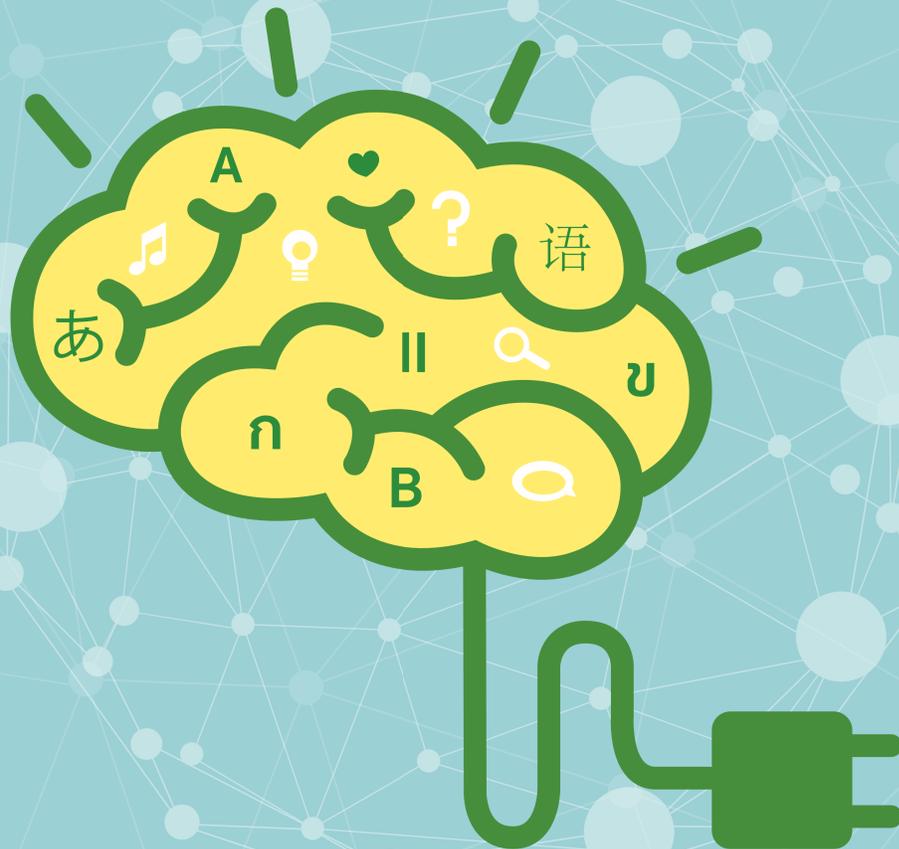ICAA
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Positioning, Agency, and English Language Learners: Voices of Pre-service Classroom teachers

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Abstract

Recent literature of identity has demonstrated strong impact on teachers' professional development and formation in educational industry. This study explores the (re) identity negotiations and agency of five Thai pre-service student teachers majoring in English language who received their internships at a secondary school in Eastern Thailand. Drawing upon theories of identity construction, narrative positioning perspective, and using in-depth interview, the case highlights how preserve teachers identities formation positioned and shaped by university-school internship. Finding suggests that pre-service teachers perceive challenging to their self-positioning as English teachers in the classroom, varies positional identities to their school context (e.g. supervisor, mentor, colleagues, etc.), and sometimes conflicting identities. Through discussion of excerpts from the teachers' narratives, the study argues that the negotiation between multiple identities and positioning are necessary part of the construction of identity of pre-service teachers as they are newcomers in the field of teaching. The analysis presented provides implications for teachers, pre-service teachers of English language, and teacher education.

Key words: positioning; identity; agency; construction; internship

1. Background of the study

In recent years, educators and curriculum designers emphasized the importance of teachers training to all individuals who want to pursue their professional development in teacher's education. In the case of pre-service teachers, for instance, pre-service teachers come into the teaching profession with beliefs about teaching; sometimes they are aware of them, other times they are not. These are informed by their own judgment of how high-quality teaching looks and works. It is, in other words, they have entering beliefs that enlighten their own system of beliefs about teaching. Moreover, entering beliefs about teaching come from their own experiences as pupils, significant interpersonal relations with their professors, mentors and classmates, and their reflection upon critical incidents in their first encounters with teaching. In fact, entering beliefs appear to be a construction, which implies that they are not static or do not remain the same

