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VIETNAMESE NOVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION PROCESS: MULTIPLE CASE STUDIES IN HANOI

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Abstract: *Teacher identity plays a crucial role in teachers' decision on teaching styles, methodology and personal development opportunities. Although in-service language teacher identity has received considerable attention of researchers in the past decade, there is little knowledge in regard of how novice teachers negotiate their professional identify in the learner-teacher role transition process. Adopting multiple case studies as research design, this study aims to investigate how novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers construct and reconstruct their teacher identity during the early years of their teaching career. The sample involves five EFL novice teachers working in four K-12 institutions in Hanoi. The research reveals that the professional identity development of novice teachers in Vietnam is a multifaceted journey influenced by their family backgrounds, personal values, educational experiences, and the challenges faced during their initial teaching year.*

Keywords: *English Language Teaching, personal development, teacher identity, novice EFL teacher, identity negotiation, case study.*

INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this research is rooted in the significant transformations in the role of teachers and the increasing expectations placed on them by the community. Over the past decade, there has been a notable focus on understanding teacher identity due to its profound impacts on various aspects of teaching, such as responsibilities, curriculum practices, professional development, and job effectiveness. The passage emphasizes the importance of studying how teachers perceive themselves at work and the factors influencing the construction and reconstruction of their professional identity.

The specific focus on novice teachers is justified by the challenges they face in transitioning from learners to teachers, testing their prior learning experiences, and establishing their professional images. The entrance of novice teachers into the profession is closely linked to their commitment and development, making it crucial to understand their identity formation for enhancing teacher education programs and promoting professional development, particularly within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) community.

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The discussion acknowledges that teacher identity is not static but dynamic and multifaceted, evolving over time and influenced by individual characteristics, teaching experiences, and professional contexts. The passage cites various studies highlighting the diverse experiences of teachers at different career stages and the significance of overcoming identity crises for subsequent professional development.

Despite the existing research on professional identity, the focus on novice teachers, especially in the Vietnamese context, is identified as a gap. The paper aims to address this gap by exploring how Vietnamese novice EFL teachers construct and negotiate their professional identity in teaching practice using narrative inquiry. The personal investment theory is proposed as a potential framework to understand the factors influencing novice EFL teachers' identity formation. Overall, the rationale underscores the importance of understanding teacher identity, particularly among novice teachers in the context of evolving educational landscapes and societal demands.

The aims and objectives of this study are centered on exploring and understanding the intricate process of novice EFL teachers' professional identity formation in the specific context of Vietnam. The primary aim is to investigate how these novice teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities as they embark on their teaching careers. This research seeks to uncover the factors that influence their identity formation, with a focus on the challenges, experiences, and support mechanisms that play pivotal roles in this process. Additionally, the study aims to shed light on the evolving nature of novice teachers' professional identities, particularly in the Vietnamese context, where English language teaching and learning have undergone significant growth and change.

The study seeks answers to two following questions:

- 1. How do Vietnamese novice EFL teacher construct and negotiate their professional identity during their teaching practice?*
- 2. What are the key factors that influence the construction of EFL novice teachers' professional identities?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Concept of identity

Identity, a long-debated concept, lacks a precise definition, originally linked to "the self." Rooted in the fundamental question of "who am I?" or "who are you?", it encompasses characteristics maintained through negotiations with social situations or internalized roles. While Bucholtz (2003) sees it tied to socially defined group attributes, Ting-Toomey's (2015) identity negotiation theory emphasizes multifaceted aspects based on self-reflection. Identity is now seen as an ongoing, interpretative process involving personal and sociological facets, interwoven through experiences and continuous reconstruction within social, historical, and cultural contexts.

2. Concept of teacher identity (TI)

Teacher identity, a multifaceted concept, is viewed through visible and invisible domains, aligning with the sociological and personal aspects. The visible domain focuses on teachers' roles

and actions, while the invisible delves into their mental realm of beliefs and emotions. Personal images crucially shape professional identity, guiding teachers' practices. Socially, teacher identity forms through interactions in the teaching community and engagement with classroom practice. It evolves through a dynamic process, influenced by personal experiences, educational background, and societal expectations. Teacher identity involves self-perception, beliefs, values, and practices, shaping pedagogical approaches, relationships, and professional growth (Yazan, 2018). It is not fixed but continually evolves through experiences, reflections, and ongoing engagement in the teaching profession, marked by its dynamic, socially constructed, and evolving nature.

