

# Engagement as an Ice-Breaking Stage in Teacher Identity Construction: A Case of Iranian Pre-service Teachers<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explored the process of professional identity construction of eight pre-service teachers through engagement during their practicum in a higher education institute in Tehran, Iran. By means of a longitudinal qualitative design within the social constructivist approach, data were collected by one semi-structured interview, one reflective essay, and five personal narratives embedded as the first phase of a teacher education programme, namely (i) engage, (ii) study, and (iii) activate (ESA). Thematic analysis at two levels (within-case and cross-case) resulted in three themes: (i) the mentor teacher's role as an engagement facilitator, (ii) online and offline activities as effective prompts, and (iii) the engage phase as a motivator. Data analysis revealed that negotiations on classroom activities contributed to student teachers' self-confidence, self-awareness and self-image. The findings suggested that successful engagement requires a variety of systematic activities. Furthermore, the findings support the significant role of engagement at the initial stage of pre-service teacher education that open new directions to design local training programmes. Focus on engagement could produce a deeper understanding of pre-service teachers' professional identity construction.*

**Keywords:** community of practice, engagement, pre-service teacher, teacher education programme, teacher professional identity

## INTRODUCTION

A community of practice (COP) is defined through mutual engagement and the negotiation of meanings by its participants (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) believes that, in such a community, meanings are negotiated by means of activities. For Wenger, engagement is not simply membership in a community, but it is a sort of belonging that requires being included in a COP meaningfully. The student teachers in a community such as a teacher education (TE) programme mutually engage with classroom activities when they share their interpretations and experiences of reflective practices through competitions, challenges and disagreements. The active participation associated with commitment and motivation leads them to the negotiation of meanings, and effective interaction among and understanding of themselves (Hanna et al., 2020). This indicates that a strong relationship between identity formation and engagement can be

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gained while members of a social community communicate meaningfully with each other through activities (Trent, 2010; Tsui, 2007).

Scholars claim that there is a gap between what teachers learn and what they experience in the real context (Izadinia, 2013; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Pedler et al., 2020; Safinas & Harun, 2020). They state that practitioners have focused more on language teaching theories than the practical side of teaching skills, overlooking the challenging realities of the classroom such as complicated individual and contextual factors. Accordingly, a shift has occurred in traditional TE programmes guiding them to more reflective-oriented programmes that were concentrated on collaboration and situated learning practices (Bukor, 2015; Lee, 2005; Varghese et al., 2005). In this trend, attention has also been given to the role of engagement as a dominant factor in identity construction (Bigelow & Walker, 2003; Hsiu-ting, 2008; Pennington & Richards, 2016). From a different perspective, Pedler et al. (2020) review the multidimensional aspect of student engagement and believe that a holistic dimension of engagement, namely behavioural, emotional, and cognitive, can help learners overcome the contextual changes.

Identity is a state of one's self and identity construction is a maturity process that occurs across time in a specific context. Varghese et al. (2005) believe that positioning oneself in a context is an everlasting process that happens through interaction, negotiation and engagement. In a TE community, positioning oneself happens when getting involved in learning and teaching skills as well as an understanding of themselves as teachers to develop a new professional identity (PI). This procedure highlights the necessity of the contribution of mutual engagement during the practicum and the consideration of engagement as an ice-breaking stage in TE. According to the literature, despite the significance of engagement in identity construction, the stages of incorporating negotiations into TE programmes are not clear (Abednia, 2018; Cheng & Lee, 2014). Moreover, not much has been done on the sequence of materials in TE programmes and their contributions to identity formation, nor has there been adequate research that takes engagement as an initial stage of a TE procedure. In most of the mentioned studies, this factor has been taken as a pedagogical tool to encourage the emergence of identity construction in pre-service teachers. This highlights the necessity of investigating the engagement as a pedagogical and ice-breaking stage in the process of PI construction, and, consequently, the significance of the present research.

Overall, the above-mentioned literature suggests three fundamentally noticeable gaps that the present research attempts to focus on: (i) a dearth of investigations on the process of pre-service teacher identity focusing on *engagement* as an introductory and ice-breaking sequence of TE; (ii) lack of systematic, consistent and integrated activities facilitating the negotiation of meanings and thus engagement in pre-service teachers; and (iii) the scarcity of adequate time taken to report the changes in student teachers. Furthermore, most of the studies reported in the literature are on the part of in-service teachers (e.g., Pinho & Andrade, 2015; Yazdanpanah, 2011) within a short duration, typically over a one-semester practicum or at the exit time of the course (e.g., Abbasian & Karbalaee Esmalee, 2018; Chong, Low & Goh, 2011). To address the gaps mentioned above, the present research attempted to explore the contribution of engagement as the initial phase (*engage*) of a three-phase TE programme – i.e., (i) *engage*, (ii) *study*, and (iii) *activate* (ESA) – to Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers' PI construction.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Wenger (1998) draws scholars' attention to three interrelated modes of identification, i.e., (i) *engagement*, (ii) *imagination* and (iii) *alignment*, and the ways that student teachers negotiate their identities during practicum. He argues that these modes are significantly strengthened by each other in that any improvement in one of them may lead to growth in the others. Drawing special attention to the central role of 'engagement', Farrell (2011) states that engaging in reflective activities makes the prospective teachers aware of their own role identity. This guides researchers and teacher educators to take these three modes, especially engagement, as determining interventions to foster pre-service teachers' identity development.

