

Exploring Pre-service Teacher Identity Development in Teaching English for Young Learners

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English to young learners presents unique challenges and opportunities, requiring simplicity and clarity in pedagogical methods. This study investigates teaching strategies that emphasize foundational concepts and cater to the distinct cognitive, emotional, and social development needs of young children. Through a qualitative approach utilizing open-ended questionnaires, the research identifies key elements that contribute to effective English language learning in primary school education, especially grade 6. Furthermore, the study explores teacher identity development in the context of international teaching practicums. The findings highlight the critical role of a nuanced and adaptable teaching identity in shaping teaching effectiveness and student engagement in diverse cultural environments. The distinct approaches of two participants demonstrate that successful international teaching requires more than technical proficiency; it also demands a deep understanding of and adaptability to different cultural and educational contexts. By comparing both settings, the research underscores the importance of developing a flexible teacher identity that integrates practical effectiveness with cultural sensitivity. Whether teaching young learners or navigating international environments, teacher identity development emerges as a foundational element in fostering inclusive and engaging learning experiences.

Keywords: English Language Teaching (ELT); Young Learners; Teacher Identity

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to young learners is a dynamic field, continuously evolving with new research and pedagogical advancements. Effective early language instruction is crucial as it significantly impacts students' long-term language proficiency and academic success (Ellis, 2020). Given that young learners have distinct cognitive and developmental needs, educators must adopt strategies that are not only aligned with their stage of language acquisition but also developmentally appropriate (Gibbons, 2021). Foundational practices like interactive storytelling, play-based learning, and the use of age-appropriate materials have been recognized as effective tools for engaging young learners and promoting language acquisition (Ginsburg, 2021; Pinter, 2017). These strategies foster both language development and broader cognitive and social growth in young students.

Despite this understanding, gaps remain in the practical application of these foundational teaching practices. While theoretical frameworks such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983) provide valuable insights into how language is acquired, there is limited empirical evidence on how these theories translate into classroom practices, especially with young learners (Ellis, 2020). Current research tends to focus on general models rather than examining how foundational practices, such as interactive storytelling and play-based learning, are adapted and applied in diverse educational contexts (Ginsburg, 2021; Pinter, 2017).

A critical area often overlooked in research is the subjective experiences of educators who implement these strategies. Understanding the challenges teachers face and the methods they use to adapt these practices in different settings is vital for bridging the gap between theory and practice (Gibbons, 2021). Moreover, the adaptation of foundational practices to suit varying cultural, linguistic, and educational contexts remains underexplored. Young learners from different regions may respond differently to these methods, and there is a need for more research on context-specific adaptations to enhance teaching strategies for diverse learners (Ellis, 2020; Gibbons, 2021).

In addition to foundational practices, the development of teacher identity during the teaching practicum plays a significant role in shaping effective language instruction. Studies highlight the importance of reflective practices, including recollection, reflection-in-action, and mentorship, in linking theory to practice and fostering professional growth (Nuraeni & Heryatun, 2021). Structured reflective tasks, peer observation, and mentoring contribute to the development of teacher identity and agency (Hendriwanto, 2021). However, the process of teacher identity formation is often fragmented, with various dimensions evolving at different times throughout the teacher education program (Prabjandee, 2020). Incorporating reflective practices and structured support during the practicum can play a crucial role in strengthening professional identity and improving the overall quality of language instruction for young learners. The research question is formulated, “How EYL pre-service teachers develop their teacher identity during teaching practicum in Thailand?”

METHODS

This study applied qualitative approach. To explore the experiences of student teachers who conducted teaching practice in Thailand, a qualitative approach was employed using open-ended questionnaires. Participants included two student teachers who had completed their teaching practice in two different educational settings across Thailand. They consist of one male and one female student teacher. The male participant is called participant#1, while the female one is called participant#2. As the instrument, the open-ended questionnaires were designed to capture detailed insights into their experiences, challenges, and strategies used during their practice. These questions were intended to elicit comprehensive and nuanced responses.

The data collection process involved distributing the questionnaires electronically to ensure accessibility for all participants. Responses were collected over a four-week period. Following data collection, the responses were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Initial coding was performed to identify key themes and concepts, such as “cultural adaptation,” “engagement strategies,” and “classroom management challenges.” These codes were then organized into broader themes reflecting the participants' shared experiences and individual insights. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of patterns and variations in how teaching practices were adapted and implemented in the Thai context. The findings offer a detailed understanding of the practical experiences of student teachers in Thailand, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of various teaching strategies and the challenges encountered in an international setting.