over time; they are subject to experience changes or turning points when they come into contact with different components of teacher development: course content, reflection, and research, to mention some. For this reason, teacher educators should embrace a teacher education pedagogy that considers the central role of pre-service beliefs about teaching by both explicitly including this topic in the curriculum (for example through reflection, course content and learning activities). As Varghese and colleagues (2005) highlight, the teacher is not "a neutral player in the classroom, but on the contrary, her positionality in relation to her students, and to the broader context in which the teacher was situated" (p. 34) is vital. They further argue that to understand teaching and learning "we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them". However, the identities of pre-service teachers, particularly in EFL context have not been adequately addressed. Little is known regarding their identity negotiations in relation to their teaching practices in particular context, and how such negotiations influence their agency, interactions, and practices. In particular, the research on the identity (re)construction of pre-service teachers who teach English language (as a foreign language) is scarce. Finally, there is a conclusion that highlights the importance of undertaking more research on pre-service education.

2. Related Review

2.2 Narrative positioning and identity,

Over the last fifteen years, research has shown that the construction of Identity can be achieved through narration of individual in particular context, more specifically through what is related, to whom and in what way. Schifrin (1996, p. 197) calls narratives "a linguistic lens through which to discover people's own (somewhat idealized) views of themselves as situated in a social structure". Georgeakopoulos (1997) affirms the close relation of narrative communication to self-presentation. De Fina (2003, p. 19ff.), on the other line, stresses the central role of narrative to the construction of identities that through narration, people enact and negotiate personal and social roles, relationships, and their membership into specific communities of pratice. The most common definition that can be found is "language in use". The term position is used to capture the dynamic aspects of selfhood. This selfhood, Davies (2000) argues, is constantly in process; it only exists as process; it is revised and (re)presented through images, metaphors, story lines, and other features of language, such as pronoun grammar; it is spoken and re-spoken, each speaking existing in a palimpsest with the others. Unlike roles that are static and fixed, positions are situation-specific, disputed, challenged, changing, shifting and therefore dynamic (Harré and Slocum, 2003, van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). In a similar study, Yoon (2008) described how three teachers assigned various positions to themselves and ELLs in their classrooms and how these positioning closely influenced teachers' classroom practices. Overall, the limited literature on positioning of teachers of ELLs shows that teachers' self-positioning closely interact with how they position their

students and how such positioning moves influence their teaching practices. Focusing on this relational aspect of positioning, this study aims to add to the limited literature on teachers' reflexive and interactive narrative positioning. Roger and Wetzel (2013) define agency as "the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (p. 63). Just like identity, agency is shaped by social interactions and achieved in particular situations (Priestley et al., 2012). In other words, through positional moves or positioning, people can gain or lose the right to speak and act. That is, by being positioned in certain ways, individuals may or may not exercise agency. An individual can only speak from the positions made available within discourses (Davies, 2000). While certain positions may enable one to become argentic, agents can also actively resist certain positioning. Agency and positioning are therefore closely linked, one influencing the other. Roger and Wetzel's study (2013) is worth highlighting because it is perhaps the first study that has analyzed teacher agency by looking at positions the participant teacher, Leslie, has constructed for her. From the short review above, then we might look across contexts and then positions may enable actively resist certain positioning.

Therefore, the research question addressing this aim is;

1. How do pre-service teachers (re) negotiate, construct, and position themselves in pre-service internships program in an EFL context?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and setting

The five participants in this study (see below) were pre-service teachers enrolled in Faculty of Education major in English in one of the public university in Thailand. They were pursuing their internship program in Public Secondary schools in Thailand. For their internship, each participant observed and taught in different levels of primary and secondary level.