'Engagement' has been conceptualised as the first and most fundamental mode of the process of self-identification and an underlying component in the negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This indicates the active role of 'engagement' in the TE community that occurs during mutual activities. In order to experience successfully negotiated identities, Wenger (1998) suggests that identities be correlated with social activities that are negotiated meaningfully among community members. He also mentions that, to engage in social practices, negotiations should be reified. Focusing on the centrality of reification, he means going beyond understanding and discussing concepts by materialising them. In other words, pre-service teachers learn how to become teachers by doing and practising rather than merely negotiating.

#### *Engagement in TE contexts*

In a more recent review, Abednia (2018) highlighted 'trust' as a prerequisite factor to interactions among student teachers for fostering mutuality. He found trust, mutuality, diversity of perspectives and recognition of participants' multi-membership to be fundamental factors for achieving effective engagement in a COP. This reveals that, to perform meaningful actions, pre-service teachers need help from their mentors to make meaningful negotiations to practise a successful process of identification. He also argued that there has not been adequate research to inform teacher educators about how interactions take place in the process of teacher identity formation.

Conversely, Cheng and Lee (2014) underestimate the power of teacher educators' role in schools. They contend that mutual engagement cannot be regulated by school leaders, but that it can be actuated by incorporating more reflective activities in collaborative interactions. Regarding the practical side of engagement, Lin and Beyerlein (2015) point to mutual engagement as a critical factor to support the coherence of a TE community, and they believe that successful engagement is rarely achieved in multiple communities. They value mutual engagement as they believe that community members can negotiate with each other on the same activity when they engage in them mutually and meaningfully. In a similar line, Cheng and Lee (2014) argue that, for mutual engagement to be facilitated, teacher educators need to include more reflective activities in TE courses. The place and significance of 'engagement' are considered in a paper by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015: 7) as follows:

This is the most immediate relation to a landscape of practice – engaging in the practice, doing things, working on issues, talking, using and producing artefacts, debating, and reflecting together... Still, there is no substitute for direct engagement in practice as a vehicle for learning the competence of a community.

Considering 'engagement' as a central theme in a teacher education COP, there has only been a handful of studies investigating the changes in EFL pre-service teachers' PI over a long term (Kanno & Stuart, 2011). Among reviewed studies in recent years (e.g., Liu & Xu, 2013; Wedell, 2017), a number of papers that focus on 'engagement' as an effective factor in the development of pre-service teachers' identities were found (e.g., Fajardo Catañeda, 2014; Trent, 2012; Trent & Shroff, 2013); yet none of the studies addressed engagement as the initial sequence of a TE course.

For instance, Fajardo Catañeda's (2014) study highlighted the role of TE as a community in forming, sustaining and transforming the PI of six pre-service teachers. In this research, the researcher found that focus on interconnected domains such as a community of teachers and the relationship between beliefs and classroom practices can guide researchers to a clear understanding of the process of transforming identities in student teachers. However, Fajardo Catañeda (2014) presented two areas of concern. One is the dependency of the pre-service teachers on their mentor due to the mentors' constant supervision and support; the other is the overlap between trainees' previous identities with which they enter the practicum

and their new identities as teachers. Although Fajardo Catañeda's (2014) research has offered new insight into the pre-service teachers' identity construction, the data were gathered during the final year of a five-year programme and the paper does not report the tensions that pre-service teachers encountered at the emergence of their identities at the beginning and during the process of engagement.

In terms of a relationship between identity construction and practice, a strong mutual relationship has been reported by Kanno and Stuart (2011). The researchers explored the challenges of two novice teachers and believed that changes in teachers occur in an intertwined relationship between identity and practice. Theoretically, adopting identity-in-practice and learning-in-practice as two aspects of the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the scholars collected narrated data through interviews, teaching journals, stimulated recalls, classroom observations, video recordings of classes, and documents. One of their findings suggested that two novice teachers could identify themselves as teachers through negotiations with their English as a Second Language (ESL) students in one academic year. A possible explanation for this finding may be the lack of adequate reports on the changes that the trainees underwent before the identification stage.

Out of the most relevant studies, Trent and Shroff (2013) examined pre-service teachers' engagement and the development of their identity as teachers by incorporating the technology of an e-portfolio with an eight-week TE course. In the same vein with Wenger (1998), Trent and Shroff (2013) and Thom and Thuy (2019) supported engagement as a critical factor in the identification of pre-service teachers by allowing them to present their sense of self. They found that such engagement can lead the findings to display the participants' competence through planning, practice and decision-making. Similarly, these researchers recommended more studies on the interplay of identity construction and engagement as well as the replication of their research to discover deeper results on the issue.

