A case study of EFL pre-service teachers’ identity construction

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In EFL contexts, while much research on pre-service teachers is influenced by the reflective inquiry perspective centered on experiential learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999), relatively few attention has been paid to per-service language teacher identity construction in relation to their participation in service learning programs or teaching practicums. Drawing upon Activity Theory (Engeström, 1996, 2001) as a theoretical framework, this study investigated how a group of Taiwanese EFL pre-service teachers (re)constructed their identities as participating in one EFL-teaching-based service learning project with an emphasis on intercultural communication. These Taiwanese pre-service teachers worked with their collaborators, American college students who joined international service learning program, to teach one intensive English course in a local elementary school in Northern Taiwan.

Multiple data sources were collected, including the per-service teacher’s teaching journals, interviews, field observations, and records of online and face-to-face discussions. Through data triangulation, the pre-service teacher’s identity was uncovered from two perspectives. Firstly, the pre-service teacher’s identity construction was examined in terms of the cognitive, social, and emotional processes (Yuan & Lee, 2015). Secondly, employing the notion of identity in relation to discourse, practice, and activity systems (Engeström, 1996, 2001; Gee, 2004), this study explored the pre-service teacher’s identity development as being situated within a wider system of social, cultural, and historical relations in which teaching takes place. The findings showed the pre-service teachers constructed their identities as they learnt skills and knowledge cognitively, engaged in various interactions with socio-cultural agents and factors, and dealt with diverse emotions. Also, the pre-service teachers’ identities were found to be discursively constructed. Specifically, by working with their American partners, the pre-service teachers experienced power struggles and negotiated contradictions within and across activity systems, which resulted in consequences on their identities. Based on the findings, relevant implications are provided for pre-service language teacher education.

Keywords: identity, pre-service language teachers, activity theory.