



Pre-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' identity construction during teaching practicum in Vietnam

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Abstract

This study explores how pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Vietnam construct their professional identities during teaching practicum. Framed within sociocultural theory (SCT), it examines both the factors that mediate their identity development and the processes through which identity is negotiated. Data were collected from five pre-service teachers through reflective journals written over two months and two rounds of interviews. Using holistic and categorical narrative analysis, the study found that teacher identity was mediated by mentors, students, peers, and institutional regulations, while also shaped by emotional experiences, reflection, and agency. Contradictions between university-based pedagogy and classroom realities emerged as central to identity negotiation. The study contributes theoretically by highlighting the longitudinal development of identity across practicum stages and practically by offering insights into designing teacher education programs that integrate formal regulations with supportive mentoring, peer collaboration, and opportunities for reflection.

Keywords: *Pre-service teacher identity; sociocultural theory; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); teaching practicum; Vietnam.*

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Introduction

Learning to teach is defined as “learning to think like a teacher, learning to know like a teacher, learning to feel like a teacher, and learning to act like a teacher” (Feiman-Nemser, 2008, p. 698). This conceptualization underscores the multifaceted and developmental nature of becoming a teacher, one that extends beyond the acquisition of technical knowledge to include affective, reflective, and professional dimensions. It highlights that teacher learning is not simply about mastering instructional techniques, but about internalizing values, attitudes, and practices that align with the professional identity of educators.

Identity, as a central construct in teachers’ professional learning, has gained increasing attention in teacher education research, especially in the context of shifting cultural, educational, and policy landscapes in Asia (Huynh & Pretorius, 2024). Understanding how pre-service teachers form their identities during practicum is essential to supporting them in becoming resilient, reflective, and contextually responsive professionals. Prior research has often focused either on structural and institutional dimensions of teacher education (e.g., Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Ngo, 2023) or on discursive and narrative constructions of teacher identity (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2021; Tsui, 2007). That said, the complexity of identity development during teacher education demands inquiry into both the internal processes of meaning-making and the external conditions of practice.

Framed within SCT, this research investigates how Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers navigate and make sense of their professional identities through participation in teaching practicums. In doing so, it highlights the interaction between individual agency and contextual affordances and constraints in shaping identity. The research aims to identify the factors that mediate pre-service teachers’ identity construction and explore how their professional identities develop during the teaching practicum. It answers the following research questions:

1. What factors in the teaching practicum in Vietnam mediate the identity construction of pre-service EFL teachers?
2. How do the pre-service EFL teachers construct their professional identities during the teaching practicum in Vietnamese high schools?

Literature review

Teacher identity as a sociocultural and dynamic construct

Teacher identity has been conceptualized as a dynamic, socially constructed, and continuously evolving process. Recent research in English language education views language teacher identity as developing through dilemmas arising from competing professional expectations and contextual

constraints (Riffo-Salgado, 2024). From a sociocultural perspective, identity is understood as a set of “long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). In the context of teaching, it refers to how individuals make sense of themselves and present themselves within professional settings (Day, 2011), encompassing both self-perception and recognition by others (He & Lin, 2013).

Rather than being a fixed attribute, teacher identity is shaped through participation in social practices and interaction with others across contexts. It is continuously reconstructed as teachers negotiate meanings, roles, and expectations in specific situations (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Prior studies have also highlighted the role of personal histories, such as language learning experiences, in shaping identity trajectories (Tsui, 2007). Narrative reflection and storytelling further enable teachers to interpret their experiences and (re)construct their professional selves (Beijaard et al., 2004).

In teacher education, identity development typically begins during academic study and is further shaped during the practicum, where theoretical knowledge is confronted with classroom realities (Nguyen, 2021). Given its complexity and context-dependence, understanding teacher identity requires examining both the sociocultural conditions in which it is formed and the processes through which individuals make sense of those conditions.

Mediation in sociocultural theory: Social mediators of teacher learning

Within sociocultural theory (SCT), learning and development are fundamentally mediated by social, cultural, and institutional factors (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Mediation refers to how human action is shaped through interaction with tools, artefacts, and other people within specific contexts (Huong & Bui, 2021). In teacher education, mediational means include mentor feedback, peer collaboration, classroom practices, institutional regulations, and broader sociocultural expectations.