#### *PI construction in TE in the context of Iran*

Within the Iranian context, despite the improvements that have occurred in the methodology and the content, scholars have criticised TE programmes for their lack of practicality, their motivation and their evaluation system, and their focus on teacher trainers' preferences rather than learners' needs. They insist that TE programmes need serious reforms in terms of planning and practicality (Motallebzadeh, 2012; Nezakat-Alhossaini & Ketabi, 2013).

Regarding themes such as TE as a community, teacher identity formation, pre-service teachers, and the time duration taken for the identification process in the last decade in Iran (e.g., Abbasian & Karbalaee Esmalee, 2018; Hesamoddini, 2013), only two studies (Biria & Haghighi Irani, 2015; Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014) have explored teacher PI construction of pre-service teachers focusing on TE programme as a context. However, neither foregrounded the importance of 'engagement' as a critical factor in identity formation or as a sequence of the content in TE. For example, Zare-ee and Ghasedi (2014) reported on Iranian student teachers' expectations of some of the issues in teachers' PI construction, including historical, sociological, psychological and cultural factors. Their analyses of a questionnaire and a focus group interview revealed that prospective teachers expected more support from authorities and believed that these factors may affect their PI construction. Although the researchers attempted to categorise the factors influencing teachers' PI through the literature, the study has not illuminated the process of its formation over time.

In terms of the duration of the studies, only one of the papers collected data on pre-service student teachers over one year while the others were conducted mostly on in-service teachers over one semester or over just a few weeks. Biria and Haghighi Irani (2015) examined the identity formation of 10 pre-service teachers over one year and concluded that utilising systematic reflective discussions may facilitate the construction of teacher identity. Despite the study's significant insights, some criticisms are directed towards it. One

of the limitations concerns the pedagogical perspective that considers reflective discussions simply as a tool for facilitating teacher PI construction while ignoring its powerful efficacy as an engagement factor. A further criticism is on the unclear illustration of identity formation and how pre-service teachers engaged in the process of learning to become teachers.

Collectively, given the studies cited above, one may infer that almost all of the scholars have agreed upon incorporating reflective activities in TE programmes to engage trainees meaningfully in teaching practices. According to the literature, most of these studies have collected quantitative data over a short time that mainly provide general results (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Naseri Karimvand, Hessamy & Hemmati, 2014). These kinds of studies lack sufficient depth to offer teacher educators a clear understanding of the process of discovering new identities by pre-service teachers. Furthermore, they ignore the sequence of the curriculum materials, the time period pre-service teachers need to negotiate their identity, and the meaningful engagement in the process of becoming to acquire new identities as teachers. This echoes some researchers' plea for more studies on student teachers' identity and on planning local programmes in developing and underdeveloped countries (Izadinia, 2013; Kennedy, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

With the above-mentioned gaps in mind, the current research findings are important because this study attempted to bridge these gaps by shedding light on the student teachers' mutual engagement while becoming teachers over a longer period. Moreover, the findings let the pre-service teachers understand themselves as language teachers before commencing the field training and real practicum. Thus, this study examined the process of PI in Iranian EFL pre-service teachers focusing on the engage phase as a fundamental stage of a three-phase TE programme – that is, ESA. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How does engagement contribute to the PI construction of Iranian EFL pre-service teachers in the engage phase of the ESA TE programme?
2. How do Iranian EFL pre-service teachers perceive the importance of engagement in interactive activities to negotiate their PIs in the engage phase of ESA TE programme?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Design of the study*

In line with the nature of the research objectives, in this study, a longitudinal qualitative design with a social constructivist approach was employed because social constructivists view knowledge as a gradual, social process performed through cumulating experiences during TE. In the present research, this knowledge was summed up through negotiations among participants and meaningful engagement. To provide an in-depth description of identity construction in individual cases of pre-service teachers, the study progressed through a case study design during the engagement process (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Riazi, 2016). Thus, attempts were made to explore the emergence and development of the PI in a TE programme in a higher education institute in Tehran.

In a nutshell, the ESA curriculum is a non-compulsory TE programme designed locally in three circular and interrelated phases, namely (i) *engage*, (ii) *study*, and (iii) *activate*. The programme was planned specifically for institutional purposes aimed at training qualified teachers over one year in 2014. It was planned for the courses offered by the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) to certify professional teachers to start English language teaching in institutions. The context of the present study indicates that the ESA TE programme took advantage of being conducted in a natural setting rather than a developed setting for the sake of the research. This advantage could prevent the participants from providing the information the researcher sought or changing their behaviour, namely the Halo and Hawthorne effects (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The ESA programme started in February 2017 and ended in March 2018. The present phase, *engage*, started in February 2017 and lasted for 20 weeks (100 hours) as the first phase of this programme. The participants attended the training classes once a week for five hours. It is worth noting that the researcher had a dual role in this research conducting both classroom activities and the research steps concurrently. The specifications of each phase in ESA TE are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1:  
*Specifications of each phase in an ESA Teacher Education*

