"Not Fully a Student, Not Fully a Teacher": A Narrative Study of a Pre-service English Teacher's Identity in Project-based Teaching

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This narrative inquiry examines how a pre-service English teacher, Lin (pseudonym), constructed her professional identity while supporting eighth-grade students in a five-week project-based learning (PBL) course in southern China. Drawing on three interviews, five emotion diaries, and classroom observations, the seven-week study traced how emotionally significant moments shaped Lin's sense of becoming a teacher. Four identity positions emerged: tentative beginner, overextended coordinator, supportive collaborator, and boundary negotiator. These identities reflected Lin's shifting emotions as she navigated uncertainty, managed divergent group needs, experienced relational affirmation, and confronted institutional constraints. The findings highlighted the emotionally mediated and contextually situated nature of identity formation and emphasized the need for teacher education programmes to prepare pre-service teachers for the emotional complexity of practice, particularly when implementing PBL in exam-oriented EFL settings.

Keywords: pre-service teacher identity, teacher emotion, project-based learning

Introduction

Teacher professional identity has become a central construct in teacher education research, reflecting how teachers make sense of who they are, what they value, and how they position themselves within institutional contexts (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). For pre-service teachers, identity formation is often unstable and deeply intertwined with emotional experiences, as early field encounters expose them to the realities of schooling that may contrast sharply with pedagogical ideals learned at university (Izadinia, 2013; Flores & Day, 2006). Emotions, ranging from excitement to insecurity, are not simply private reactions. Rather, they function as interpretive lens through which novice teachers understand their emerging place in the profession (Yuan & Lee, 2016).

In recent years, project-based learning (PBL) has gained increasing prominence in English language education. PBL emphasises authenticity, collaboration, and multimodal communication, encouraging learners to produce meaningful artefacts such as videos or performances (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Although PBL is frequently associated with student-centered learning and creativity, its implementation can be demanding for

teachers, particularly novices who must guide open-ended processes while attending to group dynamics, time constraints, and curricular expectations (Grant, 2011).

In EFL contexts such as Chinese schools and universities, these demands are compounded by an exam-oriented culture that often shapes the boundaries of what teachers feel permitted to do in schools (Gong & Gao, 2025). Pre-service teachers navigate not only pedagogical tasks but also expectations to maintain emotional composure and deference to established hierarchies (Tsang, 2011). While after-school programs theoretically offer greater pedagogical flexibility, they remain embedded in the same normative structures that influence teachers' emotional expressions and perceived legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, the present study examined how a pre-service English teacher, Lin (pseudonym), constructed and negotiated her professional identity while supporting eighth-grade students in a five-week after-school English dubbing course. The course required students to work collaboratively in small groups to dub, rehearse, and produce three-minute English dubbing videos. Lin, together with nine other pre-service teachers, served as two small-group tutor. The tutors were responsible for providing pronunciation, intonation, and performance guidance during the dubbing curriculum. This research lasted seven weeks and focused specifically on Lin's emotional experiences as she made sense of her responsibilities, navigated relationships with students and school personnel, and encountered institutional expectations that shaped how she could act or feel permitted to act within the project.

Guided by narrative inquiry, this research explored the processes through which Lin interpreted emotionally significant events and how these interpretations influenced her sense of becoming a teacher. Thus, this research seeks to answer three research questions:

(1) How did Lin's professional identity evolve during the research period?

(2) How did emotions mediate Lin's identity construction?

(3) How did contextual and institutional conditions shape Lin's emotional experience?

By illuminating the processes of identity formation in an authentic school context, the study contributes to a growing body of research that foregrounds emotions as essential and not incidental to pre-service teachers' professional becoming.

Literature Review

Pre-service Teacher Identity as a Negotiated and Evolving Construct

Teacher professional identity is now widely regarded as a central lens for understanding teachers' meaning making and career trajectories. Rather than a fixed attribute, identity has been conceptualised as an ongoing interpretive process in which teachers negotiate personal histories, imagined futures, and contextual demands (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Scholars highlight that identity is relational since teachers make sense of themselves in relation to students, colleagues, institutional structures, and broader discourses about teaching (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

For pre-service teachers, this negotiation is especially fluid. They occupy a hybrid status of neither being fully students nor being fully teachers. Also, the pre-service teachers often needed to reconcile idealized and university-taught notions of "good teaching" with the complex realities they encounter in schools (Izadinia, 2013). Being situated between the roles of student and teacher means that identity formation often becomes a site of tension for pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers may feel unsure of their legitimacy, capabilities, and place

within school hierarchies (Yuan & Lee, 2016). These tensions can either motivate further growth or generate doubts that follow them into early career stages (Flores & Day, 2006).