Table 1 Participants profile

pseudonym	Year of teaching level	Gender	Age	Nationality
1.Nan	Primary level 6	Female	20	Thai
2. Aom	Primary level 5	Female	21	Thai
3.Earn	Secondary level 5	Female	20	Thai
4.Nott	Secondary level 4	Male	21	Thai Isan
5.James	Secondary level 6	Male	21	Thai Isan

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The data for this study consist of semi- structured interviews from August, 2018 to January 2019. Because the researcher's goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of positioning, identity, and agency, a case study design seemed to be the most appropriate (Creswell & Poth, 2017) in this present study. The researchers did not invite more individuals to participate in this present study as Creswell suggests that the small number of case studies, ideally fewer than 4 or 5, provides "ample opportunity to

identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis"(p. 157). This study uses a single-case design with multiple participants. Because the researcher's participants shared many common characteristics and conditions (Merriam, S. B., & Grenier, R. S. (Eds.). (2019). single case study design over multiple or collective cases seemed to be more appropriate. Having multiple participants enabled me to "strengthen the precision, validity, stability, and trustworthiness of the findings" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 33).

The researcher interviewed each participant once and each interviewed lasted around 2 to 3 hours in faculty department's office. The researchers scheduled participants according to their free time. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The participants had officially completed their undergraduate studies when the researcher conducted the interviews that were all semi-structured. In the interviews, the researchers asked participants questions about their educational and professional backgrounds, experience and interactions with EFL students during internship placements, challenges in teaching EFL learners, and experiences in the EFL courses in the undergraduate's program. These broad questions led to many follow-up questions during the interviews. The researchers also asked participants to narrate relevant anecdotes or philosophy in teaching and reflect on them. There were four phrases and began with the coding interview data. First, the researchers read each transcript without any coding. The researchers then coded the first interview transcript. This was almost a line-by-line coding and a large number of codes emerged from my recursive reading. The goal was to make sense of the data, identify similarities and differences as well as significant participant quotes or passages that were striking or stood out to the researcher's idea. Multiple readings of interview data and multiple reviews of the codes helped the researchers revise the initial codes and create categories (e.g., teacher, mother, father, friends, financial) according to the research focus in this study. In the second phase, the researchers did positioning analysis and identified reflexive and inter-active positions. In particular, the researcher's focus was on "the relational aspect of positioning theory with respect to a determination of how one's position necessarily positions others" (Sosa&Gomez, 2012, p. 593). When the researchers completed positioning analysis, the researchers reviewed the positions and identified the most recurring or dominant ones for each participant. In the third phase, the researchers revisited the data for agency. In each positioning act identified, the researcher looked at how positioning occurred, whom the participants positioned, and what happened as a result of a particular positioning act. In other words, the researchers aimed to understand "if" and "how" positions allowed or limited the participants to "act" in their narratives. During and after these first three phases, the researcher compared and contrasted categories and themes across three participants. The researchers read their reflective memos to further make sense of the themes and strengthen understanding of the issues

they were exploring. The final coding categories are presented in Appendix A. The following section involves a description of the themes or issues that I uncovered.

4. Result(s)

This study aimed to understand how five pre-service Thai teachers positioned themselves in relation to their social context of internship and how their identity (re)negotiation interacted with their agency in particular context of teaching. The positioning analysis reveals that the participant's recursively position themselves in relation to teaching career. The positioning and identity (re)negotiations the researchers describe below seem to shape these pre-service teachers' agency and self-reported teaching practices in EFL classroom. What follows is a description of the participants' self-positioning in relation to teacher's persona, teaching styles, relationship with colleagues as well as their status the teachers ascribed to themselves?

Self-positioning in relation to their teaching career

The pre-service teacher participants positioned themselves as a product of motivation and inspiration of why they want to pursue teaching career. However, they seemed to take on different motivation in pursuing their teaching career. For example [Int. 4, Nott], mentioned that;

> "I through my inspiration is my past teacher....He had technic to motivated students to enjoy his class. It is a power to push me to concentrate to the class. [Int. 5, James]

While one participant shaped her teaching career through the fact that she came from a family of teachers. This may understand that family gave an effect to the participant's decision in becoming a language teacher.

> I got inspiration from my family because of one of my family member are English teachers – my brother and my sister. And I thought English is variety language that I could use to communicate with other people around the world. It is very important now a day to help us learn a new thing out of the book or classroom. [Int. 2, Aom]

Another participant also mentioned that his father is a teacher in the secondary schools, where he added that his teacher used to play with him educational games.