3. Teacher identity and novice English as foreign Language (EFL) teachers

The identity of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers involves how they perceive themselves in non-native English contexts, shaped by language proficiency, cultural competence, pedagogical beliefs, and professional challenges. For novice EFL teachers, this identity evolves through experiences, teacher education, classroom practices, and interactions. Novices draw on their language learning experiences, teacher education programs, and mentoring relationships for identity construction. Challenges in the classroom and societal expectations also impact their professional identity. Despite gaps in understanding newly qualified teachers and the need for holistic research, a case study using narrative inquiry in the Vietnamese context explores the multifaceted and dynamic nature of novice EFL teacher identity formation.

4. Theoretical framework

Teacher identity is a dynamic construct shaped by psychological, linguistic, and sociological factors. Kelchtermans (2009) highlights self-image, self-esteem, motivation, task perception, and future perspective as key factors. Beijaard (2000) adds teaching context, experience, and teacher biography, while Yazan (2018) introduces teacher learning, cognition, participation in communities, contextual factors, teacher biographies, and emotions. Yazan argues that teacher identities and learning constantly interact. The study adopts Maehr's (1986) Personal Investment Theory, proposing four domains influencing novice EFL teacher identity: sense to self, facilitating/inhibiting factors, teacher emotions, and professional goals. This framework acknowledges the internal, social, contextual, and emotional dimensions, emphasizing the ongoing negotiation of identity in the dynamic teaching landscape.

Sense to self refers to the internal dimension of teacher identity. This component entails how teachers perceive themselves in the teaching context. In the complex journey of shaping and affirming their professional identity, teachers navigate a landscape influenced by both facilitating and inhibiting factors. Facilitating factors encompass the social and contextual aspects that play a pivotal role in teacher identity development. These may include mentorship, engagements with students, participation in professional communities, and the influence exerted by their social networks. While facilitating factors contribute positively to the development of professional identity, teachers may also encounter inhibiting factors that challenge their self-concept and growth. These hindrances often arise from external sources, such as shifts in educational policies and the evolving teaching landscape, which can introduce uncertainty and disrupt established practices

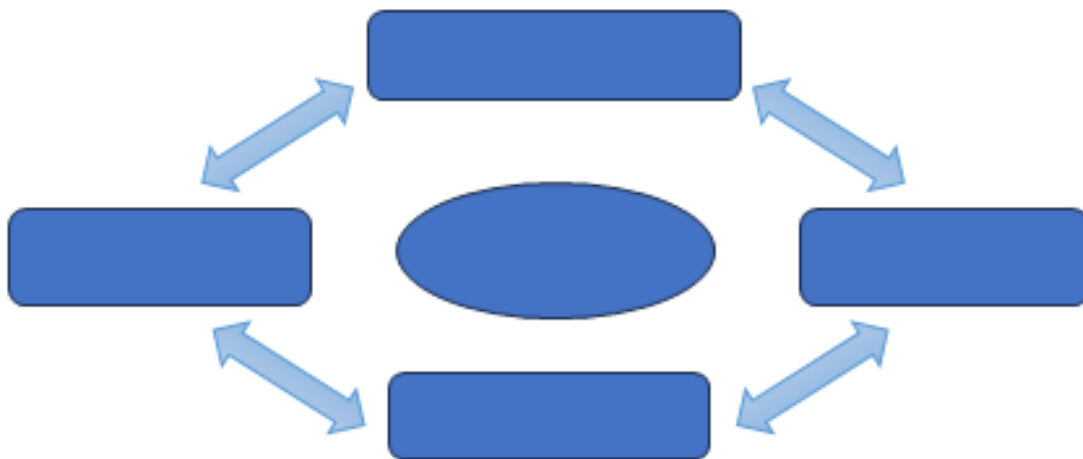


Figure 1. Four domains influencing novice EFL teachers' identity construction

Teacher emotion focuses on the effective connection and personal investment that teachers have as being an EFL teacher. It involves their feelings of attachment, passion, commitment and motivation. Teacher emotion influences teachers' engagement and satisfaction in their roles. The final aspect, professional goals for the future, refers to teachers' personal purpose for teaching and the more concrete personal goals and objectives in teaching (Schutz *et al.*, 2007). As EFL teachers' identity is not a static concept but evolves over time, teachers continuously negotiate their self with social and contextual factors. During this process the four dimensions will mutually affect each other to form teacher identity.

METHODOLOGY

1. Context and samples

This study addresses the identity construction of novice EFL teachers in Hanoi, Vietnam. It was conducted with the participant of five novice EFL teachers working in four different K-12 institutions. Therefore, student teachers or experienced teachers working in other contexts would be beyond the scope.

