respectable and stable English teacher." However, repeated assignments to supervise self-study sessions, substitute for absent teachers, and perform disciplinary tasks gradually undermined her identity, pushing her toward an ought identity of a "subordinate assistant" and eventually leading her into a feared identity of "not being a teacher at all." Her trajectory illustrates an identity rupture, where the absence of alignment between ideal and actual identities, coupled with a lack of contextual support, resulted in identity deficit and complete withdrawal from the profession.

By contrast, Chan's experience reflected a pathway of identity integration through tension. Although she was unexpectedly assigned to teach both English and Geography—leading to professional anxiety and uncertainty—she engaged in reflection and adapted her teaching strategies by incorporating English pedagogical methods into her Geography lessons. Through these negotiations, she gradually stabilized her core identity as an English teacher. This case highlights that, under conditions of agency and negotiation space, individuals can recalibrate their professional self-understanding through conflict and adaptation.

5.2 Identity Negotiation and Boundary-Crossing: Multiple Trajectories of Transformation

The cases of Hao and Lynn further illuminate the diversity of identity negotiation mechanisms. Both participants encountered unexpected role arrangements yet demonstrated strong reflective and integrative capabilities that enabled identity reconstruction through two distinct paths: negotiated identity development and ideal identity expansion.

Hao, though distanced from his initial aspiration of full-time teaching due to substantial administrative responsibilities, actively reframed his administrative experience as a resource for improving his teaching organization and time management. This cross-boundary integration led to the formation of a dual professional

identity that merged instructional and managerial roles. His case suggests that even when actual identities deviate from expectations, identity can still be reconstructed positively if the individual exercises agency and finds professional meaning in the experience.

Lynn's identity trajectory reflected a path of ideal identity expansion. Faced with the challenge of teaching three subjects, she gradually overcame her initial anxiety and began to explore interdisciplinary teaching. By integrating knowledge from Politics and Biology into her English lessons, she constructed a new vision of herself as a cross-disciplinary educator. This identity expansion is consistent with Buckley et al. (2024)'s notion of situated identity fluidity and contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic and adaptable nature of professional identity during the initial stages of teaching.

5.3 A Dynamic Model and Its Theoretical Contribution

Based on the above analysis, the study proposes a dynamic model of pre-service teacher identity development during practicum, which outlines three possible trajectories: Identity rupture and withdrawal: When the practicum context suppresses agency and limits negotiation space, individuals may fall from their ideal identity into a feared identity, eventually withdrawing from the profession; Negotiated identity reconstruction: When individuals are able to develop negotiated identities between their ideal and ought selves, they may activate new professional motivations and reconfigure their identity; Ideal identity expansion: When ideal identities are updated and broadened in response to practical challenges, teachers may develop more flexible and diversified professional selves.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of Possible Selves Theory and Identity Conflict Theory to demonstrate that teacher identity is not merely an internal cognitive construct but a constantly evolving, negotiated, and context-mediated process shaped by institutional roles, pedagogical tasks, and personal agency. Teacher identity, in this sense, emerges from ongoing dialogue between the individual and the environment, underpinned by complex emotional dynamics and adaptive regulation mechanisms (McCullough Hedelin, 2024; Sheridan et al., 2022).

6. Conclusion and Implications

By analyzing the identity development processes of pre-service EFL teachers during their teaching practicum, this study deepens our understanding of the dynamic, complex, and context-sensitive nature of teacher identity and provides both theoretical and practical insights for teacher education. The findings emphasize the pivotal role of core identities in shaping pre-service teachers' professional growth. Teacher educators should guide student teachers in identifying and reflecting on their core identities to enhance their sense of professional direction and learning purpose. Moreover, ideal identities serve as key drivers of emotional investment and vocational commitment. Teacher education programs should help students link their ideals to classroom practices and provide opportunities to expand their professional vision through practical engagement. Additionally, identity development is profoundly influenced by practicum contexts and organizational support. Universities and placement schools should work collaboratively to create supportive environments that foster reflection and exploration. Pre-service teachers must also be equipped with identity negotiation skills and contextual adaptability to manage complex teaching demands and identity tensions. This can be achieved through diverse pedagogical approaches, such as teaching portfolios and action research, which help student teachers cultivate professional resilience and practical wisdom.

Despite its contributions, the study acknowledges several limitations. First, the data rely primarily on student teachers' self-reports, lacking multiple stakeholder perspectives. Second, the focus on the practicum stage does not capture identity evolution during the early-career phase. Third, the sample is context-specific, and findings may not be broadly generalizable. Future research could expand participant types, adopt longitudinal designs, and conduct cross-cultural comparisons to enhance the scope and applicability of findings. In summary, teacher educators should construct structured identity support pathways across curriculum, practicum, and mentoring systems to help pre-service teachers develop sustainable and adaptable professional identities, thereby contributing to the long-term development of the teaching profession.

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Author Biography

Wenjie Wu is a PhD student at UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia). Before her enrollment at UPM, she had three years of experience as a secondary school EFL teacher and five years as a university EFL instructor. Her research interests include teacher identity, teacher training, and teacher education.

Norhakimah Khaissa Ahmad is a Senior Lecturer in UPM. She taught English at a secondary school for six years. She served as a teacher educator at the Institute of Teacher Education for 15 years before she joined UPM. Her research interests include teacher identity, teaching grammar to young learners, as well as children and literacy.

Nooreen Noordin is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, specializing in Teaching English as a Second Language. Her research focuses on technology-enhanced language learning, content-based instruction, and instructional best practices. She has published extensively and supervised over 70 undergraduate and postgraduate research projects.

Chao Du is a PhD student at UPM. Before her enrollment at UPM, she accumulated 10 years of experience as an EFL teacher in primary schools.

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