> ...because my father is a teacher in the secondary school in Thailand. My father is teaching social subjects. When I was in secondary level I used to join him in going to school. So I found my English, He taught me also to play scrabble and then I always play with me until I did not know myself that I improve my

vocabulary. When I had an exam I got a high score in English, then I also joined competition. [Int. 5, James]

Self-positioning in relation to their teacher's persona

During the interview, the pre-service teacher participants mentioned their personality of being a teacher, when the researchers asked them about themselves as a teacher inside the classroom. Most of the participants viewed themselves differently. For instance, one participant reported that;

> I am a strict teacher because the I always impose my rule inside the classroom. If students break the rule so we have to tell them the consequences. Anyway I need to survey student's content knowledge about the subject before planning. Maybe should to be strict at the beginning to make them scary. *[Int. 3, Earn]*

[Int. 4, Nott] mentioned that he is quite selective in mingling with other teachers, he stated that;

> I am quite person with some group: for example friendly with young friends but not too much friendly with older teacher in the school.

While the one participant, mentioned that;

> I am realistic teacher yet a friendly one. But not too much friendly. I want to learn values of my subject, I mean I integrate values. [Int. 5, James]

Self-positioning in relation to their teaching style

During the interview, when the researchers asked them about their way of teaching during their internship, most the participants highlighted "active learning" in their teaching style. Some of them mentioned that;

> Active learning in my opinions same as child center on we need to concentrate with students but the difference is the process in doing the activities, students could reflex whatever teachers throw to them. It is the same as communication between teacher and learner. [Int. 1, Nan]

> It might be child center because of I need to checked students before I teach that what students' level? How could they learn? [Int. 3, Earn]

> I used an active learning style and also student's center style to let students finding the answer by themselves after that I will let them present their opinions in front of the class and another thing I used game to make them felt good with my lessons. I felt that if I gave a lot of knowledge, it made them felt bored. So games related to their life. And games could motivate them. [Int. 4, Nott]

Self-positioning of colleagues in relation to the their status as a pre-service teacher

When the research interviewing them about their relationship with their co-teachers, they reported different cases, one participant stated that;

> Maybe It happened It had some teacher here at the beginning they looked at me a little bit straight- they didn't talk nicely but when they saw the way how I worked or the way how I did jobs after that they did to me better or before never say hi to me at the beginning but after that they say hi when I say hi to them. [Int. 1, Nan]

One participant, on the other hand, stated that she received total accommodation from her co-teacher through handbook, room-microphone, and other things to be used in her teaching.

> My trainer teacher they always ask me if I need any help from her. She gave the teacher hand book and also many teaching documents. And I also could use the multipurpose room-microphone and speaker phone. On the other hand the school supported me teaching materials I never ever spend money to buy them. For example I was moderator on Christmas day so the school support me everything. [Int. 2, Aom]

Lastly, one participant reported that he asked advised from his mentor;

> My mentor teacher always gave me advices. For example: I will have responsibility same as them never say that job for permanent teachers or for pre service teacher. Sometimes may asked for helping but they didn't means that they are not respect me. But even if they did with you as a teacher in the school. [Int. 4, Nott]

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, the researchers aimed to explore how five pre-service teachers, Nan, Aom, Earn, Nott and James, positioned themselves in relation to their social context of internship and how their identity (re)negotiation interacted with their agency in particular context of teaching. In our analysis of pre-service teachers' narratives, we found positioning theory, among other approaches to discourse, particularly helpful as it enabled me to see and understand the teachers' longingly produced selves through their positioning in terms of the categories and storylines. The analysis of data indicates that the participant teachers' positional identities were shaped mostly in relation to **their teaching; Self-positioning in relation to their teacher's; Self-positioning in relation**

to their teaching style; Self-positioning of colleagues in relation to the their status as a pre-service teacher. These findings corroborate to the results of Baranik and colleagues (2010); Buyukgoze-Kavas and colleagues (2010); Magnuson and colleagues (2006) that when mentor teachers are equipped with the above-mentioned essential characteristics and are professionally prepared for their job, they are more likely to bring about positive outcomes such as mentees' increased confidence, satisfaction, career growth, and greater personal and professional development.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the present study, it can be posited that the positioning analysis reveals that the participant's recursively position themselves in relation to teaching career. The positioning and identity (re)negotiations the researchers describe below seem to shape these pre-service teachers' agency and self-reported teaching practices in EFL classroom. What follows is a description of the participants' self-positioning in relation to teacher's persona, teaching styles, relationship with colleagues as well as their status the teachers.

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