

Research on Professional Identity Construction of University Foreign Language Teachers

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Abstract: This study examines the construction of professional identity among university foreign language teachers within the context of globalization and the New Liberal Arts Initiative. Adopting a social constructivist theoretical lens, it analyzes how their professional identity, which is conceived as the core framework encompassing a sense of meaning, values, and behavioral frameworks, is dynamically negotiated and constructed through ongoing internal and external interactions across multi-dimensional practices including teaching, research, and societal service. The research identifies three critical role tensions confronting these teachers: (1) an ontological conflict between the instrumentally rationalized role of the “technician” and the value-rational perspective of the “humanistic educator”; (2) an instrumental dilemma stemming from the imbalance between language’s functional identity as a “practical skill” and its neglected role as a “vehicle for humanistic cultivation”; and (3) a fundamental tension between externally imposed, diverse (and often conflicting) professional role expectations and internal professional identity commitments. These tensions profoundly impact teachers’ sense of efficacy, professional well-being, and development motivation. Consequently, the study proposes a dual-pronged approach for synergistic optimization: (1) at the institutional level: Reforming multi-dimensional evaluation metrics, establishing systematic developmental support networks, and facilitating professional learning communities; (2) at the individual level: Engaging in proactive identity negotiation and adaptation through deepening self-awareness, strengthening critical reflection and practice, participating in community dialogues, and setting growth-oriented goals. This research holds significant theoretical and practical implications for fostering the healthy development of university foreign language teachers and deepening educational reform.

Keywords—university foreign language teachers; professional identity construction; teacher cognition; role tension; professional development pathways

1. INTRODUCTION

The deepening advancement of globalization initiatives and the emergence of the “New Liberal Arts” framework have significantly broadened the role of foreign language education in higher education institutions (HEIs) beyond the mere transmission of linguistic skills (Mok & Marginson, 2021). Foreign language teachers (FLT), as the primary agents of pedagogical practice, find their professional identity construction (PIC) emerging as an intrinsic and pivotal variable impacting both educational quality and their own developmental efficacy. PIC transcends the simple acquisition of professional labels; rather, it constitutes a profound, ongoing process wherein individual teachers cognitively engage with, experientially negotiate, and socially define their sense of significance, core values, and frameworks for action as “foreign language educators” within specific socio-historical contexts and multifaceted relational dynamics (Beijaard et al., 2004). This constructive process represents a continual, dynamic negotiation (Filzmoser et al., 2021), shaping not only their pedagogical philosophies and daily practices but also exerting a profound influence on their occupational well-being and commitment to professional growth (Tsui, 2007).

Globalization and the deepening internationalization of higher education have imposed novel demands on HEIs regarding talent cultivation, elevating foreign language education to national strategic importance. As transmitters of linguistic and cultural knowledge and practitioners of cross-competency development, FLT’s professional identity cognition directly impacts teaching efficacy and disciplinary evolution. Professional identity construction, constituting a core dimension of teacher development, interrelates profoundly not only with individual occupational identification and agency but also with the practical orientation of pedagogical reform and the cultural adaptability of curricular innovation (Solari & Martín Ortega, 2022). Existing research demonstrates that teacher professional identity is a dynamically negotiated construct integrating knowledge systems, role positioning, value commitments, and societal expectations (Beijaard et al., 2004). Within the foreign language education context, this construction manifests heightened complexity: teachers are required to negotiate and reconcile potential tensions among multiple roles, such as “language skills instructor”, “cultural mediator”, and “academic researcher”. Particularly in the current era where Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies are reshaping educational ecosystems, investigating how FLT’s dynamically

negotiate their professional identities through meaning-making practices holds critical theoretical value and practical necessity for advancing teacher education system reform.

