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Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioural Construction of Pre-Service English Language Teacher Identity

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the curriculum of a pre-service English language teacher education programme in China shapes the professional identity of non-native English-speaking student teachers (NNESTs). Drawing on a constructivist framework, the research examines how cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of identity are cultivated through curriculum content. Using content analysis in NVivo 14.0, 38 course syllabi and one policy document from a private Chinese university were analysed. Findings reveal a pronounced emphasis on the cognitive dimension, with curriculum documents prioritising pedagogical knowledge, linguistic accuracy, and subject mastery. While these cognitive components are essential for developing teaching competence, the limited presence of emotional and behavioural content reflects a narrow and incomplete approach to professional identity construction. This imbalance is particularly concerning for NNESTs who often face additional pressures related to linguistic legitimacy and self-confidence in English Language Teaching. The findings highlight the need for a more systematic integration of affective and behavioural elements, such as reflective practice, emotional resilience, and professional agency, into teacher education curricula. Underemphasising these dimensions risks the curriculum reinforcing a deficit view of NNESTs and hindering the development of well-rounded, confident educators.

KEYWORDS: Teacher Professional Identity, Non-Native English-Speaking Student Teachers, Pre-Service Teacher Education

INTRODUCTION

Pre-service teacher education programmes are fundamental in preparing student teachers to navigate the many challenges of the teaching profession. As Yuan et al. (2022) argue, effective teacher education must extend beyond the development of technical skills to encompass the formation of a professional identity. This continuous and dynamic process begins during initial training. Pre-service teachers construct this identity through interactions with peers, mentors, school-based teachers, and students during practicum experiences (Badia & Clarke, 2022).

Given the centrality of identity in shaping teachers' development and long-term professional engagement, it is perhaps surprising that identity construction has received limited attention, even within studies that have directly addressed pre-service education. While a growing body of literature has begun to recognise the importance of identity in influencing pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices, this theme is frequently treated as secondary or tangential to other concerns. A closer examination of recent studies reveals both valuable insights and persistent gaps, particularly in understanding how professional identity is shaped among non-native English-speaking student teachers (NNESTs), whose experiences are often underrepresented in mainstream research. For example, Kong et al. (2023) explored how in-service NNESTs constructed their identity and negotiated power dynamics with native English speakers, thus highlighting the complex and continuous nature of NNEST identity work even beyond the pre-service phase.

Among the few studies which have examined identity construction in pre-service teacher education, Richter et al. (2021) studied the relationship between teacher educators' task perception, professional identity, and teaching practice. Although the study is situated among teacher educators rather than pre-service teachers, it offers a crucial lens on how perceptions of professional roles shape identity and, in turn, pedagogical choices. The study found that educators who viewed their task as both didactic and developmental were more likely to engage in reflective and learner-centred teaching practices. These findings affirm the interdependence between identity and practice. Still, they also suggest that identity formation begins within a broader ecology of influence, highlighting the importance of exploring how identity emerges during pre-service education, not just in in-service contexts.

In another study, Masitoh et al. (2023) investigated identity construction among pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers through the lens of digital gamification. Drawing on a social theory of learning, their study revealed that participation in digitally mediated learning environments provided pre-service teachers with opportunities to reposition themselves as active, confident, and creative agents. Importantly, their findings demonstrate that identity is not only constructed through formal curriculum or mentor relationships, but also by digital experiences and peer interactions. However, the study falls short of critically engaging with the implications of linguistic background or nativeness in shaping identity – an omission especially relevant in ELT contexts, where language ownership and legitimacy remain contested issues.

Richards (2023) offers a valuable conceptual discussion on the layered nature of identity in ELT, distinguishing between the roles of teacher, learner, and student-teacher. His analysis acknowledges the fluidity and multiplicity of identities that teachers navigate and negotiate, particularly their evolving roles within the classroom and the broader profession. While this perspective contributes to

a greater understanding of professional identity, it essentially adopts a universal stance without deeply considering the socio-political and cultural pressures faced by NNESTs. The experience of non-native speakers who often grapple with issues of legitimacy, linguistic inferiority, and marginalisation requires more localised and empirical attention.

