



Betwixt and Between: A Narrative Inquiry into EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Identity Negotiation and Borrowed Agency in Vietnam

Hoai Thi Thu Nguyen*✉ and Hue Thi Trinh Tran✉

To cite this article. H. Thi, T. Nguyen, H. Thi, and T. Tran, "Betwixt and Between: A Narrative Inquiry into EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Identity Negotiation and Borrowed Agency in Vietnam," *Lang. Technol. Soc. Media*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 418–432, 2026.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70211/ltsm.3026-7196.696>

To link to this article:



Published online: 23 July 2026



Submit an article to this journal



View crossmark data



Watch the video on YouTube



Betwixt and Between: A Narrative Inquiry into EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Identity Negotiation and Borrowed Agency in Vietnam

Hoai Thi Thu Nguyen* and Hue Thi Trinh Tran

Received: 22 April 2026

Revised: 18 May 2026

Accepted: 19 June 2026

Online: 23 July 2026

Abstract

This qualitative narrative inquiry examined how three Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers negotiated professional identity during an eight-week teaching practicum. Three final-year students were purposively selected from twelve eligible candidates to represent varied linguistic and educational backgrounds. Data comprised nine semi-structured interviews, twenty-four weekly narrative frames, and participant-selected artifacts, interpreted through Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional narrative space. Chronological restorying followed by cross-case analysis revealed that the practicum operated as a liminal environment in which professional agency was provisional and mentor-dependent. Lan and Vy strategically complied with mentor expectations when communicative or technology-mediated pedagogies conflicted with exam-oriented routines and hierarchical evaluation. By contrast, Minh experienced the same structure as a protective scaffold that reduced anxiety about linguistic legitimacy and validated his grammar-focused identity. The findings refine the concept of borrowed agency by showing that constrained autonomy is not experienced uniformly; its meaning depends on trainees' prior pedagogical orientation and linguistic confidence. In comparable EFL teacher-education contexts, structured mentor training, dialogic co-planning, and protected low-stakes experimentation may support identity development without making pedagogical conformity the primary route to practicum success.

Keywords: Teacher Professional Identity; Borrowed Agency; Narrative Inquiry; Teaching Practicum; Pre-Service Teacher Education; Vietnam.

Publisher's Note:

WISE Pendidikan Indonesia stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright:

©

2026 by the author(s).

License WISE Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandar Lampung, Indonesia.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



Language,
Technology,
and Social Media



INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has progressively shifted from rote, teacher-centred instruction toward communicative and student-centred pedagogies [1]. In Vietnam, this transition has been institutionally promoted through the National Foreign Language Project, formalized under Decision No. 2080/QD-TTg (2017), which emphasizes competency-based curricula and the development of teachers' professional capacity across the national education system [2]. Implementing these reforms, however, requires more than introducing new curricula or instructional techniques. It also requires teachers to reconsider how they understand professional competence, legitimacy, authority, and their roles within the classroom. Accordingly, teacher professional identity is increasingly conceptualized as dynamic, relational, and socially constructed rather than as a stable personal attribute [3], [4], [5].

For pre-service teachers, professional identity development becomes particularly consequential during the teaching practicum, when university-based pedagogical ideals are tested against the institutional realities of school-based practice. Vietnam-based studies have documented classroom-management difficulties, mentoring limitations, complex interactions among practicum variables, and the emotional resilience required of pre-service EFL teachers [6], [7], [8]. Research conducted in other EFL contexts similarly indicates that practicum experiences can reshape pedagogical beliefs, perceived professional legitimacy, and imagined teacher selves [9], [10], [11]. Nevertheless, existing studies have paid comparatively limited attention to the temporal process through which Vietnamese pre-service teachers negotiate these changes across the practicum period. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to how trainees reconcile communicative and student-centred approaches learned at university with examination-oriented school practices, established classroom routines, and mentor-controlled evaluation.

The teaching practicum represents an especially intense professional threshold. During this period, pre-service teachers are no longer positioned solely as university students, yet they have not been fully recognized as autonomous members of the teaching profession [12], [5]. Their classroom authority remains provisional because mentors and placement schools regulate what they may teach, how they may teach it, and how their performance is evaluated. Mentors therefore occupy multiple roles: they model professional practice, provide instructional guidance, regulate access to classroom authority, and contribute to formal practicum assessment [13], [14]. This arrangement can generate tensions when pre-service teachers' pedagogical beliefs or imagined professional identities differ from the expectations of their mentors. In Vietnam, such tensions may be intensified by institutional examination pressures and culturally embedded expectations concerning teacher authority, relational harmony, respect for senior educators, and avoidance of open disagreement.