Current research concerning FLT development in HEIs predominantly focuses on enhancing pedagogical competence or mitigating occupational burnout, while systematic exploration of the intrinsic mechanisms underlying PIC remains scarce. The distinctive nature of the foreign language discipline dictates unique challenges to PIC: on one hand, instrumental language policy orientations and the national mandate for cultural dissemination impose a “dual responsibility”; on the other hand, prevalent stereotypical perceptions within academia regarding the “non-disciplinary” status of foreign languages exacerbate identity anxieties (Glass et al., 2022). Existing literature exhibits three primary limitations: Firstly, empirical studies largely concentrate on pre-service teachers or the K-12 phase, neglecting identity reconstruction during the mid-career stages of HEI faculty. Secondly, the inherent role conflicts (ontological tensions), instrumental predicaments, and professional role expectations arising within cross-cultural teaching contexts remain inadequately theorized. Thirdly, the paradigmatic shifts in professional roles instigated by digital pedagogical transformation demand more robust theoretical responses.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND CORE DIMENSIONS OF UNIVERSITY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

2.1 Conceptual Framework of University Foreign Language Teacher Professional Identity Construction

The professional identity construction of university foreign language teachers refers to the complex, dynamic process through which they understand, ascertain, negotiate, and reshape their sense of professional meaning, belonging, and agency across multiple role dimensions, namely teaching, research, and social service, within specific higher education contexts (Wang & He, 2022). This process is fundamentally centered on the core proposition of “what it means to be me as a foreign language teacher” and entails continuous social negotiation and reflective practice.

The theoretical underpinning of this study is rooted in a social constructivist perspective on identity. This perspective emphasizes that identity is not an inherent trait but rather an ongoing process of “becoming” and “re-becoming”. It arises from the intricate interplay between individual teachers and their specific socio-cultural environment, including institutional structures and norms, the disciplinary ecology of foreign languages (language-specific characteristics), institutional culture, networks of interpersonal relationships (students, colleagues, administrators), societal expectations, and personal life histories. This interplay involves constant internal interpretation, negotiation, and agentic responses by the individual.

Drawing on Wenger’s (1998) theory of “Community of Practice”, identity construction is embedded within three

interconnected modes: engagement (in teaching and research practices), imagination (envisioning future possibilities), and alignment (commitment to community belonging). Furthermore, Coldron and Smith’s (1999) concept of “professional space” highlights the necessity for teachers to locate an interface between structure and agency to define their unique professional practice approach.

Specifically, within the foreign language education domain, the construction process must contend with its distinctive complexities: (1) Intercultural Mediation: Foreign language teachers bear the responsibility of mediating foreign cultures, values, and modes of thinking embedded within the target language; their cultural positioning itself constitutes a core identity element. (2) Tension between Instrumentality and Humanistic Orientation: Balancing the objectives of linguistic skill development with humanistic cultivation poses a significant challenge to their identity as subject educators. (3) Complex Significance of “Native Speaker/Non-Native Speaker” Identity: This distinction takes on intricate meanings within international educational settings. (4) Pressure for Pedagogical Innovation and Reconstitution of Knowledge Authority: Driven by globalization and technology-enhanced learning environments.

Therefore, the conceptual framework proposed in this study conceptualizes professional identity construction as an iterative, integrative cycle of cognition, affect, and action. This cycle originates from the individual’s cognitive and value systems and unfolds through practice via the following core iterative mechanisms: Subject Negotiation, Contextual Adaptation/Resistance, Competency-Belief Integration, and Discursive Positioning.

2.2 Core Dimensions of Professional Identity Construction for Foreign Language Teachers in Higher Education

The construction of professional identity for foreign language (FL) teachers in higher education institutions (HEIs) constitutes a complex, dynamic process integrating individual internal cognitions, pedagogical practices, and interactions with the external environment (Ren & Pan, 2025). Its core dimensions encompass at least four interrelated aspects: the Knowledge and Competence Dimension, the Professional Practice Dimension, the Organizational Culture Dimension, and the Social Interaction Dimension.

First, the Knowledge and Competence Dimension forms the foundational core of identity. It includes not only sophisticated subject-specific language knowledge and robust pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) concerning education and language teaching methodologies, but also practical knowledge concerning the translation of theory into appropriate teaching strategies. Furthermore, it encompasses the capacity for intercultural communication and interpretation utilizing the target language. This dimension fundamentally shapes the teacher’s perceived positioning of their own professional value.