The research employs a multiple case study design across four Vietnamese K-12 institutions, each representing different contexts and challenges. The institutions include newly established public schools in Hanoi, a high-quality gifted school emphasizing foreign languages, and a private inter-level school. The qualitative research design incorporates a narrative inquiry approach, utilizing essays and interviews for data collection.

Five carefully selected novice EFL teachers participate in the study, meeting specific criteria of having a Bachelor's degree in English or a related field and less than five years of teaching experience. The data collection instruments include narrative essays and semi-structured interviews. Narrative essays guide participants through reflective journeys, while interviews facilitate dynamic conversations, addressing the second research question. The data collection procedure involves participant recruitment, essay writing, two rounds of interviews, and data analysis.

2. Data analysis process

Thematic analysis is employed for data analysis, involving six phases from familiarization to theme identification. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach guides this process (Figure 2).

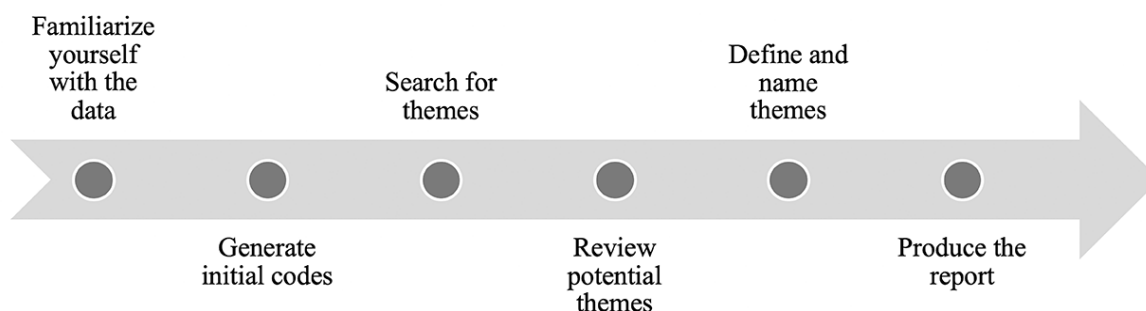


Figure 2. Braun and Clarke's (2006) Six-Phase Guide to thematic analysis

The analysis includes both narrative essays and interview transcripts, exploring teacher identity dimensions such as cognition, emotion, facilitating factors, and professional goals for the future. Reflexivity is acknowledged, considering the researcher's status as a novice EFL teacher and prior acquaintance with some participants. Ethical considerations involve informed consent, pseudonyms for participant confidentiality, and secure data storage.

Overall, the research design aligns with the study's focus on the Vietnamese context, contributing contextually grounded insights into the construction of professional identities among novice EFL teachers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Novice EFL teachers' identity negotiate process

The study delves into the intricate process of shaping professional identity among novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Vietnam, drawing valuable insights from deep analyses of their experiences, motivations, and perspectives.

One central theme emerging from the narratives and interviews is the influence of family legacy and cultural values on the construction of professional identity. For several teachers, the decision to pursue a teaching career is deeply rooted in a family tradition of valuing education. Family support and encouragement not only played a significant role in their career choice but also fostered a strong motivation to continue the legacy. Family gatherings transformed into impromptu lessons, contributing to the development of a profound sense of vocation among the novice teachers.

Another crucial factor in professional identity construction is the participants' passion for learning and knowledge sharing. Many teachers expressed a deep love for reading, writing, and literature, which significantly contributed to their decision to become educators. This passion fueled their motivation to view education as a key to empowerment and transformation, positioning

themselves as catalysts for change. The joy of sharing knowledge and witnessing students' understanding became a driving force in their teaching practice.

Despite diverse backgrounds, all novice teachers reported overwhelmingly fulfilling teaching experiences. Joy and purpose were found in helping students learn and grow, aligning with their aspirations to inspire and empower the next generation. Positive experiences, such as students excelling in literature, further solidified their commitment. However, they acknowledged challenges, including diverse learning needs and administrative burdens, which could be potential demotivating factors. The first year of teaching often brought a sense of shock as they navigated the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical challenges.

Novice teachers faced challenges independently, but some fortunate ones received support from experienced colleagues or mentors. These interactions were crucial in navigating complexities, providing practical knowledge for professional identity development. Overcoming challenges, adapting, improving skills, and developing resilience shaped their identities as educators.

The narratives highlighted strengths novices bring to the profession, including deep knowledge and passion for subjects, effective communication, adaptability to diverse learning styles, and commitment to fostering critical thinking. They emphasized that an effective teacher should be a guide, mentor, and source of inspiration, highlighting their dedication to creating supportive learning environments.