Collectively, these studies affirm that professional identity is both context-dependent and socially mediated. However, they also reveal a critical gap in the literature, that is, the identity construction of NNESTs remains significantly underexplored. In an increasingly globalised, yet still linguistically stratified ELT landscape, NNESTs often face unique challenges that impact their confidence, sense of belonging, and professional legitimacy. These challenges tend to be greater during the pre-service phase, where linguistic insecurities intersect with pedagogical anxieties, cultural dissonance, and power asymmetries within teacher education programmes. Despite these challenges, there remains limited research examining how teacher training curricula explicitly address the development of NNEST identity, especially in contexts such as China, where English is taught as a foreign language and pre-service training is conducted within culturally specific educational structures.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating how professional identity construction is shaped through the curriculum of a pre-service English language teacher education programme at a private Chinese university. Adopting a constructivist lens, this research focuses on how the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of professional identity are cultivated in student teachers. Specifically, it examines how curriculum content informs the dynamic process of nurturing professional identity development among Chinese student teachers training to teach English.

To guide the inquiry, the study focuses on addressing the following research question:

How are the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions, which make up the professional identity of pre-service English teachers, distributed in curriculum documents used in an English language pre-service teacher education programme?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Language Pre-Service Teacher Education in China

In China, qualifying as an English language teacher typically involves completing an undergraduate programme in English, English Education, or Applied Linguistics at a university. These programmes include coursework in English language, literature, linguistics, pedagogy, and educational psychology (Chen et al., 2023). In addition to discipline-specific courses, students are also required to complete general university subjects such as politics, foreign languages, and computer skills, which are shared with students from other academic disciplines and designed to enhance cultural literacy and soft skills.

For student teachers majoring in English, the curriculum includes a comprehensive set of core courses, including English linguistics, English and American literature, English national culture, and translation theory and practice. These are complemented by pedagogical and psychological training through courses like pedagogy, educational psychology, and Professional Cognitive Practice (Chen et al., 2023). While course offerings may vary slightly across institutions, the overall structure of English language teacher education programmes typically integrates three key domains, namely, language proficiency and appreciation, education and pedagogy, and general education. Proficiency in English is further assessed through standardised examinations such as the TOEFL or IELTS, and graduates

aiming to teach in public schools must pass the National Teacher's Qualification Examination (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025; Teachers Law of the People's Republic of China, 2024). This includes written assessments on educational theory, subject-specific content, and general pedagogical knowledge, as well as a practical teaching component in which candidates demonstrate instructional competence in classroom settings (Lu, 2023).

This four-year degree programme serves as the foundational platform not only for entering the teaching profession but also for initiating the long-term process of professional identity construction. The curriculum is intended to shape cognitive, emotional, and behavioural readiness for teaching (Al Zadjali, 2017; Zhang, 2022). However, despite its comprehensive structure, several scholars have raised concerns about the adequacy of China's pre-service teacher education in fully preparing future teachers. Yang (2021), for instance, highlighted the absence of professional ethics education, while Jiang et al. (2018) argued for greater emphasis on professionalism in the training process. Yet, such critiques often adopt a broad lens and do not specifically address the experiences of English language pre-service teachers, particularly in relation to how their professional identity is formed and negotiated during training.

Efforts to improve the quality of teacher education led to the introduction of the *Curriculum Standards for Teacher Education* in October 2011, which emphasised practical orientations and curricular relevance in pre-service training. The reform advocated a closer alignment between theoretical knowledge and classroom application, suggesting a need to recalibrate existing programmes to more effectively support pre-service teachers' identity development (Dixit, 2022; Trevalion, 2018). This call for reform indicates a recognition that teacher identity is shaped not only by subject knowledge but also by how teacher candidates are prepared to enact and embody the role of a teacher in evolving educational contexts.

