

Novice EFL Teachers' Professional Identities in Reading Instruction: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study investigates how a novice EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher enacts professional identity within the context of reading instruction. While prior research has established the dynamic and multifaceted nature of teacher identity, limited attention has been given to how professional identity is constructed and enacted through subject-specific pedagogical practices, particularly in reading instruction. This qualitative case study draws on interview and classroom observation data to explore how a novice EFL teacher enacts professional identities in reading instruction. The findings suggest that the teacher's professional identity is not a fixed set of roles but is expressed through situated teaching practices and professional reflections. Specifically, three interrelated identity positions were identified—facilitator of meaning-making, cultural and textual guide, and reflective learner. These positions were reflected in instructional practices such as scaffolding, interpretive questioning, and the provision of cultural and textual background knowledge, as well as in the teacher's willingness to learn from students and engage in professional development. Furthermore, the findings highlight the relationship between the teacher's professional identity, individual agency, and the working conditions of her teaching context. By situating teacher identity within the practices of reading instruction, this study extends existing research by foregrounding the practice-based and context-sensitive nature of novice teacher identity. An Activity Theory perspective further informs the interpretation of how professional identity relates to pedagogical practices, instructional tools, and contextual conditions.

Keywords: Teacher Identity, Novice Teacher, Reading Instruction, Professional Roles, EFL

1. Introduction

As noted by Kagan (1992, p. 147), “without a strong image of self as teacher, a novice may be doomed to flounder,” underscoring the critical role of self-concept in novice teacher development. In recent years, there has been a growing body of research on teacher identity (TI) within the field of education. Teacher identity is generally understood as teachers' professional self-concept that informs their roles and instructional practices (Pennington, 2015; Sachs, 2005). In the present study, teacher identity is operationalised as teachers' self-perceived understanding of their roles in reading instruction within a Chinese university context, as reflected in both their conceptualisations and classroom practices. Teacher identity has been widely recognised as a key factor shaping instructional practices and professional development. It influences how teachers interpret pedagogical knowledge, position themselves within institutional contexts, and engage with students and professional communities (Yazan, 2022; Varghese et al., 2016). Examining teacher identity, therefore, provides important insights into how teachers enact their professional roles in situated teaching practices.

Novice teachers, particularly language teachers, face challenges that influence the construction of their professional identities. Novice teachers commonly refer to newly qualified teachers who have less than five years of teaching experience (Kim & Roth, 2011; Makoa & Segalo, 2021). In the field of English language education, novice EFL teachers may experience additional challenges associated with teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) within specific educational contexts. Research on novice EFL teachers frequently indicates that they experience an important stage when their idealised perceptions of teaching clash with the realities of classroom practice, which further influences their teacher identities (Farrell, 2012; Huang et al., 2021; Li & Costa, 2018). As novice EFL teachers transition from teacher education to the early phases of their careers, they often undergo significant identity adjustments, influencing both their professional identity development and their long-term teaching commitment (Jiang et al., 2021). Thus, understanding how novice EFL teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities in the early stages of their careers is essential for supporting their professional development.

Teacher identity construction is closely intertwined with teaching practice, particularly in the context of reading instruction. The ways teachers approach reading pedagogy may both reflect and shape their professional identities, as instructional decisions influence how teachers perceive their roles and interact with students. Previous studies suggest that teaching practices can prompt teachers to construct or reconsider their professional identities, which in turn reshape classroom practices (Kaya & Dikilitaş, 2019; Lee, 2013). In many EFL

contexts, reading instruction is also shaped by strong assessment pressures. Teachers responsible for high-stakes subjects often experience greater job-related stress, which may influence their teaching beliefs, strategies, and sense of self-efficacy (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Such pressures are particularly evident in China, where English is a compulsory subject from primary to tertiary education and reading competence plays a central role in national English proficiency examinations, such as CET-4, CET-6, TEM-4, and TEM-8 (Zhang & Seepho, 2013). Given the prominent position of reading in these assessments, EFL teachers frequently encounter tensions between instructional goals and testing demands, which may further shape their professional identities.