To analyze the data collected from the electronic questionnaires, begin by familiarizing with the transcribed responses. This initial step involves thoroughly reading through the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and context of the participants' responses. Following this, proceed with initial coding by highlighting significant statements and phrases related to key concepts, such as “cultural adaptation,” “engagement strategies,” and “classroom management challenges.” While these initial codes provide a foundation, remain open to identifying new codes as you delve deeper into the data. Next, group similar codes into broader themes. For instance, codes concerning how teaching practices were adapted to fit the Thai cultural context can be organized under a theme like “Cultural Adaptation.” Similarly, codes related to engagement methods and classroom challenges can be consolidated into themes such as “Engagement Strategies” and “Classroom Management Challenges.” Once themes are established, the researchers review them to ensure they accurately represent the data. This involves evaluating the themes in relation to the entire dataset to confirm their coherence and relevance, making adjustments as needed.

After refining the themes, the researchers clearly define and name each one based on the key concepts and patterns identified. Each theme should capture a distinct aspect of the data and contribute meaningfully to answering the research question. Analyze these themes to understand the patterns and variations in how teaching practices were adapted and implemented by student teachers in the Thai context. This analysis should reveal relationships between themes and provide insights into the effectiveness of various teaching strategies and the challenges encountered. Finally, the data were interpreted and the findings were reported by highlighting the key themes and supporting your analysis with examples from the data. The results is followed by discussion on how these themes reflect the practical experiences of student teachers and the implications for understanding teacher identity development and teaching practices in an international setting. This structured approach to thematic analysis offer a detailed and nuanced understanding of the practical experiences and challenges faced by student teachers during their practicum in Thailand.

FINDINGS

The teacher identities reflected by the two participants can be characterized as follows: Participant#1 demonstrates a practical and adaptable approach, focusing on the effective application of digital media and interactive quizzes in their teaching. This practical application and flexibility enable them to address classroom dynamics and enhance student understanding. On the other hand, Participant#2 exemplifies an innovative and student-centered teaching style. They creatively incorporate online educational games and culturally relevant content into their lessons, making the material more engaging and relevant to students' lives. This approach fosters a dynamic and supportive learning environment. Both teacher identities, though distinct in their methods, show a strong commitment to improving student engagement and learning outcomes, highlighting their dedication to enhancing the educational experience through their unique strategies.

Participant #1

Adaptable and Practical: This participant exemplifies an adaptable and practical teacher identity. They integrate digital media and interactive quizzes into their lessons, which proves effective in engaging students and enhancing their understanding. Their approach is characterized by a pragmatic use of technology and an openness to feedback, such as considering increased assertiveness in classroom management. This adaptability allows them to respond effectively to student needs and classroom dynamics, resulting in clear participation and a strong grasp of the material.

Participant #2

Innovative and Student-Centered: This participant embodies an innovative and student-centered teaching style. They utilize online educational games and adapt learning materials to reflect Thai culture, making lessons more engaging and relevant to students' daily lives. By incorporating technology like videos and learning apps, they create a dynamic and interactive learning environment. Their focus on making content culturally relevant and using visual aids helps increase student engagement and comprehension, fostering a supportive and participatory classroom atmosphere.

TABLE 1. Summary of Participants' Responses

Aspect	Participant #1	Participant#2
Teaching Identity	Practical and Adaptable	Practical and Adaptable
Key Method	Digital quizzes, interactive media	Online educational games, culturally adapted content
Strengths	Effective use of technology, flexible approach	Creative use of technology, relevance to students' daily lives
Classroom Impacts	Clear participation, enhanced understanding	Increased engagement, improved comprehension
Adaptation	Adjusts based on feedback, considers assertiveness	Adapts content and language to students' needs
Student Engagement	Motivates through competitive quizzes	Engages with interactive and culturally relevant materials

DISCUSSION

The findings from the two participants reveal distinct teaching identities that highlight different approaches to enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. Participant #1 adopts a practical and adaptable teaching style, utilizing digital quizzes and interactive media, while Participant#2 exemplifies an innovative and student-centered approach by incorporating online educational games and culturally relevant content. Both methods reflect a strong commitment to improving the educational experience, though they do so through different strategies.