Nevertheless, empirical studies suggest that many of these reforms have yet to fully address the socio-cultural and pedagogical complexities of pre-service teacher preparation. Song (2023) argued that Chinese teacher-training programmes have been slow to respond to changes in the socio-political and economic environment, while Deng (2025) advocated for a more holistic approach to programme development. Other scholars have proposed more specific interventions, including enhancing professional quality through integrated course content (Chueh & Kao, 2024) and redesigning curricula to address the evolving needs of 21st-century educators (Ul Zaman & Ch, 2024).

In the context of the present study, which examines how curriculum shapes the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of professional identity construction among pre-service English teachers, these reforms and critiques provide a crucial backdrop. They highlight the systemic and structural dimensions that influence identity formation, yet also reveal a research gap. Little is known about how the current curriculum, in practice, contributes to the identity development of NNESTs navigating both linguistic and professional legitimacy in their training.

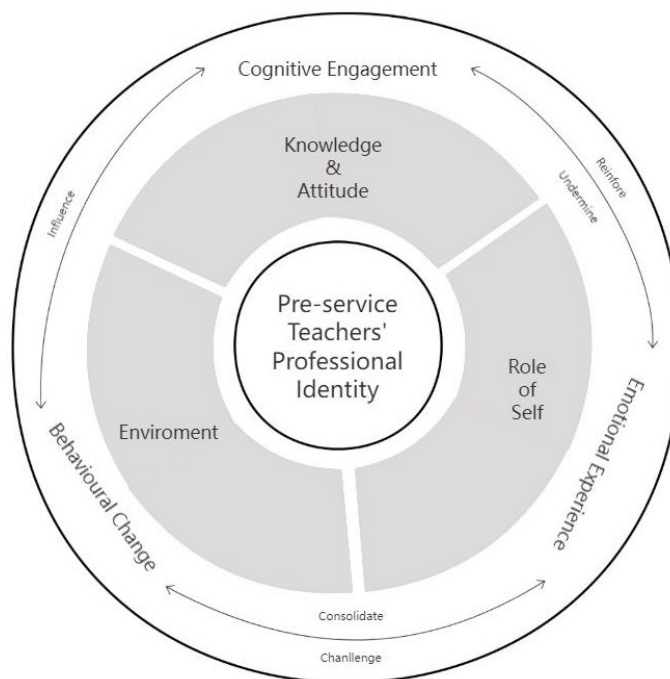
Theoretical Foundation

The present study adopts a constructivist perspective to examine pre-service English teachers' professional identity construction. The model, as represented in the figure below, conceptualises pre-service teacher professional identity as a dynamic construct shaped by the interaction of three core influences: the role of self, knowledge and attitudes toward the profession, and the environment. These

influences are expressed through cognitive engagement, emotional experience, and behavioural change.

Figure 1

Conceptual model (Feng et al., 2013)



The model proposes that identity formation begins with how student teachers see themselves (role of self), what they know and believe about the teaching profession (knowledge and attitudes), and the institutional and socio-cultural settings in which their training occurs (environment). These influences interact to shape how student teachers engage cognitively with teaching content and theory, how they emotionally connect with their role and with students, and how they behave in instructional contexts. Cognitive engagement refers to the internalisation of teaching knowledge and role conceptualisation, emotional experience reflects passion, attitudes, and emotional investment in the profession, and behavioural change manifests in observable actions such as reflective practice, classroom adaptability, and professional conduct (Alajmi, 2025). The model suggests that the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions are not isolated, but dynamically interlinked. Emotional experience can reinforce or undermine cognitive commitment, while behavioural engagement can either consolidate or challenge internalised beliefs (Kelly et al., 2024; Lo, 2024). For NNESTs, this model foregrounds the importance of recognising how self-perception and linguistic identity are continuously shaped by the curriculum and context, ultimately influencing their professional growth and legitimacy in the field of English language teaching.