Although contemporary teacher-identity research increasingly recognizes professional identity as fluid, relational, and continuously negotiated, reviews continue to identify limited empirical connections between language teacher education and identity as it is enacted in practice, particularly from the perspectives of pre-service teachers and their mentors [3], [15]. Survey-based and cross-sectional studies can identify general patterns of professional development, but they are less able to preserve the emotional, relational, and temporal sequence through which emerging teachers interpret conflicting expectations. Narrative inquiry is particularly appropriate for examining this process because it conceptualizes experience as temporally continuous, socially situated, and repeatedly interpreted through personal storytelling [16], [17]. It also enables

researchers to retain contradictions, hesitation, and changes in participants' professional positioning rather than reducing identity development to a uniform or linear trajectory [18].

Against this background, the present study uses longitudinal narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of three Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers during an eight-week teaching practicum. It focuses on three interrelated dimensions of professional identity: pedagogical beliefs, linguistic confidence, and relational positioning toward mentor teachers. The study also examines how participants themselves narrate the socio-cultural and institutional conditions influencing their professional decisions. By tracing each participant's experiences before, during, and immediately after the practicum, this study seeks to provide a temporally grounded account of identity negotiation rather than a static description of professional identity at a single point in time. It thereby addresses the limited understanding of how individual dispositions and institutional conditions interact as Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers move from university preparation into evaluated classroom practice.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers negotiate their professional identities during an eight-week teaching practicum?

RQ2. What socio-cultural and institutional factors do they narrate as shaping this professional identity negotiation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Professional Identity as an Ongoing, Relational Negotiation

Over the past two decades, language teacher education has undergone an ontological shift in which teacher professional identity (TPI) is understood as a dynamic, relational, and ongoing process of negotiation and restorying [16], [19], [4]. From a social-constructivist perspective, TPI develops at the intersection of personal biography, imagined future selves, professional agency, and the socio-institutional structures within which teachers participate [20], [10]. For language educators, this process is especially complex because teachers must simultaneously enact pedagogical competence and negotiate linguistic legitimacy in relation to dominant norms of English proficiency [1], [21], [15].

This constructivist framing is not the only perspective available. Complexity-theory studies conceptualize learning to teach as a non-linear system produced through interactions among personal, classroom, and institutional variables [7], [9]. Dialogical and positioning approaches, by contrast, examine the multiple I-positions that pre-service teachers enact while reflecting on practicum experiences [18]. The present study retains a narrative-constructivist lens because its central concern is the chronological restorying of three divergent trajectories across one bounded practicum. A system-level analysis could illuminate interactions among variables, but it might obscure the contrast between two participants who resisted mentor expectations and one participant who experienced traditional structure as protective. The narrative approach therefore supports the case-level divergence that constitutes the phenomenon under investigation.

Professional identity is also inseparable from emotion, vulnerability, and relational safety. When emerging teachers' pedagogical commitments are challenged by school routines or mentor judgments, feedback may be experienced not simply as advice about technique but as recognition or rejection of a possible professional self. Research on practicum relationships shows that relational turning points, mentor support, and psychological safety can substantially shape

engagement and professional learning [22], [23]. Examining how participants narrate these emotional tensions is therefore essential to understanding whether identity development becomes expansive, defensive, or strategically compliant.

The Practicum as a Liminal Space

Within teacher education, the practicum is widely recognized as one of the most consequential and emotionally unstable phases of professional development [12], [5]. It can be conceptualized as a liminal space because pre-service teachers occupy a threshold position between studenthood and recognized professional membership. This condition differs from reality shock, which describes the emotional jolt created by the transition, and from professional socialization, which refers to the broader and more enduring process of learning a profession's norms. Liminality instead identifies the acute, bounded structural condition in which authority and belonging remain provisional. Recent practicum research similarly emphasizes that preparedness, power relations, and access to professional participation are negotiated rather than automatically granted [13], [14].

This liminal position can produce the psychological and pedagogical disruption historically described as reality shock [24]. During university coursework, pre-service teachers commonly internalize progressive and communicative pedagogies; in placement schools, they encounter timetables, examination demands, classroom-management conventions, and evaluator preferences. Trent [25] describes the resulting condition as borrowed agency: authority is temporarily granted by the host institution and mentor rather than held as an independent professional right. Studies of mentor identity and negative mentoring further show that this provisional authority can be narrowed when mentors define acceptable teaching through conformity to their own practices [26], [27]. The present study adopts borrowed agency as an analytical lens rather than proposing it as a new construct.