Teacher Emotion as the Lens Through Which Identity Takes Shape

Research has increasingly acknowledged that teacher emotions are not merely private psychological states but socially structured phenomena shaped by institutional norms, power dynamics, and cultural expectations (Zembylas, 2005). Emotions influence how teachers interpret their experiences, evaluate their competence, and decide whether they belong in the profession (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

Pre-service teachers, in particular, experience emotional changes intensely because they sometimes lack stable repertoires for coping with uncertainty. Feelings of excitement, inadequacy, shame, pride, and frustration often emerge in rapid succession as they confront unfamiliar classroom situations. According to Yuan and Lee's (2016) study, such emotions played a decisive role in shaping whether novices perceive themselves as legitimate teachers. However, existing work largely focused on emotional outcomes without examining how emotions were negotiated within specific instructional contexts. In particular, little is known about how these identity-emotion dynamics unfolds in project-based learning environments.

The concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1984) has been widely used to explain how teachers regulate their emotions to meet institutional expectations. In the Chinese context, these expectations were found to be further shaped by cultural norms that prioritise harmony and rational composure, often encouraging teachers to suppress negative emotions to maintain group cohesion (Tsang, 2011). While such regulation may project professionalism, research also showed that it can create emotional dissonance and identity strain, particularly for pre-service teachers who have not yet developed stable coping repertoires (Ehlert, Grunschel, & Koehler, 2025). However, existing scholarship tends to conceptualise emotional labour in broad institutional terms and offers limited insight into how novices experience and interpret emotional regulation in specific pedagogical settings such as project-based learning.

In addition, recent studies suggest that emotions not only constrain but can also enable teacher agency. Positive emotions such as pride and connection may motivate perseverance or innovation, whereas frustration may push teachers to question restrictive structures (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Yet much of this work examines agency at a general professional level rather than within concrete moments of classroom practice. How pre-service teachers regard emotions as resources or struggles during complex, collaborative tasks like PBL remains insufficiently understood.

Project-based Learning in English Language Education

Project-based learning (PBL) has gained attention for its potential to foster authentic communication, collaboration, and learner autonomy (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Within English language education, PBL is argued to support multimodal literacy, integrate skills development, and enhance motivation, as learners work toward meaningful outcomes such as videos, performances, or digital artefacts (Beckett & Miller, 2006).

However, PBL brings considerable complexity. Teachers must navigate open-ended tasks, scaffold group processes, and balance creativity with curriculum requirements (Grant, 2011). Research noted that teachers, especially novices, may feel uncertain about their role. They were found to be no longer mere transmitters of knowledge but facilitators of dynamic and unpredictable learning processes (Mahasneh & Alwan, 2018). Without adequate support, PBL can become emotionally taxing.

The Chinese school context may add additional layers of challenge. Exam-oriented cultures often prioritise measurable outcomes and standardised procedures, leaving little room for the implementation of PBL (Gong & Gao, 2025). Even when PBL occurs in after-school programmes with ostensibly greater flexibility, teachers may still feel pressured to align with dominant norms, limiting their ability to enact creative pedagogies.

While PBL is increasingly integrated into pre-service teacher education, empirical studies exploring how pre-service teachers emotionally experience PBL in real school settings remain scarce. This gap is particularly salient in EFL contexts, where cultural and institutional expectations may shape novice teachers' pedagogical choices and emotional management.

Methods

This study adopted a narrative inquiry approach to explore how one pre-service English teacher made sense of her identity and emotional experiences during a five-week project-based learning (PBL) course. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited to research that seeks to understand teachers' lived experiences, as it views experience as storied, relational, and situated within specific temporal and institutional landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Rather than treating identity or emotion as static constructs, narrative inquiry enables close examination of how meanings shift as individuals engage with particular events, people, and contexts.

The study was conducted in a public lower-secondary school in southern China that offered an English dubbing school-based curriculum. Fifty-two eighth-grade students participated voluntarily and were organised into groups of four to five. Their final task was to produce an approximately four-minute English dubbing video based on selected film or animation clips. Ten third-year English major students served as pre-service tutors, guiding pronunciation, intonation, and dubbing performance techniques. This article focused on one pre-service teacher, Lin, whose data contained rich emotional descriptions and detailed reflections.

The research lasted seven weeks and data included three semi-structured interviews, five emotion diaries written by Lin, and field notes from five classroom observations by the researcher. The interviews invited Lin to recount emotionally salient incidents, relationships with students and her mentor, and the evolving understandings of her role. Emotion diaries provided immediate accounts of moments that triggered noticeable emotional reactions. Observations offered contextual grounding, capturing group interactions, classroom rhythms, disruptions, and institutional decision-making.

Following narrative inquiry principles (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), data analysis involved chronologically reconstructing Lin's five-week trajectory and identifying episodes that were emotionally meaningful or identity-relevant. Attention was specially paid to how Lin positioned herself and others in her stories, as well as how emotions shaped the interpretation of events. Identity positions were derived iteratively by comparing accounts across data sources and refining interpretations through member checking. Trustworthiness was further enhanced through triangulation and reflexive memoing.