Cognitive engagement pertains to how student teachers mentally construct and internalise the identity of a teacher. Avraamidou (2014) argues that teacher identity is, in part, a cognitive project shaped by

how student teachers interpret and make sense of their roles. For pre-service teachers, this construction emerges from both self-perception and external influences such as formal instruction, mentor feedback, and peer interactions (Lestari et al., 2024). The curriculum should, therefore, play a central role in transmitting disciplinary knowledge, teaching philosophies, and pedagogical norms (Calderhead, 1996; Van Driel et al., 2023). Furthermore, the recognition of professional responsibilities, as emphasised by Adams et al. (2014), reinforces cognitive alignment with the expectations of the teaching profession.

Emotional experience is equally critical in shaping teacher identity. Teaching is not merely cognitive work. It is also deeply emotional. It requires empathy, care, and affective investment in students and learning environments. Amorim and Ribeiro-Silva (2024) note that passion for teaching is often a defining feature of a strong professional identity. However, novice teachers frequently experience emotional tensions as they confront the demands of real classrooms (Nazari & Hu, 2024). The curriculum, particularly in its role of preparing students for practicum and professional challenges, plays a key role in equipping them with the emotional resilience needed in the profession (Towers et al., 2025). Building on this, as Beijaard et al. (2004) assert, attitudes toward teaching – whether shaped by personal inclination or institutional culture – are not only expressions of identity but active components in its ongoing formation.

Behavioural change refers to how student teachers enact their professional selves in practice, reflecting the understanding that identity is not static; it is performed and refined through professional activity (Xu & Connelly, 2017). The curriculum contributes to this behavioural development by structuring opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and reflection. Smeplass (2025) highlight that identity is solidified through participation in professional learning communities, collaborative projects, and field experiences. Teachers' behavioural tendencies, including their willingness to take initiative, adapt to challenges, and reflect critically, are directly influenced by the habits cultivated during their training. This aligns with Pettenati's (2025) calls for teacher education to promote lifelong learning. Pathak and Annan (2025) add that self-reflection is essential for nurturing such behavioural transformation, enabling teachers to critically evaluate their beliefs and pedagogical actions.

Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for analysing how curriculum influences the identity construction of pre-service English teachers. By attending to the cognitive (what teachers know and believe), emotional (what teachers feel and value), and behavioural (what teachers do and how they act) aspects of identity, this study offers a holistic understanding of teacher development within the context of Chinese undergraduate English teacher training programmes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed content analysis using NVivo 14.0 to examine curriculum documents from an English language teacher education programme at a private university in Shandong Province, China. In addition to analysing 38 course syllabi used in the programme, the *Undergraduate Education Plan for English Majors*, a key policy document guiding the programme, was also analysed. The syllabi were obtained through the author's role as one of the primary participants in the design and revision of these documents since 2019. In this capacity, the author has been directly involved in developing

and revising the English major's talent cultivation plan and course syllabi. This direct involvement ensured the completeness and accuracy of the data collected for this study.

To ensure coding reliability and validity, two independent coders were trained. These coders were external to the research team and had no prior involvement in the study, providing an unbiased perspective. Both coders had educational backgrounds, with one holding a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction and the other a PhD in Educational Psychology. They had previously worked on similar qualitative research projects, demonstrating a strong understanding of content analysis and qualitative research methodologies. They underwent training to familiarise themselves with the research objectives, theoretical framework, and coding procedures. The training included a detailed review of the literature on content analysis, specifically referencing Krippendorff (2018) and Feng and Lin (2013) to guide the coding process.

The unit of analysis in this study was the phrase. This choice was made to capture specific concepts and themes within the curriculum documents more precisely. For example, a phrase from the Undergraduate Education Plan for English Majors might read: "having a healthy body," which was coded under the sub-theme of "body image perception" under the main theme of "self-image perception." Another example is the phrase "proficiency in oral English communication," which was coded under the sub-theme of "capability impression." The coders independently coded the same set of documents and met regularly with the lead author of this paper to compare outcomes and assess inter-coder consistency. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, ensuring a high level of reliability in the coding process.