Socio-Cultural Pressures and Mentor Power Dynamics in Vietnam

In Vietnam, EFL teacher identity is negotiated within intersecting cultural and systemic pressures. Educational relationships have historically reflected Confucian values that emphasize teacher authority, hierarchy, and respect for seniority [28]. To avoid treating these values as a uniform cultural explanation, the present study operationalizes them through observable markers in participants' accounts: deferential language toward mentors, avoidance of explicit disagreement, and references to hierarchy or face-saving when explaining classroom decisions. These markers functioned as sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined categories. At the same time, national commitments to communicative language teaching continue to interact with examination-oriented classroom priorities. Vietnam-based studies document the practical and emotional strain created by these competing expectations [6], [7], [8], while evidence from comparable exam-oriented EFL contexts shows that institutional culture can mediate the movement from imagined to practiced identity [11].

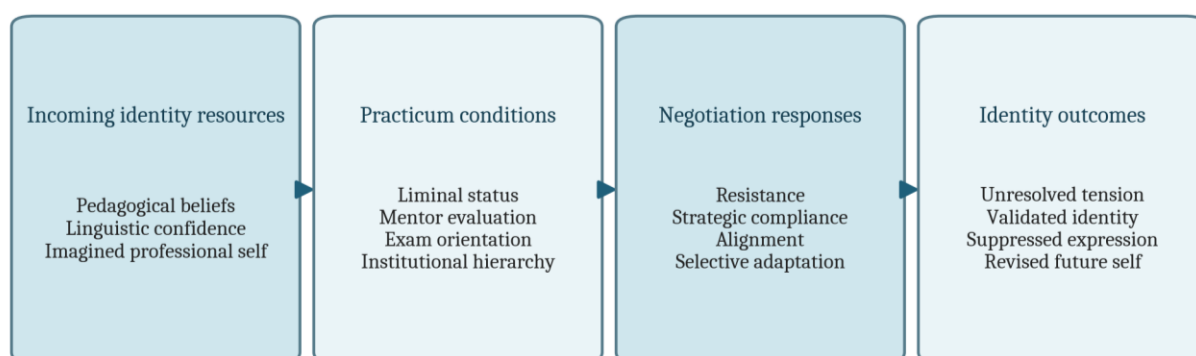
These macro-level tensions are enacted through the micro-level relationship between the mentor and the student teacher. Because mentors model practice, regulate access to the classroom, and contribute to final evaluation, pre-service teachers may suppress pedagogical disagreement to protect their grades and institutional legitimacy [19], [27]. Research on practicum mentoring confirms that mentor identity, feedback practices, relational turning points, and stakeholder expectations influence whether trainees experience mentoring as developmental or controlling [26],

[22], [13], [29]. More reciprocal models that incorporate multiple voices can redistribute some of this authority [30], while supportive relationships beyond the mentor–mentee dyad can strengthen psychological safety [23]. In the Vietnamese context, respect for senior educators may further reduce the likelihood of openly contesting a mentor’s preferred pedagogy [28].

Taken together, these strands form a connected interpretive chain rather than three adjacent topics. Professional identity develops through the interaction of personal agency and institutional structure [20]; liminality describes the practicum condition in which a stable professional position is withheld [25]; and borrowed agency follows because classroom authority remains contingent on mentor and school approval [26], [22], [27]. This dependency creates emotional and pedagogical strain when progressive beliefs encounter exam-oriented routines and hierarchical evaluation. Figure 1 synthesizes the analytical logic applied to the narrative data.

Conceptual and Analytical Framework

Figure 1 integrates the personal and institutional dimensions used in the analysis. It is not a causal model; rather, it summarizes how incoming identity resources were examined in relation to practicum conditions, negotiated responses, and narrated identity outcomes.



Borrowed agency emerges through the interaction between personal resources and mentor-controlled institutional conditions.

Figure 1. Analytical framework for identity negotiation during the teaching practicum (authors’ synthesis based on [20], [25], [26], [22], and [27]).

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed qualitative narrative inquiry to examine the personal, temporal, and contextually situated development of EFL pre-service teachers’ professional identities [16]. Narrative inquiry treats story as both the phenomenon being investigated and a mode of interpretation. It was selected over case study and phenomenology because the research questions require attention to change across time and to the ways participants repeatedly interpreted the same practicum events [17]. Grounded in Deweyan pragmatism, the design used Clandinin and Connelly’s three-dimensional narrative space—temporality, sociality, and place—to examine how participants restoried their movement from university student to classroom practitioner. This approach preserves contradiction and discontinuity rather than assuming a linear developmental sequence.

Context and Participant Selection

The study was conducted in the Department of English Language Education at a public university in Hanoi, Vietnam. The four-year undergraduate program culminates in an intensive eight-week practicum at a local secondary school. Each pre-service teacher is assigned a host mentor by the placement-school administration; the mentor observes weekly lessons and submits the final practicum grade. Placement schools include lower- and upper-secondary institutions with typical class sizes of approximately 35–45 students. Neither mentor teachers nor university staff participated in selecting the research participants. Using purposive, criterion-based sampling [31], twelve eligible final-year students were invited by email through the department office. Three accepted, three declined because of timetable conflicts, and six did not respond. This recruitment pattern may have favored participants who were more willing to discuss identity-related tensions with researchers affiliated with their department. The resulting portraits should therefore be interpreted as information-rich accounts from reflective volunteers rather than as representative of the invited cohort. The three participants were selected because they were about to begin the mandatory full-time practicum and represented varied linguistic confidence, educational backgrounds, and imagined professional selves. Three cases were considered appropriate because the study sought analytic transferability through depth, coherence, and longitudinal detail rather than statistical generalization [16], [17], [31].