In the context of teaching practicum, these mediational factors function as both resources and constraints that shape pre-service teachers’ learning experiences. For instance, mentors provide guidance, modeling, and evaluative feedback, while students’ responses influence classroom dynamics and teachers’ sense of legitimacy. Institutional structures such as school norms, curriculum requirements, and national regulations further frame what is considered appropriate teaching practice.

In Vietnam, pre-service teachers’ learning is embedded within broader sociocultural and institutional contexts, including university training programs, local school environments, and national educational policies (Nguyen, 2021). This aligns with recent research in Vietnam, which

shows that professional development and learning activities of English language educators are deeply mediated by institutional structures, collaborative practices, and sociocultural contexts (Huong, 2023; Huong et al., 2024). These contexts do not determine identity directly; rather, they create the conditions within which teachers interpret their experiences and engage in professional practice. Thus, mediation is conceptualized in this study as external sociocultural influences and resources that shape pre-service teachers' experiences, including interactions with mentors, students, peers, and institutional structures. External influences function as an analytical category that originates in the social environment rather than remaining exclusively external to the learner. In other words, mediation is not merely "outside" the individual; it is gradually internalised over time.

Agency in sociocultural theory: Teachers' agentic engagement with learning

In contrast to mediation, which refers to external conditions, agency is understood as an internal, contextually achieved capacity through which individuals interpret and respond to those conditions. While mediation shapes the conditions of teacher learning, agency refers to how they actively interpret, negotiate, and act upon mediational conditions within specific contexts. Agency is defined as "the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63), but it is not an inherent individual trait. Rather, it is achieved within specific sociocultural contexts and is closely tied to the opportunities and constraints available in those contexts (Priestley et al., 2012).

From this perspective, agency is relational and context-dependent. It emerges through interaction between individuals' intentions and the structures, tools, and social relationships that mediate their actions (Lasky, 2005). In teaching practicum, pre-service teachers exercise agency when they interpret feedback, adapt pedagogical strategies, manage classroom challenges, and negotiate their positioning within school communities.

Importantly, agency should be distinguished from identity. While identity concerns how teachers understand and position themselves professionally, agency refers to what they do in response to contextual conditions. Through agentic actions such as reflection, adaptation, and decision-making, pre-service teachers actively engage with their learning environments and shape their professional development.

The interplay between mediation, agency, and identity construction

It is important to distinguish clearly between mediation and agency. Mediation refers to the external sociocultural forces and structures that shape action, whereas agency refers to the individual's capacity to respond to, appropriate, or transform these conditions. Although interrelated, the two constructs operate at different analytical levels: mediation frames possibilities for action, while agency determines how those possibilities are taken up. Despite being analytically distinct, mediation and agency are dialectically interconnected in the process of identity construction. Mediation provides the sociocultural conditions that shape teachers' experiences, while agency determines how individuals interpret, negotiate, and respond to those conditions. Teacher identity emerges from this dynamic interplay, rather than from either process alone.

In teaching practicum, pre-service teachers are simultaneously shaped by contextual factors and actively engaged in constructing meanings about themselves as teachers. For example, mentor feedback, student interactions, and institutional expectations may influence how teachers perceive their roles, but these influences are taken up differently depending on teachers' interpretations, intentions, and responses. In this sense, identity is neither imposed by context nor entirely self-determined; it is co-constructed through ongoing negotiation between structure and action (Miller, 2009; Morgan & Clarke, 2011).

This perspective highlights identity construction as a process of participation, negotiation, and transformation within communities of practice. It also underscores the importance of examining both mediational factors (external conditions) and agentic processes (internal responses) in understanding how pre-service teachers develop professionally.

Teacher identity construction in practicum contexts

Teaching practicum represents a critical site for identity development, where pre-service teachers engage directly with the realities of classroom practice. The practicum has been identified as a critical site where pre-service teachers negotiate tensions between university-based ideals and classroom realities, often leading to identity dilemmas and adaptive pedagogical responses (Riffo-Salgado, 2024). During the practicum period, they interact with multiple actors, including mentors, students, peers, and institutional structures, all of which mediate their experiences. At the same time, they exercise agency by adapting to challenges, reflecting on their practices, and negotiating their roles within the school environment.