Findings

The finding revealed four interrelated identity positions that Lin inhabited during her participation in the school-based curriculum. These positions were not sequential stages but fluid interpretations shaped by shifting emotions, relational encounters, and contextual constraints.

Tentative Beginner: Stepping Into the Uncertainty of Early Teaching

At the beginning of the curriculum, Lin positioned herself as someone eager yet unsure of her legitimacy as

a teacher. During the first interview, she repeatedly described her status as "not fully a student, not fully a teacher". This ambiguity became emotionally salient during the first class when both of her assigned groups asked how they should begin the dubbing process:

> "They looked at me waiting for direction. I suddenly wondered if I deserved the title 'teacher.'"

Observation notes from Week 2 confirmed this uncertainty since Lin was observed to hover near the groups, offering cautious suggestions and frequently glancing toward the supervising teacher, as if seeking tacit approval.

Her first emotion diary reflected a mix of excitement and self-doubt:

> "I wanted to show confidence, but inside I wasn't sure how to guide them. I kept thinking, 'What if my advice is wrong?'"

This identity position was shaped by vulnerability and a heightened sensitivity to students' perceptions. However, it also opened interpretive space for growth. Rather than viewing her uncertainty solely as a deficit, Lin gradually began to frame it as an inevitable part of learning to teach.

Overextended Coordinator: Balancing Divergent Needs Across Two Assigned Groups

Lin's emotion shifted as she took on a more complex coordinating role at around Week 4. Although the class had 10 tutors supporting 12 groups, the two groups under Lin's care developed at divergent paces and required different forms of support.

One group was highly motivated but prone to disagreements about script choices and voice assignments. Lin often mediated these conflicts:

> "They were enthusiastic, but every decision became an argument. I felt like a referee."

In contrast, her second group lacked confidence and frequently sought reassurance on pronunciation and line delivery, with questions such as "Miss Lin, is this okay?" or "Can you listen again?" (Lin's 3rd emotional diary).

The simultaneous demands of the two groups left Lin emotionally stretched. Her third diary described feeling "pulled in different directions", as each group required immediate attention for very different reasons.

The final interview captured her sense of overload:

> "I thought managing two groups would be easier than managing a class, but PBL doesn't work like that. Both groups needed me at the same time, but in totally different ways."

This period solidified an identity position of overextended coordinator, shaped not by the number of groups but by the emotional and cognitive shifts required to support two contrasting learning trajectories. Yet this experience also pushed Lin to develop practical strategies such as rotating attention systematically, setting small internal deadlines, and prompting peer collaboration to maintain progress without burning out.

Supportive Collaborator: Experiencing Identity Growth Through Shared Accomplishment

As both groups advanced to practice their dubbing tasks, Lin's identity shifted again. She began to see herself less as a manager and more as a collaborative partner in the learning process. Her 4th and 5th diary described a moment when one group invited her to demonstrate a line to model rhythm:

> "I read the line with one student, and we all felt a sense of success when the timing matched. For the first time, I felt like part of their creative process, rather than someone standing outside it."

These relational moments softened the emotional burden of previous weeks. Students increasingly sought her feedback, not out of dependency but genuine respect for her judgment. One student commented:

> "Teacher, your advice helped the timing a lot."

Such recognition generated feelings of pride and emotional fulfillment for Lin. She reflected in her 5th diary:

> "Maybe being a teacher doesn't mean always teaching your students. Maybe it means growing and experiencing with them."

This identity position was constructed through shared accomplishment, interpersonal warmth, and the gradual emergence of mutual trust. The emotional resonance of these moments counterbalanced earlier self-doubt and reinforced her developing sense of professional belonging.

Constrained Boundary Negotiator: Confronting Institutional Limits on Pedagogical Intentions

The final week introduced a new form of emotional tension as institutional constraints became visible. The supervising teacher unexpectedly shortened the final class session due to a school-wide scheduling change, limiting students' final rehearsal time. Lin felt frustrated and powerless:

> "They worked so hard. I wanted them to have a proper final run-through, but suddenly the time was gone."

Her disappointment revealed the institutional boundaries that may shape novice teachers' agency. During the final interview, she articulated this shift:

> "I realised I'm not the one who decides how everything runs. Even when I care about the curriculum, I still have very little control."

Observation notes corroborated her emotional struggle since despite her professional demeanor, she appeared tense and subdued in her interactions with students. These experiences positioned Lin as a constrained boundary negotiator—a pre-service teacher learning to navigate the limits imposed by school structures, administrative decisions, and hierarchical roles.