In terms of professional development, novices focused on short-term goals like providing quality education and adapting teaching methods. Long-term aspirations included further professional development in educational leadership or curriculum design. However, uncertainty about future development orientation was common, stemming from diverse teaching experiences and the evolving nature of education.

While some teachers found passion in specific aspects of teaching and pursued further development in those areas, others opted for additional training in methodologies or language proficiency improvement. The narratives and interviews offer valuable insights into the construction and negotiation of professional identity within the teaching profession, emphasizing the pivotal roles of family legacy, a passion for learning, and a commitment to knowledge sharing. Teachers' experiences, both positive and challenging, contribute significantly to their overall sense of fulfillment and commitment to the profession.

2. Key influential factors

Regarding the essential elements that influence the construction of professional identities among the participants to the current study, there are numerous factors influencing professional identity construction of the teachers.

a. Educational backgrounds and experiences: The teachers often come from diverse educational backgrounds and experiences. Some may have completed specialized teacher training programs, while others may have degrees in unrelated fields. These differences can significantly impact their initial perceptions and preparedness for the teaching profession. Teachers with formal education in language teaching may feel more confident and better equipped to navigate the challenges of EFL instruction.

b. Pedagogical training and development: The level of pedagogical training and professional development that novice teachers receive plays a pivotal role in identity construction. Teachers who have access to comprehensive training programs tend to have a more structured and well-informed approach to teaching. Conversely, those with limited training may initially struggle to establish their teaching identities and seek support to bridge the gap.

c. Teaching environments and school culture: The specific teaching environment and school culture in which the teachers work significantly impact their professional identities. Schools with a supportive and collaborative culture tend to foster positive teacher identities. In contrast, schools with rigid regulations and limited autonomy may challenge teachers' abilities to develop their identities in line with their beliefs and teaching philosophies.

d. Student interactions and feedback: The teachers continuously interact with their students, and these interactions can have a profound influence on identity construction. Positive student feedback and engagement can boost teachers' confidence and reinforce their sense of professional identity. Conversely, challenging student behaviors or disengagement may lead teachers to reevaluate their teaching approaches and adapt their identities accordingly.

e. Colleagues and mentors: Colleagues and mentors play a pivotal role in supporting novice teachers' professional identity construction. Experienced colleagues can provide guidance, share practical insights, and serve as role models. Mentors offer ongoing support and opportunities for reflection, enabling novice teachers to refine their identities and teaching practices.

f. Cultural and societal norms: Cultural and societal norms also influence how novice EFL teachers construct their professional identities. Cultural expectations regarding the role of teachers, classroom management, and teaching methods can shape teachers' approaches to education. Novice teachers must navigate these norms and adapt their identities to align with local expectations.

g. Professional development opportunities: Access to professional development opportunities, such as workshops, conferences, and additional training, can significantly impact the development of novice teachers' professional identities. Teachers who actively seek out and engage in such opportunities tend to have a more expansive and adaptable view of their roles as educators.

h. Self-reflection and adaptation: Self-reflection is a fundamental aspect of professional identity construction. Novice teachers who engage in critical self-reflection are better equipped to adapt and refine their teaching practices and identities. This process of introspection allows teachers to align their actions with their beliefs and values, leading to more authentic and effective teaching.

i. Challenges and resilience: The challenges faced by the teachers, such as managing diverse classrooms, addressing learning difficulties, or overcoming language barriers, can be instrumental in identity development. Teachers who demonstrate resilience in the face of challenges often emerge with a stronger sense of identity and purpose in their teaching careers.

These factors encompass educational backgrounds, pedagogical training, teaching environments, interactions with students and colleagues, cultural norms, professional development opportunities, and personal reflection. The teachers must navigate these influences as they develop their identities within the dynamic context of EFL education. Understanding the multifaceted nature of these key

factors provides valuable insights into the challenges and triumphs experienced by the teachers as they shape their identities as educators. It also highlights the importance of ongoing support, mentorship, and professional development to facilitate the growth and adaptation of novice teachers' professional identities. Ultimately, the construction of professional identities among the teachers is an ongoing journey of self-discovery and growth within the dynamic landscape of language education.

It is obvious that the narratives and interviews of five novice EFL teachers have uncovered some common patterns and unique aspects that have emerged during their professional identity formation. One common pattern is the profound influence of family background and values on their career choices. While their families did not necessarily have direct ties to the field of education, they shared a strong commitment to the value of knowledge, intellectual curiosity, and a robust work ethic. This influence led these educators to choose teaching as a profession, and it cultivated a deep respect for the teaching vocation. The bond with family values served as a driving force, guiding their path to becoming educators.