Previous studies have shown that practicum experiences often involve tensions between theoretical knowledge acquired at university and the practical demands of classroom teaching (Sang, 2023; Xu, 2025). These tensions can lead to identity struggles, particularly when pre-service teachers

find it difficult to position themselves as authoritative and competent professionals (Aktekin & Celebi, 2020). Similarly, institutional constraints, such as limited autonomy or rigid classroom norms, may restrict opportunities for experimentation and influence identity development (Goktepe & Kunt, 2021).

Research in Vietnam has also emphasized the contextual and dynamic nature of teacher identity. Studies adopting activity theory and discourse-analytic approaches have shown how identity is shaped through tensions, emotions, and interactions within specific sociocultural settings (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023; Nhung, 2019; Tran & Taylor-Leech, 2023). These studies highlight that identity is continuously reconstructed through engagement with institutional structures, social relationships, and personal experiences.

Research gaps

Despite these contributions, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature on pre-service EFL teacher identity has been conducted in contexts outside Vietnam, limiting its applicability to the Vietnamese educational setting. Second, while prior studies have examined identity using various theoretical frameworks, fewer have explicitly analyzed the interaction between mediational factors and teacher agency during teaching practicum. Third, existing research often treats identity and agency as overlapping constructs, without clearly distinguishing their analytical roles.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a sociocultural perspective to examine how external mediational factors and internal agentic processes interact in shaping pre-service EFL teachers' identity construction during teaching practicum in Vietnam. It employs an analytical distinction between mediation (external conditions) and agency (internal processes) to examine their interaction in identity formation.

Research methodology

Research design

This study employs a narrative case study design to explore layers of meaning in pre-service teachers' identity construction. Narrative inquiry is appropriate because teacher identities are shaped discursively through stories and reflections (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Kılıç & Cinkara, 2020; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Narratives provide access to introspective reflections on learning-to-teach experiences and the complex factors influencing identity development.

Participants

The study involves five female pre-service English teachers from a Vietnamese university who undertook a two-month teaching internship at five high schools in one province as required in their final year in their bachelor's program in English language teaching. All the participants consented to take part in the research. Their English proficiency ranged from B2 to C1 level in the CEFR framework. In the second semester of their last year, they were sent to some urban and suburban high schools in a central city in Vietnam for a teaching practicum. The participants were given pseudonyms (Nicole, Queen, Theresa, Tira, and Vivian) in the study for data analysis.

Data collection

Data were collected from various sources. The first comes from the document review of internship requirements from the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and those given by the university at the research site. Second, pre-service teachers' reflective journals and narrative accounts of stories/incidents related to identity construction, guided by the tenets of SCT, were also used. Reflective writing tasks followed approaches used in prior studies (Delgado et al., 2020; Lutovac & Assunção Flores, 2021). For example, the participants were asked to reflect on their understandings of success, failure, and classroom challenges, and how these shaped their emerging teacher identities. Over the course of two months, each participant wrote five journal entries, except one (Nicole), who prepared only four due to her busy workload in the last week of the practicum. Guiding questions were given to the participants to write in English or Vietnamese, and the complete journal entries were submitted to the researcher. The entries in Vietnamese were translated into English for data analysis. Third, in-depth interviews were conducted after the first week of their teaching practicum, and at the end of the internship to capture changes in identity construction. The interview questions were derived from SCT to probe mediating tools, interactions, and community engagement. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and was answered in either English or Vietnamese and the transcripts were translated into English for data analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis employed a combination of holistic and categorical narrative approaches (Lieblich et al., 1998) to capture both the overall trajectories and recurring patterns of pre-service teachers' identity construction. In the holistic phase, each participant's journals and interviews were read as a complete narrative to understand the development of identity over time. In the categorical phase, the data were coded to identify recurring themes related to identity formation, such as professional

positioning, emotional responses, pedagogical practices, and identity tensions. Narrative accounts were also organized chronologically to trace changes across the pre-practicum, practicum, and post-practicum stages (He & Lin, 2013).

This analytical framework was applied to two data sources: reflective journals and interviews. For the journals, holistic reading was first conducted to identify each participant's developmental trajectory, followed by categorical coding to capture cross-case patterns. The coding scheme was informed by sociocultural theory, emphasizing both mediational factors (e.g., mentor guidance, student interaction, institutional context) and agentic processes (e.g., reflection, emotional responses, adaptation). Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate each category, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Journal coding.