Past studies have explored various aspects of novice teachers; however, the relationship between teacher identity and teaching practice remains insufficiently examined. Over the past decade, language teacher identity has attracted increasing attention due to its significant influence on pedagogical decisions and professional growth. In China, research on EFL reading instruction has mainly concentrated on instructional strategies (Cheng et al., 2023; Pan & Zhang, 2020; Zhang, 2024) and technology-assisted reading instruction (He, 2022; Peng et al., 2023; Wang, 2022). While these studies provide valuable insights into classroom practices, they tend to focus primarily on instructional aspects rather than teachers' professional identities. Consequently, little is known about how novice EFL teachers construct and enact their professional identities in the process of teaching reading. Addressing this gap may contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between teacher identity and instructional practice. Hence, this research aims to examine how a novice EFL teacher enacts professional identities and roles within an EFL reading classroom context. Specifically, this research is guided by one central question: *What kinds of identities and professional roles does a novice EFL teacher enact during the teaching of reading?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Identity Construction among Novice Teachers

Teacher identity is an important subject of study for teachers' professional development, which not only involves language teaching knowledge and skills but also the meaning of being a language teacher (Lee, 2013; Richards, 2010). Understanding teachers' professional identity involves examining how their identities are constructed and negotiated. EFL teachers' professional identity has become a prominent topic in language teacher development, with growing research conceptualising identity as a dynamic process negotiated within specific teaching contexts (e.g. Kennedy, 2023; Nazari et al., 2023; Zhang & Hwang, 2023). Across different contexts, teacher identity evolves through a continuous and dynamic process shaped by the interplay of internal and external influences (Varghese et al., 2005). While teacher identity develops through the ongoing interaction between personal and contextual factors, novice language teachers, particularly in EFL contexts, often encounter challenges that may influence the development of their professional identities.

During the process of teacher identity construction, identity tensions frequently emerge among novice teachers. There has been a growing body of research examining the formation and development of identity among novice language teachers in recent years (e.g., Avalos-Rivera, 2019; Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Yuan et al., 2020). Studies on language teacher identity indicate that novice teachers frequently experience a transitional stage during which their idealised expectations of teaching confront the realities of classroom practice. Given the complicated nature of identity, the development process is affected by an array of internal and external elements, involving personal beliefs (Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Yuan & Zhang, 2020), local communities of practice (CoPs) (Chen et al., 2023; Nguyen & Le, 2025), and institutional environment (Han & Zhang, 2025; Tran-Thanh, 2024). Given that early-career challenges can lead to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and teacher attrition, it is important to better understand how novice teachers navigate these difficulties and develop more resilient and adaptable professional identities in an evolving language education context (Uras Eren & Atay, 2025; Yuan, 2019).

Nevertheless, these tensions and challenges may also create opportunities for novice teachers to engage in self-reflection and exercise agency, thereby shaping the development of their professional identities. As reviewed in the literature, current studies on teacher identity have begun to investigate novice teacher identity construction and negotiation in China (e.g. Tao & Gao, 2018; Xu, 2021; Yuan et al., 2020). Novice teachers' agency allows them to proactively engage with resources, which in turn mediates the construction of their professional identities (Xu, 2021). In addition, developing the capacity for reflection is essential for EFL teachers, as it enables them to understand evolving professional identity demands and transform identity tensions into opportunities for professional growth (Lu & Zhang, 2023).

2.2 Teachers' Professional Role Identities in EFL Teaching Practice

Teacher identity has emerged as an influential factor in language teaching and teachers' professional development. Research has consistently illustrated the crucial role that L2 teachers' identity construction plays in their classroom practice and professional development (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; Kessler, 2021; Tao & Gao, 2018). To be more specific, teachers' practice prompts the formation or reconsideration of their teacher identity, thereby modifying their classroom practice (Kaya & Dikilitaş, 2019; Lee, 2013). In other words, the ways that teachers instruct can influence their identity, which in turn affects how they approach the classroom and engage with their students. Meanwhile, English education in China is currently undergoing substantial reform, shifting from traditional knowledge-transmission models toward competency-oriented and innovation-driven pedagogies. Within this changing landscape, the process of identity construction for Chinese novice EFL teachers becomes particularly complex, as they must negotiate reform expectations alongside the specific demands of the local EFL context.