Items	Phase 1 (Engage)	Phase 2 (Study)	Phase 3 (Activate)
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivating learners</li> <li>- Preparing trainees to start practice teaching</li> <li>- Establishing engagement conceptually and emotionally</li> <li>- Negotiating teacher professional identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integrating theory and practice</li> <li>- Putting the known knowledge into practice</li> <li>- Starting to practise teaching in front of the class and discuss</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Activating the known knowledge of Phases 1 and 2</li> <li>- Practising application and production</li> <li>- Creating tasks and tests</li> <li>- Providing feedback</li> </ul>
Content and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learning knowledge about language and teaching</li> <li>- Doing systematic and reflective discussions and written reports in pairs and groups</li> <li>- Reading texts, watching videos and webinars, joining online international teaching groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presenting knowledge of teaching in practice</li> <li>- Doing simulations &amp; role plays</li> <li>- Doing field training as observations of in-service teachers' classes and providing notes and comment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focusing on the assessment for developing tests</li> <li>- Focusing on learning theories for developing tasks</li> <li>- Developing tests for language skills and components</li> </ul>
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Taking the final test (Teaching Knowledge Test 'TKT' Mock), 50%</li> <li>- Trainees' Portfolio, 50%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presenting mini and long teaching practices and a final demonstration, 50%</li> <li>- Trainees' portfolio, 50%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Taking a written open-ended test, 50%</li> <li>- Trainees' portfolio, 50%</li> </ul>
Time Duration (hrs.)	95	120	25

### Participants

Eight females in the age range of 18 to 38, all Farsi speakers, were enrolled for the above-mentioned programme through the institute's practicum office. Purposive sampling was selected because the researchers intended to select unique cases: mainly those who were considered as pre-service teachers with a high proficiency level of English. Therefore, the consequence of such a selection was that the findings could not be generalised (Riazi, 2016). All of the participants came from different majors, but, in the middle of the course, Zari and Mina decided to change their majors and continued with their Master's degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Seven of them learned English as a second language at school or at an institute for two to three years, and only Neda had acquired English since her early childhood at a private English-medium school. According to the initial interview by the official staff of the institute, the participants were at upper-intermediate to advanced level of English proficiency, i.e., at levels C1 and C2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) descriptors.



They were at a similar level of interest and had the goal to teach English as their future career. The candidates had not participated in any training sessions and did not have any teaching experience before commencing their participation in the research as they claimed in the pre-course interview. Although the participants were of different majors, ages, and the same gender, it was not the purpose of the study to include such features in their teacher identity development. As the ethical side of the study and to obtain the informed consent, all of the enrolled candidates were informed that (i) their activities during the programme would be employed as research data, (ii) any identifiable information would be removed from the data, and (iii) their names would be replaced by pseudonyms. Table 2 represents the participants' specifications with their pseudonyms.

*Table 2:  
Configuration of the participants with their pseudonyms*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Major</b>
Neda	24	BS	mechatronics engineering
Ayda	38	BA	natural sciences
Shina	20	BS	computer engineering
Pari	21	BS	medical engineering
Mina	28	BA	business management
Saba	26	MS	business management
Ziba	18	BS	business management
Zari	23	BA	business management

### *Instruments*

To ensure that the research findings were credible, transferable, dependable and conformable to satisfy the trustworthiness of the research, the triangulation method was employed in a way that data were collected in both written and spoken modes. A pre-course semi-structured interview and one reflective essay were the main data collection instruments used to explore the changes in the PI formation in pre-service teachers. To keep track of the progress and changes in the process of identity construction of pre-service teachers and a crosscheck to provide an in-depth description, the researcher wrote five reflective journals during the course. Therefore, every four weeks, one journal was written about the observed changes in the participants.

In addition, to establish the credibility of findings, both interview questions and statements of the reflective essay were applied to a similar group at the same institute. Then, some minor changes were made on the structure of the sentences (Ary et al., 2019). The details of each instrument are provided below upon the sequence of their application during the practicum.

The pre-course semi-structured interview was planned to obtain general information about the participants' particulars and experiences, their background knowledge about teaching, and their perceptions about the first session. The questions were designed in English and based on Kelchtermans' (1993) conceptualisation of teachers' PI characterising these as task perception, self-esteem, job motivation, self-image and future perspective. Moreover, using a reflective essay at the end of the 20th week could assist the researchers in crosschecking the participants' responses and thus the extent of the growth of their PIs. The reflective essay comprised six prompts to direct the participants' responses and to avoid disorganised modes. The

prompts guided the participants to write about their motivation to become language teachers, to compare their feelings to that of the first day, to write about the effectiveness of the in-class activities and weekly assignments in their engagement in negotiations and their changes, and to evaluate phase one as the starting stage of the teacher education.

#### *Data collection procedure*

As mentioned before, the engage phase lasted for a period of 20 weeks as an ice-breaking stage of the ESA TE programme. To examine the initial state of the participants' PIs, the pre-course interview was carried out in English in the first session. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. To allow the researchers to identify any inaccuracy, the first draught of transcribed data was sent to the participants for member checking, and their input was incorporated into the final version.