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Background	Practicum School	Motivation to Teach	Imagined Professional Self
Lan	22	Female	Urban schooling, high English proficiency	Urban lower-secondary school (Grade 8)	Altruistic, passion for communicative pedagogy	Progressive reformer who rejects rote learning
Minh	22	Male	Rural schooling, moderate English confidence	Rural upper-secondary school (Grade 10)	Pragmatic, seeking local career stability	Culturally traditional teacher of grammar
Vy	23	Female	Mid-sized town schooling, high digital literacy	Mid-sized town lower-secondary school (Grade 7)	Relational, interested in modern student connection	Facilitator utilizing educational technology

Data Collection Tools

Data were generated longitudinally before, during, and immediately after the eight-week practicum. Three complementary tools—semi-structured narrative interviews, weekly narrative frames, and artifact-elicitation—were used to capture temporal development, support triangulation, and connect retrospective interpretation with experiences documented during the placement.

First, each participant completed three in-depth narrative interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, producing nine interviews in total. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Draft transcripts were returned to participants for review before analysis. A second bilingual researcher back-translated a sample of English excerpts into Vietnamese and compared them with the original recordings; discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The pre-practicum interview explored language-learning histories and imagined teacher selves; the mid-practicum interview focused on immediate classroom tensions and reality shocks; and the post-practicum interview examined mentor relationships, professional learning, and future trajectories. Appendix A contains the complete guiding-question protocol.

Second, participants completed one narrative frame during each practicum week, yielding twenty-four frames: eight from Lan, eight from Minh, and eight from Vy. No frames were missing or incomplete. Each frame was returned to the research assistant within 48 hours, and a reminder was issued when necessary. Sentence starters such as “Today in class I felt ...” encouraged participants to document emotional and cognitive responses close to the events being described [32].

Third, artifact-elicitation was incorporated into the final interview. Participants selected artifacts that represented pivotal moments in their development, including annotated lesson plans, photographs of self-produced teaching materials, and written mentor feedback. Because participants—not the researcher or mentors—selected the artifacts, the discussions reflected what each participant considered professionally significant. The artifacts were used as prompts for situated reflection rather than as independently evaluated evidence of teaching quality.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Polkinghorne’s [33] distinction between analysis of narratives, which identifies patterns across stories, and narrative analysis, which configures fragmented material into a coherent temporal account. The lead researcher first conducted open coding of interview transcripts, narrative frames, and artifact notes. One doctoral colleague independently coded a 15% transcript sample; disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. Analytic memos documented emerging interpretations and alternative explanations. Each participant’s complete data set was then examined vertically and restoried into a chronological narrative portrait [31]. Hesitation, contradiction, and changing positions were retained rather than resolved into a falsely consistent account. A horizontal cross-case analysis subsequently compared participants’ positioning in relation to mentor expectations, examination pressure, linguistic confidence, and pedagogical commitments. Deferential language, avoidance of open disagreement, and explicit references to hierarchy or face-saving were used as initial sensitizing markers. Codes recurring across at least two cases were grouped into the patterns summarized in Table 2; case-specific divergence, particularly Minh’s use of traditional structure as a protective resource, was retained rather than forced into a shared category.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, data triangulation, peer debriefing, and an audit trail. Participants reviewed the complete restoried portraits rather than isolated quotations. Two requested minor wording changes to protect the anonymity of specific school

events; these changes were incorporated, and no participant disputed the substantive interpretation. Triangulation across interviews, narrative frames, and artifacts allowed claims to be examined across data types. Two doctoral colleagues who were not involved in data collection participated in peer debriefing, while coding memos and decision records documented the analytic process.

The lead researcher's former role as a practicum supervisor at the same university informed the interpretive lens brought to the study. This proximity was treated as both an analytic resource and a potential source of power-related disclosure bias [34]. To reduce that risk, a trained research assistant with no role in practicum evaluation conducted the interviews. Participants were reminded that their accounts would not be shared with placement schools or supervisors, and post-practicum interviews were scheduled only after final grades had been submitted.