Teacher identity construction can be illuminated by examining the interaction between identity and teaching practices, particularly in reading instruction. Reading deserves to be examined separately due to its distinct significance. Within Chinese university EFL contexts,

developing EFL reading competence is widely recognised as a central priority in language education. Reading remains a dominant component of university English education in China, both in instructional focus and in examination importance. In this vein, understanding novice teacher identity requires examining teachers' instructional decisions and how they enact their practices in EFL reading instruction. Thus, a novice EFL teacher's professional identity and the roles enacted in EFL reading instruction can provide valuable insights into the relationship between teacher identity and classroom practice.

Teacher identity encompasses teachers' beliefs, values, and assumptions about teaching, which shape and regulate the professional roles they enact in the classroom (Farrell, 2011). Professional roles are often viewed as a manifestation of teacher identity in the classroom (Pennington, 2015, p. 17; Volkman & Anderson, 1998). Recent research has also identified several enacted identity dimensions among Chinese university EFL teachers, such as facilitator, motivator, reflective practitioner, and researcher, reflecting the diverse professional roles teachers perform in language teaching contexts (Chen et al., 2023). Previous studies have also shown that novice teachers tend to adopt multiple and dynamic professional roles. For example, Iranian EFL teachers conceptualised their role identity in three main categories—manager, professional, and acculturator, which comprised thirteen sub-roles such as knowledge transmitter, interaction supervisor, collaborator, and learner (Sahragard & Sadeghi, 2017). Some of these findings are consistent with those reported in other studies (e.g., Aghaei et al., 2020; Farrell, 2011). While these findings provide useful insights into the professional roles enacted by EFL teachers across contexts, further research is needed to understand how such roles are constructed and enacted by novice teachers in specific teaching contexts.

2.3 Activity Theory

In the present study, Engeström's (2015) Activity Theory (AT) was adopted as a theoretical perspective to examine how a novice EFL teacher's identities are formed, negotiated, and developed within their sociocultural contexts. Within this framework, identity formation is conceptualised as an activity situated within an activity system. The second-generation model, comprising six interrelated components, provides the analytical foundation for this research. As depicted in Figure 1, each activity system is represented as a triangular model, which serves as the minimal unit of analysis. This system consists of six interacting elements: the subject (the individual under study), the object (the intended activity), tools or mediating artefacts (e.g., instruments, language, and machines used to mediate the activity), rules (the norms and conventions regulating actions), the division of labour (the distribution of roles and responsibilities within the system), and the community (the social group sharing the same general object) (Engeström, 2015).

The exploration of the novice teacher's identity and professional roles in the context of EFL reading instruction was grounded in this framework, through which identity construction in a Chinese university setting was conceptualised as an activity system. An activity-theoretical perspective offers important advantages for understanding identity. It not only situates identity within a broader sociocultural system but also foregrounds the role of individual agency by emphasising how the teacher interprets, negotiates, and engages with the activities in which they are embedded. In addition, it conceptualises identity as dynamic and developmental, highlighting its ongoing and fluid construction through participation in activity over time (Cross, 2018).

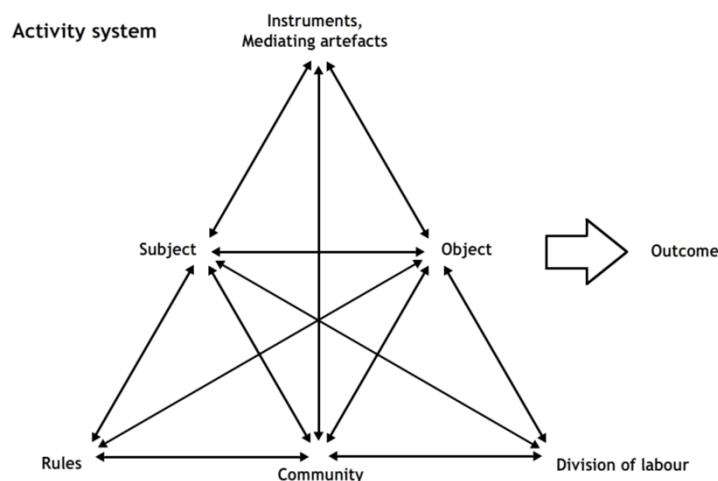


Figure 1. Engeström's Activity Theory (adapted from Engeström, 2015, p. 203)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