The classroom activities and weekly assignments comprised, but were not limited to, three Cambridge textbooks, six classroom videos, four online videos from different websites – such as *Faculty Focus and Teaching Channel* (in Magma Publications) – that support teacher development articles and videos – and three webinars from teaching experts (see Table 1). After each activity, student teachers were required to submit their reports as their assignments to the educator according to their systematic instructions. Moreover, they were instructed to negotiate their shared viewpoints in systematic and reflective discussions to come to an agreement or disagreement through collaboration and interaction in pairs and groups in the classroom. Before the first discussion session, the trainer instructed the trainees on how to conduct systematic and structured discussions in groups or pairs. Consistent, systematic and structured activities could assist student teachers to believe in themselves as teachers, and to discuss with their pairs and group members and comment on videos, webinars and textbook contents purposefully and professionally, and to engage meaningfully in activities (Biria & Haghighi Irani, 2015).

In the last week of this phase, the participants were asked to complete a reflective essay comprising six prompts. To avoid the biasedness, all the participants were assured that their reflective ideas would not have any influence on their final grade.

#### *Data analysis procedure*

Addressing the changes in the participants' PI and reporting their identity formation, the researchers compared the data collected from the pre-course interview and the reflective essay at the end of this phase. Additionally, to ensure credibility of the findings, the participants' responses in the interview and reflective essay were compared and crosschecked with the researchers' journals during the practicum.

#### *Within-case analysis*

The data were analysed at two different levels: (i) within-case analysis and (ii) cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998). At the first level, attempts were made to examine each participant's changes in their identities as teachers separately to discover recurring themes and group them. Therefore, as it is believed that identity and language are mutually constitutive (Trent, 2011), each participant's interview transcript and reflective essay were read repeatedly, then compared and analysed independently to build a profile of each trainee's changes over time. To interpret the data, the most frequent clauses and phrases were coded and classified regarding the main objective of the research and Kelchtermans' (1993) conceptualisation of teacher PI.

#### *Cross-case analysis*

Employing the categories obtained from the first level, at the cross-case analysis level, 10 themes were identified and compared across other cases to discover the shifts of identities as well as their similarities and differences among all pre-service teachers. Running the two levels of analysis enabled the researcher



to focus on the main purpose of the study: how pre-service teachers' PIs are influenced by their negotiations of meanings to identify themselves as teachers. Finally, the themes were classified, and the three most frequently recurring ones were discovered: (i) mentor teacher's role as an engagement facilitator, (ii) classroom-based activities and assignments as effective prompts, and (iii) engage phase as a motivator.

## RESULTS

Shedding light on the engagement in teachers' community practice, the themes focused on the repeated patterns and those that were influential in shaping the participants' teacher identity, their feelings as members of teachers' communities, and their perception of the course as an encouraging factor for moving to the second phase of the programme. These themes were framed in three main categories: (i) mentor teacher's role as an engagement facilitator, (ii) classroom-based activities and assignments as effective prompts, and (iii) engage phase as a motivator.

### *Mentor teacher's role as an engagement facilitator*

In the pre-course interview, the last question was about the participants' impressions of the first session. They claimed that their mentor surpassed their expectations and made them feel comfortable when she provided a friendly, energetic and encouraging atmosphere. In addition, they mentioned the mentor's role as a significant role model. For instance, Mina expressed that she was eager to know 'how to be a good teacher like our mentor'.

Job motivation is one of the identity concepts that was realised in almost all participants' responses to the question as to why they selected this course and what motivated them to learn how to teach. For example, Ziba mentioned that

I love teaching because it makes me engaged in the English language and learning new methods in teaching.

The fourth and sixth prompts of the reflective essay were guided by the factors influencing the construction of participants' identity as teachers during the engage phase. Similar sentiments were expressed by almost all of the participants when they declared their gratifications in changing their attitudes about the teaching profession in light of the mentor's positive relationship with them and her behaviour. Saba's remarks capture the ideas of most of the trainees:

*Excerpt 1:* The mentor's role was very significant in encouraging us to do the activities, our weekly assignments, creating student-student and teacher-student rapport, and taking part in discussions. Our mentor was not just a teacher, she was the one who could change my opinion about teaching. She gave me a new insight into teaching how a teacher should behave. The mentor's behaviour could boost our self-confidence and it was the most encouraging factor for us to be excited to continue to the second phase of the program. (Saba)

Regarding the pre-service teachers' present feeling as a teacher compared to the first session, the trainees named some identity concepts that were not identified in the pre-course interview excerpts. Neda and Pari could identify concepts such as self-image and task perception when Neda expressed that 'mostly, the mentor's encouragements made me improve my knowledge of language and teaching in Phase One.' Likewise, Ziba believed that she gained plenty of information about teaching and teachers' roles while she showed a type of self-confidence in one of her statements:

I think I can apply those things I learned in my classes.

This presented a sign of task perception, job motivation, self-image and self-esteem in most of the pre-service teachers at the end of the first stage of teacher development. As Vygotsky (1986) highlights the teachers' roles in guiding learning, it is legitimate to attribute the findings of this theme to both the mentor's behaviour as a role model and course activities as parts of the context of the practicum during the engage phase.

