

A Review of Foreign Language Teacher Identity in China: An Analysis Based on 32 CNKI Empirical Studies

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Abstract

This study reviews 32 empirical studies on the identity of Chinese foreign language teachers published in CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) from 2011 to 2023. The findings indicate that the number of empirical studies on the identity of foreign language teachers in China has increased year by year, but it seems to have entered a dormant period in 2024. In terms of research methods, the studies on foreign language teachers' identity in China are primarily qualitative, with mixed-methods research as a supplement, and the theoretical perspectives are diverse. Moreover, the results of the 32 studies reviewed show fluidity, diversity, and context-dependency nature of language teacher identity. In addition, this study points out the limitations of the empirical studies on foreign language teacher identity in China in terms of research subjects and focused context and offers suggestions for future research.

Keywords

Language teacher identity; language teacher education; foreign language teaching.

1. Introduction

Foreign language teacher identity refers to the way in which foreign language teachers perceive themselves and how they understand their roles in their work. The development of foreign language teacher identity is essential to their professional growth, requiring the enhancement of both their teaching knowledge and skills, as well as the establishment of their identity as foreign language educators [1]. Therefore, comprehending the intricacies of foreign language teacher identity is crucial, as their perception of the profession influences their professional development, interactions with peers and colleagues, pedagogical decisions, and classroom practices, ultimately affecting the quality and efficacy of foreign language instruction and acquisition [2]. Given this, the current study aims to illuminate the current state of empirical research on foreign language teacher identity within the Chinese context by analyzing relevant studies from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) published between 2011 and 2023.

2. Methodology

The data for the present study is sourced from CNKI. The researcher utilized the advanced search feature of CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), selected Chinese academic journals from the CNKI general database, and checked the options for the "Peking University Core Journal List" and the "Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index" to include core journal papers. Then, the researcher entered the keyword "teacher identity" in the subject term search bar. Upon acquiring the search results, the researcher chose the item "foreign languages and literatures" in the discipline column on the left side of the webpage, resulting in the retrieval of 48 academic literatures. Researchers meticulously reviewed the titles and abstracts of papers, eliminating those with low relevance and non-empirical studies, ultimately identifying 32 empirical research papers published between May 2011 and October 2023. By conducting a

thorough analysis of the 32 empirical papers mentioned, the researchers sought to investigate five specific research questions (RQs) related to empirical studies on the identities of foreign language teachers published in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure.

- RQ1. What research trends have emerged?
- RQ2. What research methods have been used?
- RQ3. What theoretical perspectives have been adopted?
- RQ4. What research topics have been covered?
- RQ5. What research results have emerged?

3. Findings

3.1. Research trends

The research trends of empirical foreign language teacher identity research are shown in Table 1. It can be seen that the empirical research on foreign language teacher identities in the principal journals of CNKI commenced in 2011. In this year, Xu examined the identity transformation of a college English instructor and its influencing factors within the context of assessment reform through narrative inquiry [3]. It was found in the study that the formation of foreign language teacher identity is a dynamic process influenced significantly by social context and individual developmental history. Table 1 illustrates that, from 2011 to 2020, the volume of empirical research on foreign language teacher identity remained stable, with fewer than four journal articles published each year, predominantly averaging 1 to 2 papers annually. Between 2021 and 2023, there was a notable increase in empirical studies concerning foreign language teacher identities, with 6, 7, and 5 relevant empirical research articles published in core journals in those respective years. The year 2024 marks a lull in the examination of foreign language teacher identities, and no pertinent empirical studies on this subject have been published in leading journals.

Table 1. Research trends of language teacher identity empirical research by year

Year	Number of Empirical Research
2011	1
2012	1
2013	2
2014	1
2015	4
2016	0
2017	1
2018	2
2019	1
2020	3
2021	6
2022	7
2023	5

The distribution of empirical research on foreign language teachers' identities in each core journal of CNKI is shown in Table 2. As can be seen from the table, the distribution of empirical research on foreign language teachers' identities included in the core journals of CNKI is relatively balanced. Among them, two journals, *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching* and *Foreign Language World*, pay more attention to the research on foreign language teachers' identities, having published 5 and 4 relevant empirical studies, respectively. Other journals that also paid close attention to the research on foreign language teachers' identities include *Foreign*

Language Education in China, Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice, Foreign Language Education, Shandong Foreign Language Teaching, Journal of Xi'an International Studies University, etc.