With the aim of conceptualising teacher identity and describing the roles played by a novice teacher in the teaching of EFL reading, this study adopted a qualitative single-case study design. A qualitative approach was employed to generate rich and in-depth understandings of the novice teacher's professional identity. The case study design was particularly appropriate for this research, as it enabled a situated and nuanced exploration of novice teacher identity within the context of a Chinese university. As noted by Stake (1995), case study research is

especially valuable for capturing the complexity of a specific case.

First, compared with other approaches such as surveys, case studies enable researchers to explore a wide range of themes and issues within a bounded and context-specific setting, thereby allowing for a more nuanced understanding of particular groups, organisations, or contexts (Gray, 2018, p. 211). Second, in relation to the research questions, case studies are particularly well suited to inquiries that seek to explain contemporary situations or generate in-depth accounts of complex social phenomena (Yin, 2018). This is especially relevant to the present study, which aims to examine how a novice EFL teacher constructs and enacts her professional identity in the context of teaching reading. Moreover, adopting a qualitative case study approach aligns with current methodological trends in teacher identity research. Indeed, a substantial number of recent studies have employed case study designs to explore teacher identity (e.g., Lee & Jang, 2023; Nazari et al., 2023; Schneider & Lengeling, 2025), highlighting its appropriateness for capturing the complexity and situated nature of identity construction.

3.2 Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a university on the east coast of mainland China. Shandong X University (pseudonym) is a comprehensive, provincially key public institution. It was selected for both its accessibility and its potential to reflect typical features of Chinese higher education. The research setting was further justified by the broader context of Shandong Province. As a populous region with a large number of students, teachers, and higher education institutions, it is widely recognised for its strong emphasis on education, which is often associated with intense academic pressure and increasing peer competition.

In China, universities commonly offer English-related degree programmes and follow national assessment systems, including the CET-4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET-6 (Band 6), TEM-4 (Test for English Majors Band 4), and TEM-8 (Band 8). English reading courses are a standard component of these programmes. The selected institution is non-religious, meeting the study's inclusion criteria.

In line with the research objectives, one participant was recruited. Non-probability sampling strategies, namely criterion sampling and convenience sampling (Gray, 2018, p. 177), were employed. The participant met a set of predetermined criteria (Gray, 2018, p. 180). First, priority was given to a teacher who held a master's degree in English teaching or TESOL, or who had received prior teaching training, as such a participant was likely to have a solid understanding of language teaching, learning, and linguistics. Second, the participant was required to be a novice EFL teacher with less than five years of teaching experience and to be currently teaching English reading to undergraduate students at a university. Third, the participant needed to provide informed consent for participation in interviews and classroom observation.

In Chinese universities, full-time English teachers are typically required to hold degrees in English-related fields, such as English language, literature, translation and interpreting, business English, education, or TESOL. In addition, they must obtain a Teacher Qualification Certificate and complete professional development programmes organised by relevant educational authorities prior to employment. Accordingly, one teacher who taught reading to freshmen in Shandong X University was chosen as the case for this study. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of this participant. To maintain anonymity, the participant was assigned the pseudonym Amy.

Table 1. Profile of the Participant

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Teaching Exp. (years)	Highest degree
Amy	35	F	2.5	PHD

3.3 Instruments and Procedures

Two data collection methods were employed in this study: interviews and classroom observation conducted over a three-week period. The interviews comprised two types: a semi-structured interview and a stimulated recall interview conducted following the classroom observation. Specifically, the instruments included a semi-structured interview protocol, a systematic classroom observation scheme, and a stimulated recall protocol. Interviews provided insights into identity construction, while observations captured the identities and professional roles enacted in practice. Collectively, these methods generated multiple sources of data, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the participant's professional identity.