Site of Investigation

The study was conducted at a university in Shandong Province that offers a comprehensive four-year undergraduate programme in English. The institution has established itself as a training ground for future teacher professionals, with enrolment comprising undergraduates and junior college students majoring in English and Business English.

Coding Process

The *Undergraduate Education Plan* and 38 syllabi from the English language teacher education programme were analysed. Table 1 provides an overview of the documents.

The policy document was first converted from PDF to Word format and then coded based on three analytical dimensions: cognitive engagement, emotional experience, and behavioural tendency. Following this, the 38 course syllabi were analysed in a similar manner. The syllabi were initially categorised into six distinct course types, namely Foundational Courses, Major Foundation Courses, Specialised Courses, Concentration Courses, Professional Development Courses, and Professional Practice Courses.

Table 1
Curriculum Documents Analysed

Document	Course Category	Course Titles
Undergraduate Education Plan	—	—
Syllabi	Foundational Courses	Introduction to English Major, Comprehensive English, English Extensive Reading, English Listening Comprehension, Oral English, English Grammar
	Major Foundation Courses	Basic English Writing, The Culture of Major English-Speaking Countries, Advanced English, Japanese (Second Foreign Language)
	Specialised Courses	British and American Literature, Translation Theory and Practice, English Linguistics, Academic Writing for English Majors
	Concentration Courses	English Pedagogy, Pedagogy, Educational Psychology, The Educational History of China and Foreign Countries, Modern Educational Technology
	Professional Development Courses	Educational Psychology, The Educational History of China and Foreign Countries, Modern Educational Technology, Advanced Audio-Visual-Oral English, English Phonetics, English Speech, English Lexicology, Intercultural Communication, Korean, International Business Etiquette, Tourism English, Traditional Chinese Culture, Selected Readings of English Newspapers, English Translation, English Interpretation
	Professional Practice Courses	Professional Cognitive Practice I–IV, Teaching Skills, Graduation Practice, Graduation Thesis

A unified course catalogue was compiled from the syllabi to support clarity and facilitate comparison across course types. Each course document was then coded according to the same three dimensions applied to the policy document. The categorisation reflects the structured design of the teacher training curriculum. Foundational courses introduce students to essential linguistic and academic skills. Major foundation courses deepen their understanding of language and cultural contexts. Specialised courses focus on areas such as literature and translation, allowing students to develop domain-specific expertise. Concentration courses emphasise pedagogical knowledge and educational theory, directly supporting the development of future educators. Professional development courses extend students' skills in intercultural communication, public speaking, and practical English usage for diverse settings. Lastly, professional practice courses offer experiential learning opportunities through classroom practice and culminate in a graduation thesis, which integrates students' academic and practical learning.

This structured categorisation not only provided an effective organisational framework for content analysis but also illuminated the curriculum's alignment with the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions central to pre-service teacher identity development.

FINDINGS

Coding Distribution of the Main Dimensions

As shown in Table 2, the content analysis of the 38 curriculum documents revealed that the cognitive dimension was the most prominent, appearing in 37 documents and totalling 334 coded references. In contrast, the emotional acceptance dimension was identified in 23 documents (81 references), while the behavioural tendency dimension was identified in 22 documents (100 references).

Table 2

Main Dimensions Identified in the Curriculum Documents

No	Major Themes	Documents Coded	Frequency
1	Cognitive Dimension	37	334
2	Emotional Acceptance Dimension	23	81
3	Behavioural Tendency Dimension	22	100

The dominance of the cognitive dimension reveals the curriculum's emphasis on building foundational knowledge in English Language Teaching (ELT) and on shaping professional awareness. Although the emotional and behavioural dimensions are present, their comparatively lower frequencies suggest that opportunities for identity formation through emotional engagement and behavioural development are less pronounced. These trends will be examined more critically in the discussion section.