The study followed relational-ethics principles [16] and the American Psychological Association's ethical standards for research involving human participants [35]. All participants received information about the study, participated voluntarily, and provided written informed consent before data collection. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying personal and institutional details were removed. Given the evaluative power held by mentors, particular care was taken to ensure that participants' critical reflections could not affect their academic standing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Individual Narrative Portraits

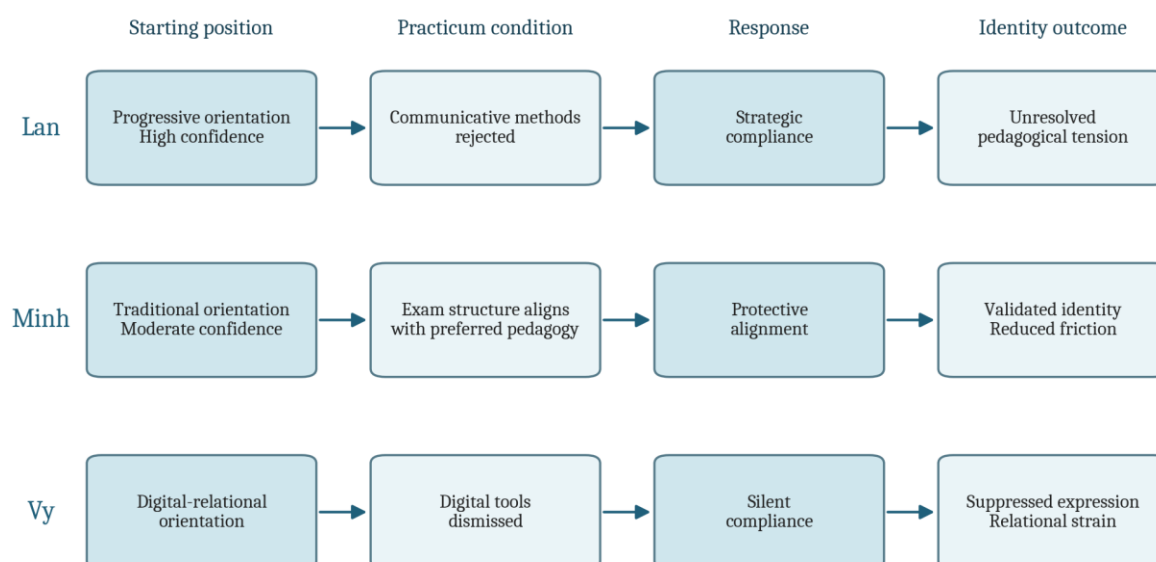
Lan entered the placement with strong commitments to communicative and student-centred teaching, but her trajectory involved a painful reduction in pedagogical agency. Examination-oriented student expectations and mentor-defined classroom-management norms quickly constrained her interactive lesson plans. Recalling her mentor's response to a pair-work activity, Lan stated: "She told me the noise meant I had lost control of the class, and that a real teacher keeps the room silent." This episode marked a shift from an imagined identity as a progressive reformer toward the compliant performance of her mentor's pedagogy. To secure a passing grade, she replaced interactive tasks with teacher-led grammar instruction and described herself as functioning as her mentor's "pedagogical shadow." The quotation was reported during the post-practicum interview rather than taken from a written evaluation document.

Minh experienced the same examination-oriented structure differently. With lower confidence in his spoken English and concerns about accent and fluency, he treated grammar-focused instruction as a protective scaffold rather than as a restriction. In a mid-practicum narrative frame, he wrote: "When I follow the grammar book step by step, I do not worry about my accent. The structure protects me." This moment marked the point at which procedural structure, rather than communicative performance, became the basis of his emerging professional legitimacy. Grammar-translation routines enabled him to project organization and authority while limiting situations in which he felt linguistically exposed. His mentor's written praise for clarity and structure therefore validated an identity that already aligned with the placement school's expectations.

Vy sought to construct a modern, relationally oriented identity through technology-mediated and cooperative activities. Her mentor, however, characterized digital tools as distracting and peripheral to the core curriculum. Vy wrote in a narrative frame: "Using the app is how I show my students I understand their generation; it is part of who I want to be as their teacher." Technology

use was therefore not merely an instructional preference but a central expression of her imagined professional self. When that practice was dismissed, the feedback was experienced as an identity challenge. Vy avoided direct disagreement and complied silently, explaining that preserving relational harmony and respect for seniority felt safer than defending her preferred pedagogy.

Cross-Case Patterns



The same mentor-controlled structure was experienced as constraining or protective depending on participants' prior positioning.

Figure 2. Cross-case identity-negotiation pathways derived from Table 2 and the participants' narrative portraits; no additional data are introduced.

The three portraits reveal two contrasting responses to a shared structure rather than one uniform practicum pathway. Table 2 compares each participant's imagined professional self, primary constraint, coping response, and identity outcome. The categories were generated through the cross-case procedure described above. "Strategic compliance," for example, groups the lesson-plan rejection, mimicry, and avoidance of disagreement evident in Lan's and Vy's accounts. Minh's reliance on structure as a psychological shield was retained as a distinct case-specific pattern because merging it with compliance would obscure the protective meaning he attributed to traditional pedagogy.