Participant#1's approach aligns with recent research on the effectiveness of digital tools in education. Digital quizzes and interactive media, as employed by Participant#1, have been shown to boost student engagement and motivation, providing interactive and immediate feedback that enhances learning (Hattie & Yates, 2022). The flexibility in adapting to classroom dynamics and feedback is crucial, as contemporary studies emphasize the importance of adaptive teaching practices in addressing diverse student needs and enhancing learning outcomes (Westwood, 2018).

In contrast, Participant#2's use of online educational games and culturally adapted content reflects a student-centered teaching philosophy. Recent studies indicate that integrating educational games into the curriculum can significantly improve student engagement, motivation, and information retention (Kapp, 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2023). Additionally, incorporating culturally relevant materials helps bridge the gap between students' prior knowledge and new content, making learning more relevant and effective (Liao & Li, 2023). This approach aligns with current findings that suggest culturally responsive teaching strategies contribute to better academic performance and increased student satisfaction (Ialuna et al., 2024).

Both teaching approaches underscore the value of considering student engagement and contextual relevance in educational practice. Participant#1 demonstrates how practical applications of technology can enhance classroom interaction and understanding. Meanwhile, Participant#2 shows how innovative and culturally relevant methods can foster a more engaging and inclusive learning environment. The combination of these strategies highlights the effectiveness of both practical and creative approaches in addressing diverse educational needs and preferences.

The participants' reflections reveal crucial strategies for managing language barriers and communication challenges in international teaching settings. Participant#1 highlights the use of translation tools as a practical solution to bridge language gaps. This approach is supported by recent research indicating that digital translation aids can effectively facilitate communication and make educational content more accessible for students with varying levels of language proficiency (Muñoz-Basols et al., 2023). Translation tools help ensure that instructional material is understood, despite differences in language proficiency, thereby enhancing overall learning experiences (Golonka et al., 2022).

Participant#2 emphasizes the use of simple language and non-verbal communication, such as body language and gestures, to overcome language barriers. This method aligns with contemporary research which suggests that simplifying language and incorporating non-verbal cues can significantly improve comprehension and engagement among students who are not fluent in the language of instruction (Derakhshan et al., 2023). Non-verbal communication strategies, including gestures and visual aids, are effective in conveying meaning and supporting language acquisition, especially in multilingual classrooms (Liu, 2022).

Both strategies underscore the importance of adaptive communication methods in international teaching contexts. By using translation tools and non-verbal cues, teachers can better address the diverse linguistic needs of their students. These approaches ensure that all students can understand and engage with the learning material, thereby enhancing their educational experience.

CONCLUSIONS

The exploration of teacher identities in the context of international teaching practicum underscores the critical importance of developing a nuanced and adaptable teaching identity. The distinct approaches of the two participants illustrate how teacher identity shapes and influences teaching effectiveness and student engagement across diverse cultural contexts. Both teaching identities highlight that effective international teaching requires more than just technical proficiency; it necessitates a deep understanding of and adaptation to the cultural and educational contexts in which one is teaching. Developing a teacher identity that balances practical effectiveness with cultural sensitivity is essential for success in international teaching practicum. This development not only enhances teaching practices but also fosters a more inclusive and engaging learning environment for students from diverse backgrounds. The findings underscore the importance of teacher identity development as a foundational element in navigating and thriving in international educational settings.

This study, while offering valuable insights into teaching identities and practices within the international teaching practicum context, is not without its limitations. One significant limitation is the small sample size, which consists of only two participants. This restricted sample may not fully capture the diverse range of teaching identities and strategies that other international educators employ. As such, the findings might not be generalizable across different countries or educational environments. Another limitation is the contextual specificity of the study, which focuses exclusively on teaching practices in Thailand. Cultural and educational differences between countries can have a profound impact on teaching methods and student interactions, making it challenging to apply the findings universally to other international settings. Additionally, the study relies on subjective self-reported experiences from the participants, which introduces potential biases. Participants might present their practices in an overly favorable light or might not fully convey the complexities and challenges they encountered.

The study also lacks quantitative data to support the effectiveness of the described teaching methods. Without measurable outcomes or statistical analyses of engagement levels, it is difficult to empirically validate the impact of the teaching practices discussed. Furthermore, the research reflects only a snapshot of the participants' experiences during their international practicum, missing the long-term impacts and the evolution of their teaching practices over time. Lastly, the focus on specific teaching methods used by the participants may not encompass all possible strategies or emerging trends in education, limiting the scope of the study. Addressing these limitations in future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of teacher identity development in international contexts and enhance the applicability of the findings to a broader range of educational settings.

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