Several formal procedures were undertaken to obtain approval from relevant authorities and to recruit the participant for this study. First, approval was obtained from the principal of the participating university, and the aims of the study were clearly communicated. Second, an ethics approval letter was provided to support the conduct of interviews and classroom observation. Formal research approval was secured from the participating institution. In addition, the Academic Research Office was fully informed about the objectives, methodology, procedures, and timeline of the study. The process of obtaining permission for the interviews and classroom observation was relatively straightforward. As a matter of courtesy, the researcher contacted the potential participant via email one month prior to the commencement of the study to invite her to participate.

Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted. The pilot interview was conducted with Amy, who subsequently agreed to participate in the main study. The pilot interview helped refine the interview questions and procedures before the main data collection. Based on the pilot study, the interviews and observation protocols were refined before the commencement of the formal research. Data collection was carried out in two phases. In Phase 1, a semi-structured individual interview was conducted with the participant to develop

a comprehensive profile. Prior to the interview, the participant was informed about the sampling procedures, research objectives, and data collection processes. The interview elicited information about the participant's educational and professional backgrounds, self-perceived knowledge of EFL and reading instruction, and her teaching context. In Phase 2, the classroom observation was conducted with the participant, supported by field notes. The observation was video-recorded to provide a primary source of data for subsequent analysis. Segments related to the teaching of reading were identified and transcribed. These segments informed the design of follow-up stimulated recall interview, which aimed to gain deeper insights into classroom practices. During the stimulated recall interview, the participant was invited to elaborate on the rationale behind her instructional decisions and classroom discourse.

3.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves systematically summarising data and presenting findings in a credible and defensible manner (Gay et al., 2012). In line with the iterative nature of qualitative research, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently, beginning with the first interaction and continuing throughout the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Gay et al., 2012). This study followed the analytical procedures outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018), including data preparation, familiarisation, coding, theme development, and the representation of findings. This framework was adopted for its systematic yet flexible approach, which facilitates the development of nuanced insights and is well suited to examining complex processes such as professional identity construction.

In this study, Tencent Meeting and NVivo 14 were employed for transcription and qualitative data analysis. Audio data were initially transcribed using Tencent Meeting and subsequently checked manually for accuracy. Interview and observation data were analysed in NVivo 14 following inductive thematic coding procedures. In addition, methodological triangulation was adopted to enhance the study's credibility, drawing on data from the semi-structured interview, classroom observation, and stimulated recall interview. Member checking involved inviting the participant to review the transcripts and interpretations and provide further clarification where necessary.

4. Research Findings

The participant in this case study was assigned the pseudonym Amy. For data analysis and reporting, the following codes were used: SS refers to the semi-structured interview, SR to the stimulated recall interview, and OB to the classroom observation. This study was guided by one primary research question: What kinds of identities and professional roles does a novice EFL teacher enact during the teaching of reading?

Amy is a 35-year-old Chinese EFL teacher in the English department. She completed her BA at her current institution, followed by an MA and a PhD in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from a national university. She briefly worked as a media editor before entering academia, a decision shaped by personal interest, family influence, and the perceived stability of teaching.

At the time of the study, she had around two and a half years of teaching experience, with a workload of 16 weekly sessions. In addition to teaching, she served as both a class teacher—responsible for student management, advising, and pastoral care—and a part-time administrative assistant handling routine departmental tasks. She reported heavy workload pressure and emphasised the need for stronger institutional support, particularly for novice teachers' wellbeing and professional identity development.

Analysis of the semi-structured interview, classroom observation, and stimulated recall interview data shows that Amy enacted multiple professional roles in her reading instruction. These roles were not fixed; rather, they were expressed through her pedagogical decisions, classroom interactions, and reflections on student learning. Three interrelated identity positions were identified: facilitator of meaning-making, cultural and textual guide, and reflective learner. Each role is identified based on evidence triangulated across the three data sources.

(1) Teacher as Facilitator of Meaning-Making

A central role in Amy's teaching was facilitating meaning-making. She supported students in understanding complex texts and encouraged independent interpretation. Instead of positioning herself as the primary source of knowledge, she guided students' interpretive processes and promoted active engagement with reading materials.