Three-Level Analysis of the Main Dimensions

The cognitive dimension was further categorised into five subdimensions, namely, self-image perception, role cognition, teaching knowledge cognition, and environmental cognition. These subdimensions reflect how the curriculum facilitates pre-service teachers' understanding of themselves, their professional roles, the contents they teach, and the institutional context.

Table 3

Subdimensions of the Cognitive Dimension

Main Dimension	Subdimension	Further Subdimension	Documents Coded	Frequency
Cognitive	Self-image perception	Body image perception	1	3
		Personality impression	2	3
		Capability impression	31	126
	Role cognition	Role behavioural norms	5	12
		Role obligations	2	2

Main Dimension	Subdimension	Further Subdimension	Documents Coded	Frequency
		Role responsibility	4	7
	Teaching knowledge	Educational purpose/value	13	24
	cognition	Evaluation of skills	7	13
		General teaching knowledge	31	106
		Knowledge of learners	7	10
	Environmental cognition	Humanistic environment	5	6
		Material environment	9	15
		System environment	1	7

The most frequently coded categories were capability impression (126) and general teaching knowledge (106), suggesting a strong curricular emphasis on teacher competence and core pedagogical knowledge. Role cognition was present but less emphasised, with lower frequencies reflecting modest attention to helping pre-service teachers internalise professional norms and responsibilities. Environmental cognition was least represented, indicating limited exposure to the profession's systemic and institutional realities. These findings highlight a curriculum that privileges intellectual development over identity-oriented contextual awareness, an issue to be examined in the next section.

The emotional acceptance dimension captures students' affective attitudes toward their profession, including passion, cultural awareness, and role acceptance.

Table 4
Subdimensions of the Emotional Acceptance Dimension

Main Dimension	Subdimension	Further Subdimension	Documents Coded	Frequency
Emotional Acceptance	Career passion	Dedication	2	3
		Patriotism	3	6
		Professional interest	2	2
		Righteous life philosophy	5	14
	Environmental acceptance	Academic acceptance	2	2
		Cultural acceptance	8	17
		Language acceptance	7	7
		Socioeconomic acceptance	5	5

Main Dimension	Subdimension	Further Subdimension	Documents Coded	Frequency
	Role acceptance	Curriculum designer	1	2
		Professional developer	3	4
		Student mentor	1	1
		Team member	3	6
	Teaching attitudes	Flexibility	1	1
		Innovative spirit	2	3
		Personal enthusiasm	5	8

The most frequently occurring subdimensions were righteous life philosophy (14) and cultural acceptance (17), suggesting that moral integrity and cross-cultural awareness are key emotional values promoted in the curriculum. However, other emotional attributes, such as professional interest and personal enthusiasm, appear to be sporadically addressed. This suggests a need for more deliberate emotional scaffolding to support identity development rooted in affective and value-based engagement.

The behavioural tendency dimension refers to student teachers' intended actions and responses in professional settings, including participation, regulation, and reflective practices.

Table 5
Subdimensions of the Behavioural Tendency Dimension

Main Dimension	Subdimension	Further Subdimension	Documents Coded	Frequency
Behavioural Tendency	Active participation	Teaching engagement	8	23
		Extracurricular involvement	3	8
		Home-school communication	1	1
		Interdisciplinary integration	1	2
		Multimedia/tech application	2	7
		Professional practice	5	7
	Self-regulation	Emotional regulation	5	16
		Flexible learning strategy	7	14
		Self-monitoring	1	1
		Stress management	1	1
	Self-reflection	Curriculum preparation/design	7	10
		Evaluation and feedback	6	9
		Learning participation	1	1

The highest frequency within this dimension was found in teaching engagement (23) and emotional regulation (16), indicating that the curriculum promotes practical teaching preparedness and emotional composure. However, limited emphasis on home-school communication and interdisciplinary integration suggests a narrow framing of teacher responsibility. Similarly, while self-reflection is addressed, the frequency of related codes points to room for deeper integration of reflective pedagogies in pre-service education.