Besides, all five novice EFL teachers expressed a remarkable passion for learning, reading, writing, and literature. This fervor for intellectual pursuits motivated them to become teachers. They viewed education not merely as a job but as a powerful tool for empowerment and transformation. In their roles as educators, they saw themselves as catalysts for change, believing in the profound impact they could have on the lives of their students. This shared passion for learning and knowledge sharing formed a common thread among these teachers.

The initial year of teaching also posed significant challenges for all five teachers. These challenges included dealing with uncooperative students, meeting parental expectations, and navigating administrative demands. These hurdles were instrumental in shaping their early experiences and played a central role in the construction of their professional identities. Although these difficulties were substantial, the teachers found moments of triumph that solidified their dedication to the teaching profession. This common pattern underscores the transformative nature of the challenges faced during their initial teaching experiences.

Moreover, each of the novice EFL teachers reported overwhelmingly fulfilling experiences in their role as educators. They derived joy and a deep sense of purpose from helping students learn and grow. These educators emphasized the transformative power of education, highlighting its potential to bring about positive change in the lives of students. This shared sense of fulfillment and the belief in the significance of their work as teachers created a sense of unity among them.

In the pursuit of constructing their professional identities, some of the novice teachers sought and received valuable support and guidance from experienced colleagues or mentors. This mentorship played a pivotal role in their development as educators, providing insights and practical knowledge in areas such as classroom management, curriculum development, and student engagement. The influence of mentors and experienced colleagues on their teaching practices and professional identity was a common factor among these educators.

While the common patterns align with the existing conceptual framework for understanding the professional identity formation of novice EFL teachers, there are unique aspects in the experiences of these teachers:

One unique aspect that stands out is the depth of the influence of family values. While the conceptual framework may have anticipated some influence from family background, the narratives of these novice teachers reveal that family values played a particularly significant role in shaping their career choices. The emphasis on knowledge, intellectual curiosity, and a strong work ethic within their families served as a powerful driving force that extended beyond what might have been expected.

The teachers demonstrated resilience and adaptability in response to the challenges they encountered during their initial year of teaching. While adaptability might have been a factor considered in the conceptual framework, the extent to which these educators employed resilience and resourcefulness to overcome obstacles was a notable finding. Their ability to adapt and innovate in the face of adversity marked their professional identity development.

An aspect not explicitly outlined in the conceptual framework is the uncertainty expressed by many novice teachers about their long-term development orientations. This uncertainty raises questions about the ongoing evolution of their professional identities. It suggests that the framework could be expanded to account for the evolving nature of teaching experiences and the diverse directions in which novice teachers may choose to grow in their careers.

To conclude, the construction and negotiation of professional identities among novice EFL teachers are intricate processes shaped by diverse backgrounds, family values, challenges, and the fulfillment they derive from their work. The impact of family values, resilience, and adaptability, as well as the uncertainty about long-term goals, indicate that the process of professional identity formation among novice EFL teachers is a dynamic and evolving one. This exploration of their experiences emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of their professional development.

CONCLUSION

The research on the professional identity development of novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Vietnam reveals a multifaceted journey influenced by family backgrounds, personal values, educational experiences, and the challenges faced during their initial teaching year. The study emphasizes the holistic nature of professional identity formation, extending beyond pedagogical skills to encompass resilience, adaptability, and a deep sense of purpose. Mentorship, peer collaboration, and supportive school environments are identified as crucial components for empowering novice teachers.

The implications of the study highlight the transformative potential for teacher education and support. It stresses the need for comprehensive support structures, including mentorship programs, peer collaboration initiatives, and nurturing school cultures. School administrators are recognized as pivotal in creating inclusive environments, and a collective effort from educational stakeholders is urged to reshape the landscape of teacher education.

However, the study acknowledges limitations, including contextual and cultural specificity, reliance on self-reported data, and a focus on the novice teachers without incorporating perspectives of students and parents. It suggests future research should explore diverse international contexts,

delve into long-term career development, examine pedagogical approaches, and actively involve novice teachers in the research process.

In conclusion, the research journey provides valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of novice EFL teacher identity formation, offering transformative opportunities for teacher education and the broader educational ecosystem. The study calls for ongoing inquiry and addresses practical concerns, paving the way for future research to deepen our understanding of this complex landscape, encompassing diverse international contexts, long-term career development, innovative pedagogical approaches, and the role of technology in teacher identity formation.

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