Interview data further show that Amy placed a strong emphasis on developing students' independent thinking through reading. She revealed some of her pedagogical beliefs, stating, "I want students to look beyond the text and engage in deeper thinking." Even when working with relatively simple articles, she hoped they would reflect on the topics involved and even consider broader ideas, such as perspectives on life (SS, 00:28:42). She also described her role as an "auxiliary," highlighting that her responsibility was to support students' comprehension rather than control the learning process. This view aligns with a facilitative, rather than transmissive, professional role.

This identity was also evident in her classroom practice. During the observed lesson, Amy frequently employed guiding questions and contextual strategies to help students infer the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary instead of providing direct explanations. For example, when addressing the word "meter," she encouraged students to draw on prior knowledge and everyday experiences. An excerpt from the classroom observation is presented below:

"Meter" in "too cheap to meter"—what does it usually mean? Right, we often think of meter as a noun, like a unit of measurement. But here, it's used as a verb. So what could it mean? Think about it. Right. To meter means to measure usage with a device, like how we measure gas, electricity, or water. So, "meters" refers to measuring devices—like water meters or electricity meters in your home.

(OB, 00:05:01)

As illustrated in the excerpt, Amy used a sequence of guiding questions to help students infer the unfamiliar meaning of “meter” within a specific context. This interaction demonstrates how her facilitative role was enacted through scaffolding, with meaning jointly constructed rather than directly delivered.

Evidence from the stimulated recall interview further supports this interpretation of her professional role. Amy emphasised the importance of encouraging students to work through texts independently, noting their prior tendency to depend on teacher explanations. Although withholding immediate answers was challenging, she considered it necessary for developing students’ interpretive confidence (SR, 00:03:53). Taken together, data from the three sources reveal a consistent pattern of identity enactment in which Amy functioned as a facilitator of meaning-making. Her use of guided questioning and contextual clues reflected her intention to encourage students’ active engagement with texts and independent interpretation.

(2) Teacher as Cultural and Textual Guide

The role of the teacher as cultural and textual guide was the second professional role that emerged in Amy’s reading instruction. This role involves situating reading materials within broader cultural, historical, and literary contexts to support students’ comprehension. During the semi-structured interview, Amy conceptualised this role metaphorically as that of “a tour guide,” explaining that she aimed to lead students through texts rather than simply transmit information. She emphasised the importance of directing students’ attention to relevant background knowledge and encouraging them to dig deeper into the reading material beyond surface-level understanding.

Classroom observation data supported this interpretation. Prior to introducing new reading passages, Amy consistently provided contextual information about the author and the text. For instance, she frequently began lessons by inviting students to first learn about the author, supported by slides presenting biographical details, literary contributions, and contextual background. She also incorporated materials from online platforms such as Microsoft Bing, Google, and YouTube to provide additional contextual information and support textual exploration. These practices suggest that Amy positioned herself as a guide who helped students explore the cultural and literary dimensions of reading.

This enacted role was further clarified in the stimulated recall interview, where Amy explained the pedagogical rationale behind her lesson design:

In my opinion, understanding a text often depends on situating it within its broader social context. In the absence of such contextual knowledge, students may find it difficult to comprehend both the subject matter and the author’s underlying intentions. Therefore, it is important for students to acquire foundational cultural knowledge, particularly familiarity with influential authors, as this can support their learning in subsequent courses, such as British and American literature. (SR, 00:04:40)

Her approach can be interpreted in relation to pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), particularly her understanding of how cultural and disciplinary knowledge may support students’ reading comprehension. These statements particularly demonstrate an awareness of how cultural and disciplinary knowledge can enhance reading comprehension. She also related this conception to her own learning experiences, noting that early exposure to cultural and literary content fostered her interest in English and indirectly supported her reading development. This belief underpins her teaching, reinforcing her role as a guide who seeks to broaden students’ perspectives and promote engagement with texts.