Category	Definition	Example from journal entry
Professional Positioning & Authority	How pre-service teachers assert, contest, or renegotiate their authority and positioning as 'teacher' versus 'peer'.	"The students called me 'sister' instead of 'teacher'. I corrected them. I said, "Please call me teacher, not sister." (Nicole, Story 1)
Emotional Responses to Practicum	Emotional experiences (e.g., anxiety, joy, pride, frustration) as mediational forces shaping identity development.	"My heart was pounding, and I felt my face turn red with anxiety in the first lesson" (Queen, Story 2)
Pedagogical Practices & Preparation	Efforts in lesson planning, material design, and teaching practices that mediated identity by linking theory to classroom realities.	"I put a lot of effort into lesson preparation, learning how to create a timer and choose a consistent color theme for the slides." (Theresa, Story 2)
Classroom Management & Student Engagement	Strategies for managing behavior, sustaining attention, and responding to challenges in participation, showing how agency was enacted.	"I was devastated, but eventually I found inner strength and fought through the situation." (Tira, Story 3)
Identity Tensions & Negotiations	Moments of conflict between imagined, ideal, and enacted teacher selves; negotiation of contradictions across contexts.	"I was surprised and couldn't accept it because I think it was against the 'natural way of receiving languages.'" (Vivian, Story 3)

Reflections on Teacher Role & Growth	Self-reflections on growth, transformation, and envisioning the teacher role as an evolving professional identity.	“After my very first lesson, I felt it greatly contributed to building my identity as an English teacher.” (Nicole, Story 2)
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A similar procedure was applied to the interview data. The two interviews for each participant were analyzed holistically to capture changes in identity over time, and then coded categorically to identify themes related to mediation and agency. The resulting categories reflect how identity was shaped through interaction with social actors and institutional contexts, as well as through participants’ reflective and adaptive responses. Representative quotations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Interview coding.

Category	Definition	Direct quote from interview
Influence of Mentors and Supervisors	Guidance, feedback, and modeling by mentors as key mediating tools shaping identity and pedagogical practice.	“The supervisors showed me how to apply theory into practice, what students liked and what was difficult for them.” (Queen, Interview 1)
Role of High School Students	Students’ responses, cooperation, and behavior as mediators of authority, recognition, and identity.	“At first, the students called me ‘sister’, but after I became stricter, they started calling me ‘teacher’.” (Nicole, Interview 2)
Tension between Theory and Practice	Negotiation of contradictions between university-taught pedagogy and classroom realities.	“Not all techniques from university can be applied in high school, like group discussions that often turned into unrelated talks.” (Tira, Interview 1)
Professional Appearance and Behavior	The role of dress, demeanor, and enacted professionalism in mediating recognition as a teacher.	“Appearance and demeanor are the first factors that affect how students perceive and cooperate with the teacher.” (Nicole, Interview 2)
Emotional Growth and Adaptability	Identity development through emotional struggles, resilience, and building relational trust.	“In the beginning, I thought identity was only about appearance and teaching style, but now I see it also means

		connecting with students.” (Theresa, Interview 2)
Vision of Future Teacher Self	Aspirations and imagined professional identities that guide current actions and meaning-making.	“An English teacher must not only teach but also inspire students and design engaging lessons despite challenges.” (Vivian, Interview 2)

To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the data analysis, inter-coder reliability was established. After the initial round of coding, a second researcher independently coded a subset of the data, approximately 25% of the total corpus, consistent with recommendations in qualitative research for balancing feasibility and representativeness (Campbell et al., 2013). The two sets of codes were then compared, and intercoder agreement was calculated using Cohen’s Kappa coefficient, which reached $\kappa = .82$, indicating a strong level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Discrepancies were subsequently discussed and resolved, leading to refinements of the coding framework.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study in the form of five individual cases: Nicole, Queen, Theresa, Tira, and Vivian. Each case is structured to address the two research questions: (1) What factors in the teaching practicum in Vietnam mediate the identity construction of pre-service English teachers? and (2) How do the pre-service EFL teachers construct their professional identities during the teaching practicum in Vietnamese high schools? The analysis draws on journals (Stories 1- 4 for Nicole and Stories 1- 5 for Queen, Theresa, Tira, and Vivian) and interviews (two rounds). A cross-case comparison is provided at the end to highlight common patterns and unique differences.