Table 2. Distribution of language teacher identity empirical research by journal

Journal	Number of Empirical Research
<i>Foreign Languages and Their Teaching</i>	5
<i>Foreign Language World</i>	4
<i>Foreign Language Education in China</i>	2
<i>Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice</i>	3
<i>Foreign Language Education</i>	2
<i>Shandong Foreign Language Teaching</i>	2
<i>Journal of Xi'an International Studies University</i>	2
Other	12

3.2. Research methods

In the 32 empirical research papers on foreign language teacher identity, qualitative research paradigms accounted for a significant proportion (26 papers, 81%). Most of these studies used in-depth interviews as the primary data source, while a few employed other qualitative data collection methods, such as open-ended questionnaires [4] and instruction videos [5] etc. Mixed-method research constituted a smaller proportion of the aforementioned empirical studies (5 papers, 16%) and researchers who adopted mixed methods in foreign language teacher identity studies often aimed to ensure the breadth of research while delving deeply into the complexity and dynamism of foreign language teacher identities. For example, Liu and Cai used a combination of questionnaires and interviews to investigate the identity changes of 109 English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers in over 40 universities in the context of the shift in public English teaching paradigms [6].

In summary, empirical research on the identity of foreign language teachers in China primarily adopts qualitative research as the main research paradigm, with a small number of researchers using mixed methods, and those who solely use quantitative research are relatively rare. The choice of research paradigm is closely related to the theoretical construct of foreign language teacher identity: Accompanied by the social turn in foreign language teacher education [7], the process of foreign language teachers learning to teach has gradually been viewed by scholars as a dialogic process of co-constructing knowledge embedded and emergent within the unique socio-cultural practices and contexts of individuals. The qualitative research paradigm can better assist researchers in deeply capturing the constantly evolving identities of teachers emerging in sociocultural contexts, which may be the reason why the qualitative research paradigm has become the main research paradigm in the study of foreign language teacher identities.

3.3. Theoretical perspectives

In the 32 empirical studies selected by the researcher, 12 studies (38%) did not employ any theoretical framework, while the remaining 20 studies (62%) explored the formation of foreign language teacher identity and its influencing factors through different theoretical perspectives. Among them, the study by Xu et al. simultaneously used positioning theory and community of practice theory [4] (see Table 3).

Table 3. Theoretical frameworks adopted by selected empirical research

Theoretical Framework	Number of Empirical Research
None	12
Sociocultural Theory	6
Positioning Theory	4
Community of Practice	3
Pragmatic Identity	2
Other Theories	6

There are 6 studies that use sociocultural theory as their theoretical perspective, accounting for 30% of all empirical studies that adopt a theoretical perspective. Sociocultural theory originates from the ideas of Soviet psychologist Vygotsky, embedding human higher mental development within historical and cultural contexts, emphasizing the social nature of cognitive development and mediation by cultural artifacts as its unique characteristic[8]. Different concepts within sociocultural theory have been used by researchers to interpret the development process of foreign language teachers' identities. For example, Gao, Zeng, and Wang used the concepts of *obuchenie* (i.e., learning and teaching) and *perezhivanie* (i.e., lived experience) from sociocultural theory to explain the developmental paths of identity construction among 6 university English teachers, finding that the *obuchenie* experience can promote the trajectory of teacher identity development[9]. Yang and Huang used activity theory from sociocultural theory as an analytical framework to summarize the mediating factors that facilitated the identity transformation of 3 university teachers during their visits as visiting scholars[1].

There are four studies that have used positioning theory to interpret the identity development of foreign language teachers. Positioning theory focuses on how individuals' identities and the world are constructed through discourse[10]. For example, Zhang used positioning theory to analyze the disciplinary teaching identity, relational identity, institutional identity, and personal identity of a college English teacher[11]. The researcher found that the formation of the teacher's identity is an active negotiation of identities amidst the clash of various competing ideas and institutional realities, characterized by both complexity and dynamism.

Three studies have used the Community of Practice[12] as a prism to interpret the identity development of foreign language teachers. For example, Zhang and Luo used this theory to explore the current status and construction process of a young university teacher's identity as an assessor. The study found that the teacher, as an assessor, simultaneously embodies multiple identities, such as an imitator of assessment behavior, a practitioner of formative assessment, a mediator of assessment conflicts, and a proponent of assessment reform. Moreover, the process of identity construction is completed within four contexts: the learning community, the teacher-student community, the institutional community, and the imagined community[13].