Second, the Professional Practice Dimension serves as the substantive locus for identity embodiment. The teacher's enactment of roles and degree of autonomous decision-making within authentic classroom settings, extended extracurricular guidance, teaching-research activities, and pedagogical reflection constitutes crucial contexts for the manifestation of identity and the development of professional self-efficacy. Successes encountered and challenging moments within practice profoundly influence the solidification or transformation of identity.

Third, the Organizational Culture Dimension provides the critical situational context for identity construction. Structural factors within the workplace, including institutional norms and policies, organizational climate, prevailing educational philosophies and orientations, and resource allocation, continuously shape both the collective expectations towards the role of an adequate/excellent FL teacher within the organization and the teacher's individual normative understandings of that role.

Fourth, the Social Interaction Dimension acts as the key mechanism for identity negotiation. Through sustained dialogic interactions with students, colleagues, administrators, industry/scholarly experts, and broader societal groups, teachers perpetually affirm, adjust, or reconstruct the perceived significance of their professional role, their understanding of their social status, and their sense of belonging. Recognition from others serves as a vital source for the perception of identity legitimacy.

These four dimensions do not exist in isolation but form an interdependent and reciprocally influential system characterized by ongoing interaction and negotiation (Balliet & Lindström, 2023). Collectively, they frame the narrative basis upon which HE FL teachers articulate the fundamental questions of "Who am I?", "What does it mean for me to be a teacher?", and "To what professional community do I belong?" This system thereby drives the formation, consolidation, and evolution of their professional self-awareness.

3. ROLE STRAIN IN THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF UNIVERSITY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

3.1 Ontological Role Conflict

Within the dynamic process of professional identity construction for university foreign language teachers, ontological role conflict constitutes a profound internal source of tension (Liu et al., 2025). This conflict centers on the fundamental challenge to the stability and coherence of individual teachers' self-identity experienced during their professional practice. Its core lies in the concurrent existence and competing pull of multiple and sometimes mutually exclusive professional self-images within the teacher's deep-seated sense of self.

On the one hand, as transmitters of linguistic knowledge and facilitators of communicative skills, foreign language teachers tend to identify with an identity characterized as a technician, predominantly driven by instrumental rationality. Their efficacy is often reduced to quantifiable metrics such as student performance on language tests or certification exam pass rates.

On the other hand, as cultural mediators and guides for values and perspectives, they bear the mission of cultivating students' critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and humanistic literacy. This demands an identification with an educator identity underpinned by value rationality.

These two identity expectations, stemming from distinct philosophical foundations, are deeply ingrained in teachers' ontological cognition: the former emphasizes efficiency, standardization, and predictability, reflecting the instrumental aspect of "teaching language"; the latter emphasizes meaning-making, critical reflection, and value guidance, reflecting the fundamental educational essence of "language education". When external circumstances or internal reflection continuously reinforces the identity of technician, it inevitably erodes the teacher's deep-seated motivation and sense of purpose as an educator, and conversely, vice-versa. This internal division and incongruence, rooted at the level of cognition concerning "who I am" (the professional essence), namely, ontological role conflict, creates a significant underlying obstacle to the exercise of professional agency, the experience of occupational well-being, and the sustainable construction of identity itself.

Consequently, the pivotal challenge in achieving harmonious identity development becomes how to reconcile these fractured perceptions of the "professional self" and strive for internal coherence.

3.2 The Instrumentalization Dilemma

A core tension underpinning the professional identity construction of foreign language faculty in universities arises from the structural conflict inherent in the dualistic nature of language, which serves simultaneously as an "instrumental skill" and a "vehicle for humanistic values" (Zhang, 2025). On the one hand, driven by globalization and labor market pressures, foreign language education faces institutional reinforcement of its pragmatic and instrumental orientation. Policymakers, university administrators, and societal demands predominantly focus on quantifiable "performance metrics" such as examination pass rates, certification acquisition, and workplace oral proficiency. This forces faculty to narrow curricular objectives towards cultivating test-taking techniques and short-term job readiness.