Case 1: Nicole

Nicole’s identity was mediated by both her lecturers at her university and her high school students. She wrote: “When I observed my professors, I admired their strictness and knowledge, which shaped my idea of how a teacher should be” (Nicole, Story 1). In the practicum, student recognition strongly influenced her sense of identity: “If the students were happy and understood the lesson, I felt even more excited and joyful” (Nicole, Interview 1). Her authority was challenged early when students addressed her as “chị” (sister) instead of “cô” (teacher): “The students called me ‘sister’

instead of ‘teacher’. I corrected them: I said, ‘Please call me Teacher, not Sister’” (Nicole, Story 1). She also highlighted contextual challenges in Story 4: “Sometimes the students were noisy and distracted, and I had to learn to manage my emotions and redirect them” (Nicole, Story 4). These experiences reflect how cultural practices, student responses, and classroom management mediated her identity.

Nicole’s identity construction involved negotiating between preparation and classroom realities. She reflected: “After my very first lesson, I felt it greatly contributed to building my identity as an English teacher” (Nicole, Story 2). Her journals show growing confidence: “When I prepared lessons carefully, the students listened more, and I felt I was in control” (Nicole, Story 3). By Story 4, she expressed resilience: “Even though I was nervous, I reminded myself to stay calm and professional in front of the students” (Nicole, Story 4). She acknowledged transformation in her interview: “At first I thought identity came from what we learn at university, but I realized it is also about how students see me” (Nicole, Interview 2). Her identity was thus constructed through reflective adaptation, emotional regulation, and recognition from students.

Case 2: Queen

Queen emphasized her personal characteristics such as patience, calmness, and communication skills as important mediators: “A teacher needs patience and calmness. Without them, it’s hard to handle students” (Queen, Interview 1). Her journals show how practicum realities shaped her: “Four students dropped out of school during the semester. It made me realize the difficulties teachers face beyond teaching” (Queen, Story 1). She also struggled with classroom management: “I ran out of time in the first reading lesson because I couldn’t manage the class effectively” (Queen, Story 2). In Story 4, she added: “Some students ignored my instructions, and I had to learn to be more assertive” (Queen, Story 4). Finally, Story 5 reflected her learning from mentors: “The mentor reminded me to always maintain discipline while being friendly. This shaped how I thought about being a teacher” (Queen, Story 5).

Queen’s identity was constructed by learning to cope with unpredictability and reflecting on her growth. She wrote: “I learned that I need to design lessons flexibly, because students may not always react as expected” (Queen, Story 3). She reflected in Story 4: “At first I felt powerless when students resisted, but I learned to adjust my tone and body language” (Queen, Story 4). By Story 5, she noted: “I realized I had become calmer and more confident. I could see myself as a real teacher now” (Queen, Story 5). Her interviews reinforce this growth: “At first I was very nervous, but after each lesson I felt more confident and more like a teacher” (Queen, Interview 2). Through adaptation, reflection, and feedback, Queen’s identity evolved toward resilience and adaptability.

Case 3: Theresa

Theresa considered patience and persistence key to identity: “Becoming a teacher is about patience, persistence, and constant self-improvement” (Theresa, Interview 1). Her mentor mediated her authority: “Students only respected me when I was given real responsibility by the mentor” (Theresa, Story 1). She also noted in Story 3: “When I was tired, the students’ energy helped me push through, reminding me why I wanted to be a teacher” (Theresa, Story 3). In Story 4, she emphasized support from peers: “Discussing lesson plans with my classmates gave me new ideas and confidence” (Theresa, Story 4). Story 5 highlighted her growing independence: “By the last week, I didn’t need as much guidance. I felt more in control” (Theresa, Story 5).