While the curriculum demonstrates a strong cognitive orientation and moderate incorporation of emotional and behavioural components, there is a clear imbalance. The findings indicate an underrepresentation of affective and reflective practices, which are crucial for cultivating a well-rounded and resilient teacher identity.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate how the curriculum of a pre-service English language teacher education programme in China contributes to the construction of professional identity through three interrelated dimensions: cognitive engagement, emotional experience, and behavioural change. The findings underscore an overemphasis on the cognitive dimension, confirming that the curriculum's primary orientation is toward the acquisition of content knowledge and pedagogical skills. While the emotional and behavioural aspects of identity formation are acknowledged, their limited representation raises significant concerns about the balance and coherence of teacher identity development, especially for student teachers who are non-native English speakers.

The most salient finding was the overwhelming dominance of the cognitive dimension across nearly all curriculum documents. This result is unsurprising given the historical structure of Chinese teacher education, which has prioritised mastery of subject content and formal instructional strategies (Lo & Liang, 2024). The coding results affirm that the curriculum's primary intent is to ensure that pre-service teachers gain a solid grounding in ELT knowledge, role conceptualisation, and familiarity with professional environments such as schools and classrooms. For NNESTs, however, this cognitively oriented approach may reinforce the implicit assumption that their professional legitimacy hinges solely on technical mastery rather than on their broader identity development as confident and culturally competent educators.

This strong cognitive orientation is reflected in syllabi such as *English Teaching Methodology*, where objectives focus on the theoretical underpinnings of English language teaching, including classroom management, curriculum design, and skills instruction in grammar, speaking, listening, and reading. Similarly, in *English Speaking*, course objectives target accurate oral expression and appropriate pronunciation, suggesting a drive toward linguistic correctness and fluency. While this emphasis is critical in preparing NNESTs to meet high linguistic expectations, it may also inadvertently amplify feelings of linguistic inadequacy and self-doubt, as documented in studies on non-native teacher identity (Guo & Sidhu, 2024).

The curriculum's reliance on cognitive training aligns with the established literature, which places pedagogical content knowledge at the heart of teacher preparation (Mourlam et al., 2024). Yet cognitive development alone is insufficient for constructing a professional identity that is resilient and responsive to the sociocultural complexities of English language teaching. For NNESTs, identity is not only built on what they know but also on how they feel about their place in the profession, especially

in contexts where native speaker norms remain dominant (Wright et al., 2024). A strong professional identity for NNESTs must, therefore, be cultivated through affective support and opportunities for behavioural growth (Nigar, 2024).

The comparative scarcity of codes related to emotional acceptance and behavioural tendencies is especially problematic for NNESTs, who often face challenges in self-confidence, professional recognition, and linguistic legitimacy. Emotional subdimensions such as career passion, role acceptance, and teaching attitudes were unevenly integrated into the curriculum, and their treatment appeared incidental rather than developmental. This signals an absence of systematic efforts to cultivate the emotional resilience needed to navigate the professional landscape; an absence that may disproportionately affect student teachers grappling with the perceived stigma of non-nativeness (Keung & Chan, 2024).

Likewise, behavioural elements, while present, were cast mainly in functional terms, focusing on teaching tasks or classroom execution rather than on behavioural growth over time. Codes such as emotional regulation and curriculum design were presented as expected outcomes rather than as ongoing developmental processes. For student teachers, such limited behavioural scaffolding may hinder the formation of agency and professional autonomy, both of which are vital in confronting native-speaker bias and negotiating self-perception within the global ELT profession (Teng, 2019).

These imbalances reflect a deeper flaw in curriculum design: the implicit assumption that professional identity will emerge organically through mastery of knowledge and skills. Yet identity, especially for non-native English teachers, must be intentionally constructed through structured opportunities for reflection, affirmation, and emotional development (Nauryzbayeva, 2024). A curriculum that fails to create space for these processes risks reinforcing a narrow, fragile, and misleading view of what it means to be a competent English teacher, i.e., one that privileges native-like competence over pedagogical identity and personal growth.