Table 2. Cross-Case Comparison of Identity Negotiation

Participant	Imagined Professional Self	Primary Practicum Constraint	Coping Response	Identity Outcome
Lan	Progressive reformer	Mentor rejection of communicative methods	Suppressed agency; mimicked mentor	Strategic compliance; unresolved tension
Minh	Traditional grammar teacher	Low linguistic confidence	Embraced structure as	Validated identity; reduced friction

Participant	Imagined Professional Self	Primary Practicum Constraint	Coping Response	Identity Outcome
			psychological shield	
Vy	Technology-facilitator	Mentor dismissal of digital tools	Silent compliance to preserve harmony	Suppressed expression; relational strain

Across the three cases, mentor authority and examination-oriented school routines constituted common structural conditions, but their effects depended on participants' prior pedagogical orientation and linguistic confidence. Lan and Vy experienced these conditions as constraints on identities they were attempting to enact, whereas Minh experienced them as resources that reduced linguistic exposure and confirmed an already preferred teaching model. This interpretation remains bounded to three participants at one institution and is not advanced as a prevalence claim about Vietnamese pre-service teachers. Figure 2 visualizes the contrasting identity-negotiation pathways summarized in Table 2.

Discussion

The cross-case findings refine the concept of borrowed agency [25]. Existing research shows that professional identity is shaped through teacher-education experiences, reflective positioning, and the movement between imagined and practiced roles [4], [10], [18], [11], [5]. Trent's formulation emphasizes the practicum as a setting in which autonomy is institutionally constrained. The present cases add a more differentiated proposition: the same mentor-controlled structure may be experienced as restrictive or protective depending on the trainee's prior pedagogical orientation and linguistic confidence. Lan and Vy interpreted borrowed agency as a threat to identities based on communicative innovation, whereas Minh interpreted it as an external scaffold that legitimized a grammar-oriented identity and reduced anxiety. The contribution is therefore not the claim that agency is borrowed, but the observation that borrowed agency is subjectively mediated by the identity resources trainees bring into the practicum.

Attributing these tensions solely to Confucian hierarchy would overstate cultural explanation and understate the practical demands of teaching practice. Research on the practicum identifies workload, preparedness, classroom unpredictability, relational turning points, and access to psychological safety as significant sources of strain across contexts [22], [12], [13], [23]. Lan and Vy also referred to intensive lesson-planning demands in their weekly frames. Hierarchy and face-saving should therefore be interpreted as compounding conditions that shaped how disagreement was expressed, not as the single cause of participants' difficulties.

Minh's reliance on grammar-translation routines also intersects with scholarship on the identities of non-English-dominant teachers. Language teachers continually negotiate legitimacy in relation to perceived linguistic competence [1], and recent syntheses show that professional identity is often constructed through ideological positioning, imagined competence, and participation in teacher-education practices [15]. Research on transitions from pre-service to novice teaching likewise demonstrates that exam-oriented institutional cultures can mediate whether imagined identities are sustained, revised, or abandoned [11]. For Minh, a highly structured methodology

reduced the salience of spoken fluency and allowed authority to be displayed through organization and grammatical knowledge.

These interpretations are intentionally case-bound. They explain how three participants at one university narrated the interaction between mentor evaluation, institutional routines, and prior confidence. The study does not establish that the same trajectories occur across Vietnamese teacher education. Rather, it offers an analytically transferable account that readers may compare with similar practicum settings.

Two practice implications follow directly from the participants' accounts. First, structured co-planning before independent teaching could replace unilateral lesson-plan rejection with dialogic negotiation about curricular goals, classroom management, and pedagogical rationale. Second, mentor preparation should distinguish feedback on pedagogical competence from preferences for a particular teaching style. Research on quality mentoring emphasizes the importance of mentor identity, relational responsiveness, explicit expectations, and reciprocal participation [26], [22], [13], [30], [29]. Supportive connections within the wider school can also strengthen psychological safety and engagement [23]. A protected, low-stakes portion of the practicum in which trainees may test communicative or technology-mediated methods without grade consequences is a plausible program-design response; however, because none of the participants experienced such a structure, this recommendation should be evaluated empirically rather than treated as a finding.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how three Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers negotiated professional identity during an eight-week teaching practicum and how socio-cultural conditions shaped that process. In response to RQ1, the cases show that identity development involved an uneven negotiation of borrowed agency rather than a linear accumulation of teaching skills. Lan and Vy strategically complied when mentor expectations constrained communicative or technology-mediated identities, whereas Minh aligned with the same traditional structure because it reduced linguistic exposure and validated his preferred pedagogy. In response to RQ2, mentor evaluative authority, examination-oriented routines, hierarchy, and norms of relational harmony formed the shared conditions within which these contrasting responses emerged. The central contribution is the confidence-moderated interpretation of borrowed agency: constrained autonomy may be experienced as punitive or protective depending on the pedagogical and linguistic positioning that a trainee brings into the practicum.