Theresa constructed her identity through reflection, responsibility, and persistence. She described: “After two weeks of preparation, I felt that the grammar lesson greatly contributed to my growth as a teacher” (Theresa, Story 2). Her journals show increasing resilience: “Even when I felt exhausted, I tried to stay positive and perform as a teacher should” (Theresa, Story 3). By Story 4, she wrote: “I started to see myself more as a teacher than a student” (Theresa, Story 4). Her Story 5 confirmed this shift: “I was proud of how I managed the class on my own. It felt like I had grown into the role” (Theresa, Story 5). She concluded: “I used to doubt myself, but by the end of the practicum I realized I could handle both discipline and teaching” (Theresa, Interview 2). Her identity was thus constructed through resilience, peer collaboration, and progressive confidence.

Case 4: Tira

Tira emphasized that teacher identity involved more than appearance: “Teacher identity is not only how I look, but also how I speak, behave, and handle pedagogical situations” (Tira, Interview 1). Her mentors mediated her learning, particularly in bilingual instruction: “I realized I had to balance using English and Vietnamese to manage the class effectively” (Tira, Interview 1). Her journals highlight her opportunities: “Leading the debate competition game made me feel like a real teacher” (Tira, Story 2). In Story 4, she described feedback as critical: “My mentor’s comments made me realize the importance of eye contact and body language” (Tira, Story 4). By Story 5, she reflected: “I understood that being a teacher is not just teaching knowledge but also being a role model” (Tira, Story 5).

Tira constructed her identity through preparation, feedback, and performance. She wrote: “I spent hours practicing my listening lesson. When I finally taught it, I felt I was truly a teacher” (Tira, Story 3). By Story 4, she noted: “Each time I adjusted something like my slides, my tone, my posture, I became more confident” (Tira, Story 4). Her Story 5 reflection shows transformation: “I felt more responsible and aware of the image I projected to students” (Tira, Story 5). Her interview confirmed this: “Each time I taught, I adjusted based on feedback from mentors and students”

(Tira, Interview 2). Her identity formation was a process of agentic engagement, reflective adjustment, and adopting professionalism.

Case 5: Vivian

Vivian described identity as reflective and contextually mediated. She recalled: “I was surprised when my mentor scolded a student so harshly; it was different from what I had imagined at university” (Vivian, Story 1). Her peers mediated her growth: “Sharing experiences with classmates made me realize we faced the same struggles” (Vivian, Story 2). In Story 3, she reflected on practice: “I wanted to be more creative, but the school rules limited my ideas” (Vivian, Story 3). Story 4 highlighted emotional mediation: “I felt discouraged when my lesson failed, but my classmates encouraged me to try again” (Vivian, Story 4). Finally, Story 5 revealed her growing self-awareness: “I realized that identity is not fixed; it changes depending on context and experience” (Vivian, Story 5).

Vivian’s identity construction involved reconciling ideals with realities. She noted: “At university, I thought teaching was only about knowledge and creativity. In high school, I realized it was also about discipline and authority” (Vivian, Interview 2). Her journals demonstrate this negotiation: “I wanted to adopt a stricter classroom persona while still keeping student-centeredness in mind” (Vivian, Story 3). By Story 4, she showed resilience: “I decided not to give up after a failed lesson but to learn from it” (Vivian, Story 4). Her Story 5 reinforced her reflective stance: “I saw identity as a continuous process, not a final product” (Vivian, Story 5). Her construction of identity was marked by negotiation, resilience, and continuous reflection.

Cross-case comparison

Across the five cases, several mediating factors were consistently identified. University training provided theoretical foundations, while mentor teachers served as critical mediators, sometimes positively by offering guidance and at other times negatively by modeling practices that contradicted student teachers’ ideals. High school students shaped the pre-service EFL teacher identity through their responses, cooperation, or resistance. Institutional and cultural contexts influenced expectations, especially regarding discipline, authority, and formality. The extended evidence from stories 4 and 5 highlights additional mediators such as peer collaboration, emotional struggles, and increased independence in later practicum stages. In terms of processes, Nicole and Theresa emphasized authority and recognition; Queen highlighted adaptability; Tira constructed identity through preparation, feedback, and visible performance; and Vivian underscored negotiation between ideals and realities. Collectively, these findings show that identity negotiation

is dynamic and longitudinal, developing across multiple practicum stages through mediation, contradictions, and agentic adaptation.