Discussion

This study traced how a pre-service English teacher, Lin, constructed and negotiated her professional identity during a seven-week dubbing research in a project-based teaching context. Her shifting identities were found to include tentative beginner, overextended coordinator, supportive collaborator, and constrained boundary negotiator. This finding demonstrated that pre-service teacher identity was not linear or predetermined but emerged through emotionally significant encounters, relational dynamics, and institutional conditions. While previous research highlighted emotional vulnerability as a challenge for novices (Flores & Day, 2006; Izadinia, 2013), the present study suggested that vulnerability also operated as a productive interpretive resource. Lin's heightened sensitivity to uncertainty prompted continuous sense-making. This aligned with Yuan and Lee's (2016) finding that emotions shaped how pre-service teachers evaluated their legitimacy. However, the present study differed in showing how this process unfolded. Whereas earlier research largely portrayed emotional vulnerability as undermining novice teachers' confidence, Lin's narrative revealed that uncertainty sometimes encouraged deeper reflection and more deliberate positioning.

Lin's experience as an overextended coordinator further reinforced prior understanding on the complexity of PBL (Grant, 2011), yet the nature of this complexity differed from that described in earlier studies. Rather

than being overwhelmed primarily by task design or workload, Lin struggled with divergent group trajectories, which required rapid shifts in emotional tone and pedagogical attention. This finding has rarely been discussed in prior PBL research, which used to focus on structural challenges rather than the moment-to-moment emotional shifts that arose when pre-service teachers must support multiple groups at once (Tsybulsky & Oz, 2019). The study also showed that PBL heightened both the emotional and organisational pressures placed on pre-service teachers, making their emotional labour more salient. Under these heightened pressures, novice teachers had to draw on various forms of emotional regulation, revealing how they attempted to stay calm during group conflicts, continue supporting students' learning, and present themselves as competent teachers in a public classroom environment (Huang, Wang, & Han, 2024).

Moreover, Lin's experiences underscored how encouragement from students could help steady novice teachers' sense of self as a teacher, echoing research that highlighted the value of student recognition (Yuan & Lee, 2016). Yet Lin's account also suggested that rather than being uniformly empowering, relational affirmation supported her identity only at particular moments and after earlier emotional turbulence had been worked through. In Lin's case, positive interactions strengthened her identity only after she had navigated earlier emotional turbulence, illustrating that affirmation operated developmentally rather than uniformly. Similarly, although institutional constraints have long been acknowledged as shaping teacher emotions (Zembylas, 2005; Gong & Gao, 2025), Lin's account showed how even minor administrative changes could destabilise identity for pre-service teachers whose roles lacked structural authority. This micro-level sensitivity has been insufficiently documented in previous studies focusing mainly on macro-level policy or organisational cultures.

Collectively, these insights underscore the need for teacher education programs to better prepare pre-service teachers for the emotional complexity of practice and to support them in navigating institutional boundaries. While the study offered meaningful insights into identity construction in a PBL context, it was not without limitations. Its reliance on a single participant within a short-term curriculum restricted the breadth of perspectives represented and the range of identity trajectories observable. Future research could therefore follow larger cohorts over longer practicum periods or examine how pre-service teacher identities develop across diverse PBL models and institutional cultures.

Conclusion

This study traced how a pre-service English teacher, Lin, constructed and negotiated her professional identity during a seven-week dubbing research in a project-based learning context. Her shifting identity positions included tentative beginner, overextended coordinator, supportive collaborator, and constrained boundary negotiator. These different identities have demonstrated that pre-service teacher identity is not linear or predetermined but emerges through emotionally significant encounters, relational dynamics, and institutional conditions. The findings add to existing literature by showing that emotional vulnerability can be further explored from the perspective of teacher identity, particularly in contexts where novices occupy partial authority and must learn to navigate uncertainty (Yuan & Lee, 2016). The study also shows that PBL heightens both the emotional and organisational pressures placed on pre-service teachers, making their emotional labour more salient. Under these intensified demands, novices engage in distinct forms of emotional regulation that shed light on how they work to remain composed during conflict, support students' learning, and project professional competence in public classroom settings (Huang et al., 2024).

Moreover, Lin's narrative highlights the stabilising role of relational affirmation and the destabilising effect of institutional unpredictability, suggesting that identity formation unfolds within a broader emotional landscape shaped by school structures and power relations (Gong & Gao, 2025). These insights underscore the need for teacher education programs to better prepare pre-service teachers for the emotional complexity of practice and to support them in navigating institutional boundaries. While the study offers meaningful insights into identity construction in a PBL context, it is not without limitations. Its reliance on a single participant within a short-term curriculum restricts the breadth of perspectives represented and the range of identity trajectories observable. Future research could extend these insights by following larger cohorts over longer practicum periods or by examining how pre-service teacher identities develop across diverse PBL models and institutional cultures.

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