Two studies have used the theory of pragmatic identity. The theory of pragmatic identity was proposed by Chinese scholar Chen Xinren, and its theoretical connotation refers to "the contextualized self or other identity that language users intentionally or unintentionally choose, as well as the other identity of social individuals or groups mentioned by the speaker or author in their discourse"[14]. Researchers adopting this theoretical perspective often focus on how foreign language teachers construct their pragmatic identities through oral or written discourse in specific contexts. For example, Xu and Chen analyzed the videos of the finals of the National College English Teaching Competition involving 20 teachers and found that the 20 selected teachers constructed multiple pragmatic identities such as knowledgeable teachers, authoritative teachers, amiable teachers, and peer-like teachers through their speech acts[5]. Additionally, six other studies have used different theoretical perspectives to analyze the

identity development of foreign language teacher identity, such as Complex Dynamic System Theory[15], the model of investment[16] and the Dynamic System Model of Role Identity[17] etc.

In a nutshell, the theoretical perspectives employed by Chinese scholars to interpret the identity of foreign language teachers exhibit a trend towards heterogeneity. Sociocultural theory, Community of Practice theory, and pragmatic identity theory are the predominant frameworks employed by Chinese scholars. Moreover, Complex dynamic systems theory and second language investment theory have also been utilized in empirical studies concerning the identity of foreign language educators.

3.4. Research topics

Concerning the research participants, among the 32 selected empirical studies, 22 (69%) concentrated on the identity of university English teachers. In contrast, in-service foreign language teachers at the primary and secondary school garnered less scholarly attention, with only 7 (22%) empirical studies addressing their identity development. The literature analysis also reveals that Chinese scholars currently exhibit limited focus on the identity of pre-service foreign language teachers, with only 3 studies (9%) addressing their identity formation. Among the aforementioned studies, for example, Li and Xu tracked the identity negotiation of one focal pre-service English teacher during her teaching practicum using narrative inquiry[18]. It was found by the researchers that multiple identities had been developed during the participants' teaching practicum, including correctional tools, mentor-friend, learner, versatile talent, and teacher trainee. Individual factors, such as previous learning experience, reflection competence, and emotion, along with sociocultural factors such as significant others and school culture, co-mediated the focal pre-service teacher's identity formation. Pre-service language teachers constitute the future workforce of foreign language education. Hence, language teacher education programs should not only facilitate the acquisition of essential pedagogical knowledge and abilities while also fostering the development of a robust and affirmative professional identity to address the intricate demands and potential problems in future employment[19]. Consequently, scholars in foreign language teacher education in China ought to focus more on the identity formation of pre-service foreign language educators. All 32 empirical studies mentioned above involve English teachers as research participants. In the realm of foreign language education, instructors of less commonly taught languages hold significant importance, which warrants acknowledgment[20]. Consequently, it is essential for researchers in foreign language teacher education to focus more on the identities of foreign language teachers beyond those instructing English in future studies.

Language teacher identity is regarded as a construct with fluidity, complexity, and contextuality [19]. Consequently, multiple researchers aimed to investigate the formation and development of language teacher identity under certain circumstances. By employing the ecological framework of language teacher identity and emotion construction[21] by Nazari and his colleagues, the current study divided the aforementioned 32 empirical studies into 4 categories, including studies that did not involve any contexts (14 studies, 44%), macro-contexts (i.e., sociocultural contexts) (7 studies, 22%), meso-contexts (i.e., instructional and school contexts) (3 studies, 9%), and micro-contexts (i.e., classroom contexts or personal contexts) (8 studies, 25%).

To be more specific, 14 empirical studies did not mention the contexts. For example, Xun and Zheng collected data through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observations to explore the components and characteristics of the professional identities of 283 middle school English teachers in China and their relationship with teachers' professional competence development. This study did not embed teachers' professional identity in a specific context but

attempted to explore the relationship between teachers' professional identity and other variables[22].

7 empirical studies placed teachers' professional identity under the macro context of national policies and social changes for research purposes, such as assessment reform[3], curriculum reform[23], and the reform for the construction of new liberal arts[6], etc. Such studies oftentimes regard foreign language teachers as individuals with agency and explain how they shape their professional identities in the context of change. For example, Gao, Tao, and Gong linked teacher agency with teacher identity and explored how the identities of eight college English teachers influenced their agency and affected their own career development under the backdrop of curriculum reform. The study found that teachers' professional identity could influence their agency and career development direction[23].