A further layer of analysis reveals differences between urban and suburban school contexts as distinct mediational conditions shaping identity construction. In suburban schools (e.g., Queen and Vivian), the participants reported greater challenges related to student disengagement, limited motivation, and classroom management, which mediated their identities toward developing resilience, adaptability, and authority. For instance, students' lack of interest in English and behavioral issues required these pre-service teachers to exercise stronger classroom control and emotional regulation. In contrast, the participants in urban schools (e.g., Nicole and Theresa) experienced relatively higher levels of student responsiveness and institutional support, which enabled them to focus more on pedagogical refinement, lesson design, and professional confidence. These differences suggest that school context functions as a mediational layer influencing both the challenges encountered and the forms of agency enacted by pre-service teachers.

These findings demonstrate that pre-service English teachers' identity construction is deeply mediated by practicum contexts, institutional structures, and social interactions, while also involving agency, reflection, and negotiation of contradictions. The five cases highlight both commonalities and individual variations in how pre-service teachers experienced their internships. In the following discussion, these findings will be interpreted in relation to existing literature and SCT to draw out theoretical and pedagogical implications.

Discussion

This study investigated how pre-service EFL teachers in Vietnam construct their professional identities during teaching practicum. Framed within SCT (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991), the analysis revealed that identity construction is a dynamic process mediated by contextual factors, social interactions, and individual agency. By examining longitudinal data from journals and interviews across five cases, the study provides insights into both the mediational factors influencing identity and the processes through which identity is enacted and negotiated. This discussion relates the findings to the existing literature and theoretical framework, highlights new contributions, and positions the study within the broader field of language teacher education.

First, the findings demonstrate that pre-service teachers' identity construction was mediated by multiple interacting factors, including mentors, students, peers, and institutional contexts. Consistent with Nguyen (2021), the practicum was a critical site where professional identity was shaped by both formal and informal influences. Mentor teachers played a dual role as mediators: some provided valuable guidance and feedback (as seen in Queen's and Tira's experiences), while others modeled practices that contradicted pre-service teachers' ideals (as in Vivian's account of

strict classroom discipline). These findings echo Morgan and Clarke's (2011) and Miller's (2009) argument that identity is negotiated within social and institutional contexts, often involving tension and struggle. Additionally, the study's findings suggest that differences between urban and suburban school contexts function as distinct mediational environments, shaping the challenges pre-service teachers encounter and the forms of agency they enact.

Second, the regulatory framework of the Vietnamese MOET (Decision No. 36/2003/QĐ-BGDĐT, 2003) shaped the structure of these practicums by formalizing roles and responsibilities for teacher training institutions, departments of education, host schools, and mentor teachers. At the research site, the guidelines required student teachers to engage in both observation and practice, to take responsibility for lesson planning, class management, and extracurricular activities, and to undergo evaluation weighted across observation (20%), teaching (50%), and class teacher duties (30%). These formal structures provided a consistent framework for practicum experiences. However, this study shows that informal mediators such as recognition by students, peer collaboration, and the emotional challenges of teaching played an equally critical role in shaping identity, beyond what the regulations prescribed.

Third, high school students were also central mediators of identity construction. Nicole's experience of being addressed as "sister" instead of "teacher" illustrates how recognition and positioning by students shaped her authority, supporting Lasky's (2005) claim that agency is mediated by social structures. Student cooperation, resistance, and recognition directly influenced teachers' sense of legitimacy, echoing Tsui's (2007) insight that teacher identity is tied to classroom interaction. Peer collaboration was another significant mediator, especially in later stories where Theresa and Vivian emphasized learning from classmates. This extends the findings of Kavrayici (2020) and Kılıç and Cinkara (2020) by showing that peer interactions within practicums are not peripheral but central to identity construction. Finally, institutional regulations and cultural expectations such as discipline and formality were important structural mediators, aligning with Tran and Taylor-Leech's (2023) study of how reform pressures reshape identity.

In addition, one of the challenges stemmed from the LTE programme's structure and instruction, which, at times, failed to consider contextual realities, leaving pre-service teachers to choose between concentrating on disciplinary knowledge and addressing school-specific demands. This tension reflects a broader disconnect between theoretical preparation and classroom practice. This finding resonates with Huynh and Pretorius (2024), who argue that teacher identity development is closely tied to engagement in pedagogical environments and the extent to which teacher education programmes provide clear connections between theory, practice, and professional trajectories.