(3) Teacher as Reflective Learner

The role of the teacher as reflective learner characterises Amy’s continuous engagement in learning through classroom interaction, reflective practice, and participation in professional communities, particularly within the context of reading instruction. In the semi-structured interview, she metaphorically described herself as “a lifelong learner” (SS, 00:54:00). Data also indicate that Amy viewed learning as a reciprocal process embedded in teacher–student interaction. She noted that both she and her students could gain new insights through classroom exchanges, suggesting that teaching reading is not a unidirectional transfer of knowledge but a shared learning experience. Specifically, rather than positioning herself as the sole authority, she framed reading as a collaborative inquiry. This aligns with her self-perception as “also a reader,” sharing her own reading experiences with students:

I think it depends on how you define professionalism. Teachers and students are different, but I don’t see a huge gap in status. I also see myself as a reader. I share my reading experiences and thoughts with students and discuss whether they think the same way. If not, we explore why and whose interpretation makes more sense. Sometimes they notice things I haven’t. In that process, we all learn from each other. So, I don’t really feel like a “professional expert.” (SS, 00:48:23).

Amy was characterised by ongoing self-reflection, encompassing both her instructional practices and research responsibilities. For instance, she expressed a sense of confusion about how to improve her professional performance and negotiate a sustainable balance between these competing demands. In reflecting on her professional development, she acknowledged constraints in her own knowledge and stressed the need for continuous learning to compensate for these gaps. Notably, she emphasised the need for greater attention to and support for novice teachers from institutions and the wider professional community (SS, 01:04:39).

Findings from the classroom observation further support this identity. During the observed reading lesson, Amy occasionally articulated her own interpretations of texts and encouraged students to co-construct meaning, especially when dealing with complex or ambiguous

content. In addition, stimulated recall data further highlight her openness to students' perspectives and her interest in diverse responses (SR, 00:07:04), reinforcing her orientation toward lifelong learning. Beyond the classroom, Amy actively engaged in professional development by seeking support from experienced colleagues and participating in lectures, training sessions, and academic seminars (SR, 00:16:15), indicating that her learning extended into broader institutional contexts.

5. Discussion

Drawing on Activity Theory (Engeström, 2015) as a theoretical perspective, this study examines how a novice EFL teacher's professional identity was enacted and negotiated in the context of reading instruction. AT provides a lens for interpreting the relationship between the teacher's pedagogical practices, professional understandings, and sociocultural context. The following discussion interprets the three identity positions in relation to these contextual and pedagogical dimensions.

Findings from the case study indicate that the novice EFL teacher's professional identity is neither fixed nor isolated. Instead, it is expressed through a set of interrelated roles that develop in specific teaching contexts. In this case, three interrelated identity positions were identified from interview and classroom observation data, including the role of facilitator of meaning-making, the role of cultural and textual guide, and the role of reflective learner. This diversity is consistent with the view in previous literature that teacher identity is dynamic, multifaceted, and shaped by particular educational contexts (Barkhuizen, 2017; Beijaard et al., 2004; Chen & Huang, 2022).

Some recent research has similarly highlighted that language teachers frequently position themselves as facilitators or supporters of learning (Chen et al., 2023; Liu & Sammons, 2021; Atai et al., 2018; Wang & Du, 2016). However, these studies often examine identity from several perspectives and do not specifically concentrate on novice teachers. The present study advances this line of inquiry by illustrating how professional identity is enacted by a novice EFL teacher within the context of EFL reading. To be more specific, Amy's facilitator identity was realised through ongoing scaffolding of lexical inference and the use of interpretive questioning, encouraging students to actively engage with the text. Rather than acting as a knowledge transmitter, she framed reading as a process of meaning-making. This finding both aligns with and extends previous research by emphasising learners as active constructors of understanding, rather than passive recipients of information.

Despite contextual constraints, teachers demonstrate agency by actively mediating and transforming their working conditions, enabling them to pursue pedagogical goals and maintain coherent professional identities. Amy's enactment of her role as a cultural and textual guide reflects her agency in responding to institutional constraints. Despite relying on prescribed textbooks and limited resources, she supplemented her instruction with slides presenting biographical details, literary contributions, and contextual background, and incorporated online materials (e.g., Bilibili, Google, and YouTube) with an aim to enhance student engagement and deepen textual exploration. From an AT perspective, such materials can be understood as mediational tools through which she pursued her pedagogical goals. This finding is in line with prior research suggesting that issues related to textbook quality and usability can give rise to identity tensions among novice teachers (Ghiasvand et al., 2023). These practices indicate that she positioned herself as a guide who cultivated students' engagement with both the cultural and literary dimensions of reading while working within institutional rules.