On the other hand, the intrinsic essence of the discipline which facilitates intercultural communication, fosters critical thinking, and nurtures humanistic literacy, constitutes the core of faculty's academic ideals and professional ethics. Yet, these vital dimensions remain chronically marginalized under the pervasive dominance of pragmatic logic.

The profound consequence of this instrumentalization dilemma lies in the erosion of teachers' professional autonomy and their role as cultural mediators. Faculty members are systematically positioned as "instrumental actors", their identity shifting from "educator" toward "service provider". The confluence of market logic and administrative logic fosters curriculum standardization and homogenization, thereby stifling humanistic exploration and critical engagement within instructional design. This tension not only causes significant attrition of faculty's intrinsic professional ethos but also substantially impedes the development of an identity grounded in the dimensions of cultural synthesis and the cultivation of critical thought.

3.3 Occupational Role Expectations

Within the complex process of professional identity construction among foreign language (FL) teachers in higher education, the multiplicity, compartmentalization, and even conflict inherent in occupational role expectations function as a source of structural tension (Liu & Li, 2025). This tension manifests concretely as a contestation and reshaping of the boundaries of teacher identity by multiple systems of institutional mandates: (1) Externally Imposed Expectations: On the one hand, national education policies and macro-level institutional orientations, coupled with the performance objectives of university organizations, impose explicit and often heterogeneous expectations on teachers' roles. These demands require FL teachers to simultaneously fulfill the duties of traditional instructors and researchers, while also serving as cultural transmitters and value guides. This results in a layering of exogenous expectations. (2) Endogenous Identity Demands: On the other hand, the discipline of Foreign Languages possesses an inherently strong cross-cultural character and communicative-practice orientation. The value norms and professional ethics within the academic community constitute the core demands of the teachers' endogenous professional identity formation. (3) Value Disjunction: A dichotomy in value orientation frequently exists between this internal self-positioning and the externally imposed, instrumentally-oriented role expectations.

A deeper conflict arises from the dual metaphorical connotations often assigned to "foreign languages" in the higher education sphere: they are construed both as a "pragmatic skill" for accessing global knowledge and enhancing international competitiveness, and as a "strategic resource" bearing upon national identity and ideological security. This tension within the macro-level discourse places substantial identity pressure on individual FL teachers. They must navigate the precarious balancing act between the perceived neutrality of language teaching and the inherent bias involved in value-laden guidance, and between the openness required for knowledge transmission and the normative constraints of cultural security. Consequently, the construction of their professional identity necessitates a challenging process of heterogeneous integration and strategic negotiation within a grid of multiple, often contradictory, expectations. Without

skillful navigation, this process may easily slide into states of role fragmentation or identity disorientation.

4. OPTIMIZED PATHWAYS FOR PROMOTING THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF UNIVERSITY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

The effective construction of the professional identity of university foreign language teachers urgently necessitates synergistic and sustained institutional support and systemic guarantees. Firstly, at the institutional level, it is crucial to reshape a more adaptive and identity-affirming regulatory environment. Central to this is the transformation of evaluation mechanisms: constructing a multi-dimensional evaluation framework (Berliner, 2001) that integrates pedagogical value, applied service value, and disciplinary development value, with particular emphasis on the demonstrable enhancement of teaching innovation efficacy and students' comprehensive linguistic competence. This aims to rectify the marginalization of teaching contributions in promotion and tenure processes. Furthermore, instituting a growth-oriented developmental feedback mechanism on an annual basis is essential to replace singular, quantitative assessment pressure points.