Overall, the cases illustrate identity construction as a dynamic process of negotiation, reflection, and adaptation. Pre-service EFL teachers moved from uncertainty to greater confidence, echoing Feiman-Nemser's (2008) conception of learning to teach as a developmental process of thinking,

feeling, and acting like a teacher. Queen and Theresa highlighted resilience and persistence, while Nicole emphasized authority and recognition. Tira foregrounded preparation and feedback, and Vivian underscored the negotiation between ideals and realities. Together, these findings align with SCT's emphasis on mediation (Solari & Ortega, 2022) and demonstrate how identity is constantly reconstructed through interaction with mentors, students, and peers.

Contradictions between theory and practice were a recurring theme. Tira noted that not all university-taught methods were effective in high school classrooms, reflecting tensions between institutional knowledge and classroom realities. This confirms findings by Sang (2023) and Xu (2025) that identity crises often emerge when theory is confronted with practice. Emotional responses also played a critical role, as seen in Queen's nervousness, Nicole's anxiety, and Vivian's discouragement. These emotions functioned as mediators that motivated adaptation, supporting Nguyen and Ngo's (2023) argument that tensions, emotions, agency, and identity exist in unity. Storytelling and reflection were important tools for identity construction, consistent with Beijaard et al.'s (2004) view that narratives enable teachers to theorize and reshape their professional selves.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it provides a longitudinal perspective by analyzing multiple stories and interviews across the practicum, showing how identity evolved over time rather than at a single point. Second, it highlights the central role of student recognition in mediating authority, a factor underexplored in prior Vietnamese studies (e.g., Nhung, 2019; Tran & Taylor-Leech, 2023). Third, it underscores the importance of peer collaboration and emotional resilience, particularly evident in later practicum stages (participants' stories 4 and 5) as key mediators of identity. Finally, the study illustrates how pre-service EFL teachers in Vietnam negotiated tensions between idealized university-based teaching and the practical demands of high school classrooms, offering an account of identity construction that extends prior work in the region. In doing so, it demonstrates how national regulations (MOET, 2003) set the stage for practicum experiences but cannot fully account for the lived, agentive, and emotional dimensions of identity construction uncovered in this study.

In summary, this study reinforces sociocultural perspectives on identity as mediated, dynamic, and situated, while also offering new insights into the longitudinal development of pre-service teachers' identities in Vietnam. The findings confirm and extend prior research, and point to the importance of recognizing students, peers, and emotions as critical mediators of identity construction. The following conclusion elaborates on the implications, limitations, and directions for further research.

Conclusion

This study examined how pre-service EFL teachers in Vietnam construct their professional identities during teaching practicums. Framed within SCT, the findings showed that identity is mediated by mentors, students, peers, and institutional contexts, and is enacted through reflection, negotiation of contradictions, and the exercise of agency. By analyzing journals and interviews longitudinally, the study highlighted how identity evolves across different practicum stages. The findings suggest important implications for teacher education in Vietnam. While national regulations (MOET, 2003) and institutional guidelines (HUFLIS, 2020) establish formal structures for observation, teaching practice, and class management, this study underscores the need to recognize informal mediators such as student recognition, peer collaboration, and emotional resilience. Programs should provide spaces for reflection, peer learning, and mentor guidance that goes beyond evaluation to include supportive feedback.

The scope of this study was limited to five participants from one institutional context, with data drawn from journals and interviews. While this design provided rich and in-depth insights, further studies could expand the sample, include mentor perspectives, or follow teachers into their early careers to capture identity development over a longer trajectory.

Overall, the study contributes theoretically by showing how SCT can illuminate the interplay of formal regulations, mentor guidance, peer collaboration, student recognition, and emotional experiences in shaping teacher identity during practicums. It extends existing frameworks by emphasizing the longitudinal development of identity across multiple practicum stages, rather than as a static outcome. Practically, the study highlights the importance of designing teacher education programs that balance regulatory requirements with opportunities for reflection, supportive mentoring, and peer learning. By foregrounding the role of students' recognition and emotional resilience as critical mediators, this study offers actionable insights for strengthening pre-service teacher preparation and enhancing the quality of English language education in Vietnam.

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