#### *Online and offline activities as effective prompts*

This theme emerged from the participants' responses to three of the prompts on the reflective essay. They were designed with almost the same focal point so that the researcher could be provided with the same issue from different lenses completing each other. The participants were asked to write about the impact of reflective class discussions on their feeling of becoming teachers after watching sample videos, and 'the efficacy of the online and offline assignments and rapport in shaping their identities as teachers'. As expressed by the pre-service teachers, every activity in this phase played a critical role in the development and maturity of their becoming teachers.

Overall, eight participants agreed that peer- and self-evaluation in systematic reflective discussions made them aware of their strengths and weaknesses and helped them to avoid making common mistakes. Additionally, they claimed that their sense of feeling like a teacher was promoted by a variety of collaborative activities, online and offline weekly assignments, pair and group negotiations, joining international communities of teachers and engaging in varieties of online discussions, and classroom rapport.

For instance, Zari's use of positive evaluation and emphatic words like 'really effective' legitimises her support for a future perspective of her real teaching practices when she wrote,

in my opinion, the excellent rapport between the teacher and the students were influential.

This highlighted the role of the negotiations of their identities as prospective teachers and the discussions on their commitments and responsibilities. For Zari, systematic reflective discussions in groups were a means to becoming self-confident as a teacher when she asserted that

if we didn't discuss the strong points and weak points of the teaching samples in groups, we might have lost our self-confidence.

As a global characteristic of a teacher, self-image and the prospective dimension of the professional self were revealed in the self-descriptive statements of the participants, Shina and Ayda, for instance, referred to the online assignments and joining international teachers' COPs as a catalyst for their engagement in the teaching profession. Shina expressed:

*Excerpt 2:* ... Online assignments helped me to keep updating and be in contact with the world of teachers... Discussions helped me to find the advantages and disadvantages of each teaching method. So, I could learn how to apply the positive points in my classes... it also made me aware of my probable problems in future classes. (Shina)

*Excerpt 3:* ... watching sample classes and discussing them was great because I knew nothing about a teacher's roles, materials, and planning for a classroom before. Each of the activities during this term had a new idea for teaching. Collaborative practices helped me to develop my language and teaching skills. (Ayda)

In these excerpts, other teacher identity representations such as the participants' motives to continue with the teaching job, their concern about their future and the result of the practicum were also realised.

### *The engage phase as a motivator*

Student teachers were asked to write about the strengths and weaknesses of phase one, that is, *engage* in the last prompt of the reflective essay. The analysis and interpretation of this part revealed that all the participants were gratified to find this stage of the programme effective in learning about teaching and becoming a teacher. The participants conceived their active participation in different aspects of language teaching and varieties of negotiations through reflective practices as a valuable and inspiring tool for acquiring knowledge about teaching and feeling more confident to continue to the second phase (*study*).

A consistent finding was that all participants evaluated the engage phase as a facilitator and a promising concept to reflect on conceptual changes in their attitude and knowledge about the teaching profession. Moreover, at the end of this phase, they displayed emotional engagement that emerged from participating in COP activities. This was reflected in their gratified statements supporting Izadinia's (2015: 4) conceptualisation of *emotion* as a two-fold concept: 'a dimension of the self and a factor that has a bearing on the expression of identity and the shaping of it.' Pari, Ziba and Mina similarly indexed emotion concerning the course materials.

*Excerpt 4:* Now, I'm very happy and satisfied that I could pass this phase. I feel that I have improved a lot in terms of my knowledge. This phase was nice encouragement. It was wonderful and I loved it. I also loved my classmates and classes. (Pari)

Mina also shared a similar feeling and showed her commitment to teaching and her future profession regarding the strong points of the first phase by using emphatic adjectives such as 'wonderful', 'great' and 'special'. She stated that 'This course was a wonderful motivator. Now, I feel I can do something special for my students in the future and can be a great teacher.'

The participants also considered reading the up-to-date materials and resources, putting everything into discussions reflectively, engaging students in all aspects of teaching during the practicum, assigning varieties of online websites, and teaching webinars as the major factors in their engagement. Regarding the encouraging points of the engage phase, they referred to the presentation of the real world of teaching combined with new knowledge and skills as a great opportunity to create a new identity (Yildirim, 2008). The contribution of the engage phase to the emergence of the teacher identity was evidenced by Saba's statement. Highlighting as strong points of the present phase, Saba identified identity categories such as self-confidence, task perception and future perspectives as determinations of teacher identity and teaching skills and the assets of the course:

*Excerpt 5:* ... teaching materials not in the order of the book, but the order of our needs, being a motivational mentor and caring friend at the same time were the advantages of this phase. One of the points that I loved the most was the seriousness of the mentor while almost always smiling and her genuine charisma that was being transferred to me as a role model positively. Being a teacher doesn't mean to transfer just the knowledge. A teacher should be a psychologist and be able to create a good relationship with their students and support them. (Saba)

The pre-service teachers' viewpoints of what was perceived as weak points of the engage phase and the link between the engage and study phases of the newly developed ESA TE curriculum were also reported. For instance, Pari, Shina, Zari and Neda stated that, despite the strong commitments of the course to their learning to teach, they needed more presentations, teaching practices, discussions and scaffolding that were planned to contribute to the second and third phases of the programme, namely the study and activate phases. This was evidenced by Neda's claim that

more frequent use of videos and teaching aids are needed during the classes.