As a grounded implication rather than a system-level conclusion, the findings support more dialogic mentoring, feedback that separates pedagogical competence from stylistic conformity, and protected opportunities for low-stakes experimentation. Implementing such changes would require sustained collaboration between teacher-education programs and host schools. Because the study involved three participants at one institution, it cannot determine how these arrangements should be implemented at scale. Multi-institutional longitudinal research incorporating mentor interviews and classroom observation is needed to examine whether the identified pattern extends beyond these cases.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations delimit the interpretation of these findings. First, the study involved three final-year EFL pre-service teachers from one public university in Hanoi. Narrative inquiry prioritizes depth and contextual meaning rather than statistical generalization; nevertheless, the small, single-institution sample restricts the range of institutional, geographic, and socio-economic conditions represented. Future research should compare identity trajectories across urban, rural, public, private, and international placement settings. Second, the analysis relied on participants' narrated experiences generated through interviews, weekly frames, and artifact-elicitation. These methods provided detailed access to meaning-making but did not include researcher-conducted classroom observation or interviews with host mentors. Claims about mentor behavior therefore represent participants' accounts and were not independently corroborated. Combining narrative data with classroom observation, stimulated recall, and mentor perspectives would enable future studies to compare storied identity with situated practice and competing interpretations of the same event. Third, the conditions of data collection may have shaped disclosure. Although the lead researcher did not conduct interviews or evaluate participants, the researcher's previous role as a practicum supervisor at the same university may have influenced what participants felt safe to disclose. Translation from Vietnamese into English may also have altered nuances of emotional intensity despite transcript review and sample back-translation. In addition, because the practicum was a high-stakes assessed experience, participants may have managed how they presented themselves when discussing mentors and institutional conflict. The study was bounded to the immediate eight-week practicum. Teacher professional identity develops across a career, and the present design cannot determine whether strategic compliance became temporary adaptation, long-term pedagogical conformity, or later resistance. Longitudinal follow-up into participants' first years of employment is needed to examine the durability of these identity positions and their implications for professional learning, retention, and instructional practice.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Author

Hoai Thi Thu Nguyen – Department of English, Hanoi University (Vietnam);

 orcid.org/0000-0003-1742-3061

Email: hoaintt@hanu.edu.vn

Authors

Hoai Thi Thu Nguyen – Department of English, Hanoi University (Vietnam);

 orcid.org/0000-0003-1742-3061

Hue Thi Trinh Tran – Department of English, Hanoi University (Vietnam);

 orcid.org/0009-0002-7723-3614

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

H.T.T.N. conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, coordinated data collection, led the formal analysis, and drafted the manuscript. H.T.T.T. contributed to the research design, data interpretation, validation, critical review, and academic editing. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and accept responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors used ChatGPT and Grammarly during the preparation of this manuscript solely to support language editing, improve academic clarity, and ensure consistency of expression. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

- [1] J. C. Richards, "Second language teacher education today," *RELC Journal*, vol. 39, pp. 158–177, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688208092182>
- [2] M. T. Ngo and L. T. Tran, "Current English education in Vietnam: Policy, practices, and challenges," in *English Language Education for Graduate Employability in Vietnam*, L. T. Tran, Ed. Singapore: Springer, 2024, pp. 49–69. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4338-8_3
- [3] B. P. Neupane, L. Gnawali, and H. R. Kafle, "Narratives and identities: A critical review of empirical studies from 2004 to 2022," *TEFLIN Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 330–348, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v33i2/330-348>
- [4] F. Haghighi Irani, A. Chalak, and H. Heidari Tabrizi, "Assessing pre-service teachers' professional identity construction in a three-phase teacher education program in Iran," *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, vol. 5, Art. no. 19, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-020-00100-3>
- [5] M. A. Flores, "Feeling like a student but thinking like a teacher: A study of the development of professional identity in initial teacher education," *Journal of Education for Teaching*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 145–158, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1724659>
- [6] T. T. Le, Y. H. Phuong, T. A. Nguyen, T. T. Pham, A. T. T. Huynh, and T. H. Nguyen, "Illuminating the English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching odyssey: Unveiling the professional identities of pre-service teachers," *F1000Research*, vol. 12, Art. no. 1086, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.139547.1>
- [7] H. H. Nguyen, "Exploring the multifaceted characteristics of pre-service EFL teachers during practicum: A complexity theory perspective in Vietnam," *Applied Research on English Language*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 23–48, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.22108/are.2024.141547.2296>
- [8] P. N. Hao and T. T. T. Tam, "'Resilience fosters sustainability!': Exploring Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' emotional experiences in a school-based teaching practicum through resilience theory," *Educational Point*, vol. 2, no. 1, Art. no. e118, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.71176/edup/16299>
- [9] M. Li, F. Kuang, and W. Dan, "Exploring the characteristics of pre-service EFL teachers' practicum experiences: A complexity theory-based case study in China," *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, vol. 8, Art. no. 13, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-023-00187-4>
- [10] J. Ye, W. Fan, and Y. Wang, "Decoding identity shifts in Chinese EFL pre-service teachers: Insights from the intersubjectivity FLT model," *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, vol. 10, Art. no. 11, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-024-00316-7>