The findings, therefore, call for a more intentional integration of emotional and behavioural learning goals into the teacher education curriculum, particularly for non-native English-speaking trainees. First, affective competencies such as self-confidence, professional passion, and resilience should be explicitly embedded in course objectives. Structured reflection tasks, guided journaling, and emotional mentoring could help them confront and overcome internalised doubts about linguistic legitimacy and professional worth. Second, greater emphasis on behavioural dimensions, including classroom adaptability, collaborative practice, and reflective autonomy, would support the behavioural flexibility NNESTs need to thrive. These could be fostered through microteaching, peer-led practicum debriefings, and inquiry-based learning that prioritises teacher voice and agency over conformity to native-speaker norms.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of ensuring curricular coherence across the multiple dimensions of professional teacher identity. To prepare reflective, resilient, and professionally secure English teachers, particularly non-native speakers, the curriculum must treat cognitive, emotional, and behavioural development as interdependent rather than isolated components of identity formation. Without this holistic integration, the curriculum risks reinforcing a view of the English teacher as a technician rather than as a culturally empowered professional.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how the curriculum of a pre-service English language teacher education programme in China contributes to the construction of teacher professional identity, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: cognitive engagement, emotional experience, and behavioural change. Through in-depth content analysis of the Undergraduate Education Plan and 38 course syllabi, the findings revealed a clear imbalance in the representation of these dimensions. The curriculum places considerable emphasis on cognitive development, prioritising knowledge acquisition, teaching competence, and linguistic accuracy. While these are essential components of teacher preparation, the limited integration of emotional and behavioural aspects presents a narrow and incomplete vision of professional identity formation, particularly for NNESTs.

The significance of this study lies in its illumination of how curriculum design implicitly shapes the identity pre-service teachers adopt. NNESTs in China have reportedly been navigating structural and psychological challenges in a global field dominated by native-speaker norms. A curriculum that underrepresents emotional resilience and behavioural autonomy may exacerbate their feelings of inadequacy and professional insecurity. Thus, the study highlights the urgent need for curricula that support the development of confident, emotionally grounded, and adaptable English teachers, not only through knowledge transmission but through intentional emotional and behavioural scaffolding.

Several implications emerge. First, teacher education curricula should ensure that affective and behavioural components are not neglected. Second, reflective and experiential pedagogies should be embedded into the programme structure to help student teachers internalise their professional roles beyond technical skill. Third, specific attention must be paid to the identity needs of NNESTs, ensuring that training programmes validate their legitimacy and build their sense of professional agency. Overall, the study highlights the need for a more holistic approach to ELT teacher education, providing valuable insights for curriculum development across diverse contexts.

While this study deliberately focuses solely on curriculum documents from a single institution, the findings may be limited since they do not represent the full diversity of pre-service English teacher education across China. Furthermore, future studies can incorporate diverse perspectives, such as those of students, educators, or policymakers, to represent deeper insights into how the curriculum is interpreted and enacted in practice. The coding framework, while theoretically grounded, may also have constrained the identification of emergent identity themes outside the three focal dimensions. Future research should, therefore, expand to include multiple institutions with varying curriculum models, along with an inductive approach to analysis, to examine various emergent patterns and themes across contexts. Moreover, this study did not employ a specific measure of inter-coder reliability. Future research may consider incorporating relevant assessment methods to enhance the quantification of coding consistency further. Additionally, future inquiries should explicitly centre the voices and lived experiences of NNESTs, who remain underrepresented in teacher identity literature despite their growing presence in global ELT.

In conclusion, constructing a strong and coherent professional identity for pre-service English teachers, particularly those from non-native English-speaking backgrounds, requires more than disciplinary mastery. It demands a curriculum that affirms their emotional realities, supports behavioural development, and nurtures a sense of belonging and legitimacy in the teaching profession. Only through such a comprehensive approach can teacher education truly prepare educators who are not only knowledgeable but also confident, reflective, and professionally empowered.

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