3 empirical studies placed teachers' professional identity in the meso-level context. These studies focused on the development and changes of foreign language teachers' professional identity within their specific institutional or school contexts. Specifically, the meso-level contexts that researchers focused on included Sino-American cross-ocean interactive writing activities[24], teaching practicum[18], and educational support activities[4]. 8 studies focused on the professional identity and development of foreign language teachers in the micro-level context, namely classroom contexts and individual experiences. Specific classroom contexts included classroom questioning[25], teaching assessment[13], online courses and online teaching[26]. In addition, the identity transformation of foreign language teachers when dealing with different individual experiences has also attracted the attention of some researchers, such as visiting scholar programs[1], learning to research[15], and teacher identity transformation[27].

Overall, empirical research on the professional identity of foreign language teachers in China has shown a trend towards heterogeneous research contexts. The development of foreign language teachers' professional identity in specific contexts at the macro, meso, and micro levels has attracted the attention of Chinese scholars. It is worth mentioning that all three empirical studies on teachers' professional identity focusing on the meso-level context are concerned with the identity transformation of pre-service teachers in the teacher education stage. Therefore, how in-service foreign language teachers cope with challenges arising from meso-level contextual changes such as school policy reforms and how they shape their professional identities during this period may be an issue that urgently needs the attention of researchers.

3.5. Research results

The selected empirical studies on language teacher identity in China corroborate the perspectives adopted by some international scholars in the domain of foreign language teacher education, indicating that foreign language teacher identity is characterized by fluidity, multi-facetedness, and situationality[19]. Furthermore, the development of teacher identity is also shaped by subjective factors of individual teachers.

First of and foremost, the professional identity of foreign language teachers in China shows fluidity, that is, the characteristic of continuous change. The professional identity of foreign language teachers may change or stay static[3]. When the professional identity does change, different types of changes may occur, such as fluctuations, weakening, and first weakening and then strengthening[15]. Secondly, the professional identity of foreign language teachers shows multi-facetedness as another defining characteristic. That is, in the same situation, the professional identity of the same foreign language teacher may have different manifestations. Thirdly, the professional identity of foreign language teachers shows the nature of situationality; that is, the identity of language educators is context-dependent. To be more specific, foreign

language teachers offer several sorts of identity representations in diverse settings, such as macro, meso, and micro levels.

Finally, agency, as a defining subjective factor for language teacher's identity formation and construction, exerts an important influence during the process[25].

4. Research Limitations and Implications

By analyzing the above 32 empirical studies on the identity of foreign language teachers in China, the following three limitations can be preliminarily identified. First of all, there are limitations in the selection of research participants in these 32 empirical studies. The vast majority of empirical studies focus on English teachers at the higher education phase, with little attention paid to English teachers at the primary and secondary school phases and those in pre-service education. In addition, no studies have been found focusing on the identity of teachers of languages other than English. Primary and secondary school teachers, pre-service teachers, and teachers of less commonly taught languages are important workforces in foreign language education in China, and the status quo and development of their professional identity deserve more attention.

Secondly, through the analysis of the above 32 empirical studies, it can be observed that researchers pay more attention to the identity transformation of foreign language teachers at the macro level such as curriculum reform, and the micro level, such as the instructor's own teaching practices. Fewer researchers focus on the identity transformation of foreign language teachers in the meso-level context, especially when foreign language teachers face policy changes in their own educational institutions. Therefore, future empirical studies should pay more attention to the identity of foreign language teachers in the meso-level context.

Last but not least, most of the aforementioned 32 empirical studies viewed language teacher identity as an independent construct, ignoring its connections with other related psychological constructs, such as agency[28, 29], emotion[30, 31] and strategy[31]. Hence, researchers and practitioners may need to consider connecting language teacher identity and other related psychological constructs, delving into the dynamic and complex relations among identity and other constructs.

5. Concluding Remarks

By sorting out the 32 empirical studies published in core journals in CNKI from 2011 to 2023, the current research found that the number of empirical studies concerning language teacher identity showed an upward trend, with a stagnant phase in 2024. In terms of research paradigm, the majority of language teacher identity-related research adopted a qualitative paradigm, with mixed methods as an auxiliary research paradigm. Multiple theoretical frameworks had been adopted as prisms for interpreting the construction and development of language teacher identity in China. The selected empirical studies corroborated the research in the international community, implying fluidity, multi-facetedness, and situationality as the defining characteristics of language teacher identity. The researcher concluded the current manuscript by indicating the limitations of the aforementioned empirical studies in terms of research participant selection and research context selection and suggesting future researchers combine language teacher identity and other related psychological constructs in future research endeavors.

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