Secondly, institutions must provide robust institutional scaffolding for continuous professional growth: integrating and establishing a tiered, modular systematic faculty development system. This system should encompass critical dimensions such as cutting-edge educational technology, development in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and simulated cross-cultural teaching scenarios, with content meticulously tailored to teachers' career stages and needs. Concurrently, strong support and institutional empowerment should be directed towards diverse professional learning communities (PLCs) (Kelchtermans, 2009) – such as interdisciplinary teaching research groups, teaching innovation labs, and informal professional discussion circles – fostering networks conducive to both knowledge creation and emotional support. Additionally, teachers require sufficient autonomy and resource allocation to actively engage in curriculum innovation, educational research, and social service initiatives, enabling them to substantively affirm the core value of their roles within diverse professional contexts (Meijer et al., 1999).

Building upon a solid institutional foundation, the proactive shaping and reflective practice of individual teachers concerning their professional identity constitute the core impetus for deepening identity commitment. Teachers must first enhance their systematic understanding of the inherent complexity of identity construction, recognizing the inherent tensions and integrative potential embedded within their multiple roles as professionals, pedagogical practitioners, curriculum designers, academic researchers, and cross-cultural communicators (Gee, 2000). Consequently, sustained, in-depth identity dialogues and practical exploration are paramount. Teachers should actively engage in critical educational narratives and reflective practice (Schön, 1983), utilizing tools such as teaching journals, curriculum action

research, collaborative classroom observations, and diversified feedback mechanisms to deeply analyze their own practices, thereby identifying and reconciling identity perception biases. They must fully leverage both intra- and extra-institutional professional development resources and PLC interaction spaces to deepen identity negotiation through collaborative knowledge building and experience sharing (Sacks, 1992). Moreover, proactively setting challenging professional development objectives (e.g., leading teaching research projects, hosting regionally influential workshops, implementing student-centered flipped classroom innovations) enhances professional self-efficacy and identity valuation through the pursuit of expertise and innovation. Strengthening the capacity to employ theoretical frameworks (e.g., Sociocultural Theory, Teacher Agency frameworks) in analyzing pedagogical issues within specific classrooms and research projects is vital to bridging theoretical insight and practical wisdom.

Ultimately, through the dialectical interaction of embodied engagement in practice and critical reflection, university foreign language teachers can continually calibrate, reinforce, and re-configure their unique professional selves within complex, dynamic educational contexts. This dynamic process enables the robust development and ongoing revitalization of their professional identity, thereby providing deep-seated impetus for optimizing the broader ecosystem of foreign language education.

5. CONCLUSION

The professional identity construction of foreign language teachers in higher education is a continuous process of social negotiation centered on the teacher as the agent, taking place within a field characterized by multiple discursive tensions. While teachers' agency, encompassing their cognition, practical wisdom, and value choices, constitutes the core driving force, the trajectory and manifestation of this identity are constantly shaped by external socio-relational networks, institutional environments, and broader historical-cultural contexts. Currently prevalent core tensions profoundly impact teachers' sense of identity stability, efficacy, and well-being. These include reconciling the roles of "skills trainer" versus "knowledge instiller", "teaching practitioner" versus "research producer", and "cultural mediator", alongside navigating the contradiction between "exaggerated expectations" and perceived competency gaps.

Consequently, fostering the healthy development of teacher identity is not merely an individual responsibility; it necessitates systematic and collaborative transformation involving teachers themselves, teaching institutions, academic communities, and relevant societal levels. Only when the identity of foreign language teachers in higher education is established upon a foundation of robust value recognition, achieving a synthesis between instrumental application and humanistic concern, can their potential role in curriculum reform and national discourse construction be fully activated. This, in turn, is essential for enabling them to genuinely

support the grand mission of cultivating high-caliber foreign language talent equipped with both a global vision and Chinese sensibilities demanded by the new era. This issue transcends educational quality; it is fundamentally entwined with the dignity of teachers as intellectuals and the effective realization of meaningful professional existence and value.

Future research could further investigate the heterogeneity of identity construction across institutions in diverse regions and among teachers of different foreign languages, as well as analyze the long-term synergistic effects of new technologies on traditional conceptions of foreign language teacher identity.

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