- [11] L. Jiang, K. Yuan, and S. Yu, "Transitioning from pre-service to novice: A study on Macau EFL teachers' identity change," *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, vol. 30, pp. 11–21, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-020-00510-4>
- [12] M. Heinz, "The practicum in initial teacher education—Enduring challenges, evolving practices and future research directions," *European Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 47, no. 5, pp. 865–875, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2024.2428031>
- [13] H. Çelik and E. Zehir Topkaya, "Preservice English teachers' preparedness to teach: Stakeholders' perceptions in teaching practicum," *Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 75, no. 1, pp. 92–106, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00224871231185369>
- [14] E. Nelson and J. Charteris, "Shifting power relations in innovative learning environments: Implications for initial teacher education and practicum," *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 452–468, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2024.2320369>
- [15] I. Moonthiya and M. Stevenson, "Identities of non-English-dominant teachers in transnational language teacher education: A systematic review," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 149, Art. no. 104707, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104707>
- [16] D. J. Clandinin and F. M. Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco, CA, USA: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- [17] G. Barkhuizen and S. Consoli, "Pushing the edge in narrative inquiry," *System*, vol. 102, Art. no. 102656, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102656>
- [18] G. Zhu and M. Chen, "Positioning preservice teachers' reflections and I-positions in the context of teaching practicum: A dialogical-self theory approach," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 117, Art. no. 103734, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103734>
- [19] M. Ruohotie-Lyhty, "Struggling for a professional identity: Two newly qualified language teachers' identity narratives during the first years at work," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 30, pp. 120–129, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.11.002>
- [20] E. Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803932>
- [21] F. Ershadi, M. Nazari, and M. S. Chegenie, "Native speakerism as a source of agency-related critical incidents: Implications for non-native English teachers' professional identity construction," *System*, vol. 120, Art. no. 103182, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2023.103182>
- [22] G. Hagenauer, J. Waber, and L. de Zordo, "'She never actually let you walk into a trap': Exploring relational turning point events in the mentor-mentee relationship in the practicum," *Professional Development in Education*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 402–415, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1876155>
- [23] B. Dreer-Goethe, "The impact of mentor support and high-quality connections on student teachers' psychological safety and engagement during practicum," *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 10, Art. no. 1499749, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2025.1499749>
- [24] D. C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*. Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- [25] J. Trent, "From learner to teacher: Practice, language, and identity in a teaching practicum," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 41, no. 4, pp. 426–440, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2013.838621>
- [26] A. Badia and A. Clarke, "The practicum-mentor identity in the teacher education context," *Teaching Education*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 355–371, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2021.1920910>
- [27] R. Yuan, "The dark side of mentoring on pre-service language teachers' identity formation," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 55, pp. 188–197, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.01.012>
- [28] L. H. Phan, *Teaching English as an International Language: Identity, Resistance and Negotiation*. Bristol, U.K.: Multilingual Matters, 2008.

- [29] N. J. Ellis, D. Alonzo, and H. T. M. Nguyen, "Elements of a quality pre-service teacher mentor: A literature review," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 92, Art. no. 103072, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103072>
- [30] J. Pattison-Meek, "The unsung heroes of practicum mentorship: Moving toward a triad model inclusive of student voice to support student teachers' professional learning," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 143, Art. no. 104553, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104553>
- [31] J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: SAGE, 2018.
- [32] G. Barkhuizen, "Revisiting narrative frames: An instrument for investigating language teaching and learning," *System*, vol. 47, pp. 12–27, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2014.09.014>
- [33] D. E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 5–23, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103>
- [34] S. Consoli and S. Ganassin, Eds., *Reflexivity in Applied Linguistics: Opportunities, Challenges, and Suggestions*. London, U.K.: Routledge, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003149408>
- [35] American Psychological Association, *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2002, amended effective June 1, 2010, and January 1, 2017)*. Washington, DC, USA: American Psychological Association, 2017. [Online]. Available: <https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/ethics-code-2017.pdf>