The enactment of the teacher as a reflective learner reflects an identity that frames reading instruction as an ongoing, practice-based process. Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Yuan & Mak, 2018; Farrell & Stanclik, 2023), novice teachers may engage in continuous reflection and adjust their instructional approaches accordingly. Extending this line of research, the findings suggest that this identity emerged as an adaptive response to specific reading-related challenges, particularly students' limited engagement and comprehension difficulties. When encountering tensions, Amy systematically reflected on and refined her instructional approaches, particularly in relation to teaching materials and interactional strategies. Her flexible use of supplementary teaching materials beyond the prescribed textbook illustrates how Amy negotiated her role as a cultural and textual guide by drawing on additional resources to support reading instruction. From an AT perspective, these findings can be interpreted as illustrating the relationship between Amy's individual agency and the broader conditions of her teaching activity. This process of negotiation aligns with Nguyen and Ngo (2023), who show from an AT perspective that identity informs how teachers respond to tensions.

The findings further suggest that professional identity is not merely discursively constructed but can also be examined through situated pedagogical practices. In this case, Amy's three identity positions—facilitator of meaning-making, cultural and textual guide, and reflective learner were dynamically enacted through moment-by-moment instructional moves, including guided questioning, the provision of background knowledge, her willingness to learn from students, and her engagement in professional development. These findings support a practice-oriented view of teacher identity, suggesting that identity can be understood as developing through engagement in teaching activities. In line with prior literature, the coexistence of multiple roles underscores that professional identity is not a fixed set of attributes but an emergent and contextually negotiated phenomenon (Varghese et al., 2005; Pennington, 2015).

In addition, Amy's case highlights the importance of examining the development of novice teacher identity as a means of supporting sustained professional growth. It is crucial to understand the complexity of language teacher identity, as teachers' professional development is often shaped by how they perceive themselves and their teaching efficacy, particularly in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts (Lee & Jang, 2023). Investigating EFL teachers' professional identities can shed light on their classroom practices and provide insights into supporting their career development and well-being (Lu & Zhang, 2023). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of their professional identity may shape their attitudes toward their profession and influence how they respond to challenges in their working environments (Beijaard et al., 2004). Thus, to achieve sustainable professional development, novice EFL teachers may benefit from

opportunities to develop a better understanding of their professional identities.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how a novice EFL teacher constructed and enacted professional identity in the context of teaching reading. The findings suggest that teacher identity is not a fixed or internally held attribute but an emergent, practice-based phenomenon shaped through the dynamic interaction between individual agency and contextual conditions. In this case, three interrelated identity positions—facilitator of meaning-making, cultural and textual guide, and reflective learner—were identified, each reflected in the teacher's situated pedagogical practices and professional reflections.

This study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it extends existing research on teacher identity by illustrating how a novice teacher's professional identity is expressed not only through discourse but also through instructional decisions in specific subject-matter contexts, particularly EFL reading instruction. Second, informed by an AT perspective, the study highlights how a teacher's pedagogical practices and professional understandings can be interpreted in relation to the tools and working conditions of the teaching context. The findings also highlight the importance of considering novice teachers' professional learning and working conditions when examining their identity development.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. As this study is based on a single case, the findings are not intended for statistical generalisation. The results should be understood as context-specific insights into how a novice EFL teacher constructs and enacts professional identity in a given institutional setting. Moreover, the data may not fully reflect the longer-term evolution of teacher identity given that they were collected over a relatively limited period. Although the study offers an in-depth account of identity construction in the teaching of reading, the results may not be directly transferable to other contexts. Future research could examine multiple cases across diverse institutional settings and adopt longitudinal designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of novice teacher identity construction.

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Author contributions

P.P. conceived and designed the study, conducted the literature search and analysis, and drafted the main manuscript. Dr. N.K.A. critically revised and refined the manuscript. Prof. A.B.R. reviewed the manuscript and provided constructive feedback. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declaration of the Use of AI

ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.5) was used solely for language editing and grammar checking. All suggestions were reviewed and approved by the authors.

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