Pari personalised the weak points and expressed that

I feel I need more teaching practice.

Table 3 summarises the emergence of the participants' PIs according to Kelchtermans' (1993) conceptualisation compared between the pre-course interview and the reflective essay based on the frequencies of the identity concepts, namely self-confidence, self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception and future perspective. In Table 3, the columns of each research instrument represent the total percentage of the contribution of each identity concept in the identity formation of individual participants (cases) in within-case analysis and the rows show the total percentage of the occurrence of each identity concept for all participants in the cross-case analysis explained above. It is worth mentioning that the item 'self-confidence' as a significant shift of pre-service teachers' identities (Beijaard et al., 2005) was added to the list. In this regard, for instance, coded statements such as 'now, I feel that I can be a great teacher' were considered as a manifestation of self-confidence, and clauses such as 'put myself in that situation' were considered as a representative of both self-image and future perspective, respectively.

Table 3:

*A comparison of the frequencies of teacher identity concepts in pre-course interview and reflective essay*

Identity Concepts	Pre-Course Interview									Reflective Essay									
	Participants	Mina	Zari	Saba	Ziba	Neda	Shina	Ayda	Pari	Total	Mina	Zari	Saba	Ziba	Neda	Shina	Ayda	Pari	Total
Self-confidence (%)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	37.5	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	75
Self-image (%)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	12.5	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	87.5
Self-esteem (%)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	37.5	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	100
Job motivation (%)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	100	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	87.5
Task perception (%)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	25	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	100
Future perspective (%)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	50	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	87.5
TOTAL (%)		16	50	83	33	33	33	33	66		100	50	100	83	100	100	83	100	

As illustrated in Table 3, in the pre-course interview, the changes of PI concepts were identified to ranges between 12.5% in presenting the self-image to 100% in job motivation. Compared with the findings of the reflective essay, the same rate grew to 87.5% in self-image while job motivation decreased to 87.5%. Generally, the cross-case analysis (rows) of two data collection tools yielded an enhancement in almost all of the PI concepts in the participants. Likewise, a within-case analysis (columns) illuminated a noticeable shift in individual student teachers' identity items in terms of self-confidence, self-image, self-esteem, task perception and future perspective. The only declining item identified was job motivation and the only inconsistent case among the participants was the case of Zari represented at the end of the first phase of the ESA curriculum. This discrepancy is discussed in the following section.

## DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data in the current study suggested that the engagement in structured activities and materials as well as systematic reflective practices could assist the participants in developing a sense of belonging to the teacher community and in transitioning from a student to a teacher PI.

### *Addressing research question 1*

The first research question aimed at examining how eight Iranian pre-service teachers could identify and develop their PIs through a variety of negotiations of meaningful activities and reflective discussions in the engage phase of an ESA TE programme.

The within-case thematic analysis of individual participants' oral and written data revealed a significant improvement in almost all the pre-service trainees concerning six PI terms reported in Table 3. The pre-service teachers' PI formation can be more explicitly understood in terms of Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptualisation of learning as social practice and learners as individual, social members who learn through integration of meaning, practice, community and identity components. For individual participants, engagement in the teaching process was partly reflected in their written statements, the reflective essay, activities such as watching sample classes, discussions after watching videos, presentations, reading texts, collaborative practices, and online assignments in a COP (excerpts 2 and 3). This echoes the significant role of engagement in the identification of the pre-service teachers highlighted by Trent and Shroff (2013); however, their study did not focus on engagement stages as an initial part of the TE course. This finding also confirms Hsiu-ting's (2005) claim in terms of applying reflective practice to grow PI in an online learning community.

Comparatively, for instance, Saba was the one who came out to present a clear identification of her PI at the earlier stage of the practicum. In her case, the degree of identity concepts appeared to be 83% in the pre-course interview and those were promoted to 100% at the end of phase one. Cross-checking with the mentor's reflective journals indicated a degree of congruence in terms of self-confidence emerged from the very beginning of engage phase in Saba. She attributed her identification to the classroom rapport and course assignments which were sent to the participants via email. These assignments were in the form of webinars and videos that they were required to discuss in groups at the beginning of the following week. The engagement process for Saba was influenced by the role of the teacher educator's behaviour when she felt a change in her attitude at the end of the course.

### *Emergence of inconsistent cases*

The participants entered this programme relying on their personal identity. Accordingly, the emergence of some inconsistent cases is inevitable as scholars believe that the practice of becoming a teacher is a complex phenomenon involving many dimensions, such as the student teachers' background experience, previous identity, and personal and cultural characteristics (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Korthagen, 2004; Wedell, 2017).

Despite the constant changes in seven participants, the findings revealed a different chain of shifts for Zari corroborated by the pre-course interview, the reflective essay and the teacher educator's personal narratives. Before initiating the programme, Zari presented a positive feeling towards being a teacher, teaching English and gaining new knowledge (representatives of job motivation, self-esteem and task perception), while perceiving the mentor's role as a significant part at the first session. However, Zari's record indicated limited changes over the concepts of identity formation, which is indicative of the constant range of 50% in both data collection tools. Unlike the other participants, Zari was the last volunteer to present in front of the class during the early weeks of the study phase. She claimed that she learned much about teaching and felt her own improvement, even though no sign of her solidifying self-confidence, self-image and future perspective was visible at the end of the engage phase. In response to the prompt indicating the efficacy of the classroom activities in her feeling as a teacher, she attributed it to activities such as systematic discussions, peer- and self-corrections, asking and answering questions, and watching sample teaching videos. Zari's lack of confidence is revealed from her statements, her anxiety about volunteering for the simulation of teaching methods and participating hesitatingly in discussions. Her

comments on the need for more presentations and discussions revealed her strong reliance upon the mentor's assistance and the decline of her autonomy.

### *Addressing research question 2*

This research question aimed to discover the participants' perception of their engagement sources and identity changes. The prompts in the reflective essay were planned to motivate the pre-service teachers to write about the same focal point from a variety of lenses assuring the credibility of the findings. The first two prompts in the reflective essay guided the participants in writing about their changes as compared to the first session. The following three prompts were designed to focus the student teachers' attention on the activities and types of groupings during the practicum. As the analysis of data reveals, all eight pre-service teachers agreed upon the effectiveness of watching videos of sample classes and webinars, joining online international communities, and the systematic reflective discussions. The participants also mentioned that their group discussions after classroom activities in a collaborative framework were influential in shaping their PI.

For instance, Zari highlighted the role of the mentor, reflective discussions, and peer- and self-corrections in shaping her identity during the programme. Despite her claims of the valuable changes, Zari did not appear to undergo any significant changes as profound as the other members over 20 weeks. Regarding the inconsistency mentioned above, this implies a conflict between what Zari perceived as a student teacher and what occurred in reality. This is in line with Pennington and Richards' (2016) claim on assuming a sort of conflict between teachers' particular roles and what they perceive of their own identities. Abednia (2012) defines this type of conflict as a 'sense of change agency', which is proven to be an indispensable part of a COP (Varghese et al., 2005; Wenger, 1998). Surprisingly, none of the participants mentioned the variability of materials as one of the efficient factors in their engagement and thus the construction of their PIs. This indicates that pre-service teachers' perception of their identity formation may be different from reality, at least at the initial stages.

The findings also revealed that the mentor's role should be highlighted with active pre-, within- and post-programme support and scaffolding to encourage the emergence and growth of PI. This can be encouraged by a social constructivist perspective that sees knowledge formation as primarily a social activity when student teachers are involved in reflective practices in a pedagogical environment. The mentor's role is highlighted when student teachers are more dependent on mentors in such a learning context modelled as a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The engagement stage in TE allows pre-service teachers to gradually pass through the ZPD of learning, which helps them develop their thinking skills. Consequently, they can transit from the area of dependency on their mentors to independency at the end of the practicum when they feel more confident and autonomous (Vygotsky, 1986).

Considering teacher identity construction as being in a state of flux and engagement as a primary step in TE curriculum, the findings of the current research can solve Fajardo Catañeda's (2014) two concerns over the dependency of trainees on mentors and the overlap of student teachers' previous and current identities. In the process of engagement in teacher learning, mentors support student teachers to enhance their intellectual state to enable them to act independently when they start their teaching career. This process allows them to negotiate themselves, which is seen as a crucial stage in the development of their PI (Ivanova, 2019).

Implications of this research suggest that teacher educators and curriculum designers invest more time and rigour in selecting, sequencing and evaluating materials. The flexibility of the reflective activities can also be projected to help curriculum designers plan global TE programmes in different contexts and among diverse COPs. To prepare qualified and practising teachers for prospective contexts, teacher educators

should focus on the complexities and conflicts involved in becoming a teacher during the practicum. Furthermore, when they design a TE curriculum, educators should take engagement as the initial step to provide appropriate time for pre-service teachers to overcome tensions and negotiate their new selves. A significant implication of the current research advocates for the critical role of mentors during the practicum. It indicates that qualified mentors should be trained to implement negotiations leading the student teachers to successful engagement in meaning, and, ultimately, the formation of their PIs. Consequently, this can encourage stakeholders and educators to design mentor preparation programmes.

Although the study has successfully demonstrated the identification of the pre-service teachers' PIs in light of the engagement, the findings were limited in two ways. The first was the paucity of incorporating adequate teaching practices that can be referred to as the nature and design of the ESA TE programme. Because the second phase focused on the integration between theory and practice and included a plethora of macro- and micro-teaching practices, it was not planned to put pressure on the participants to perform teaching practices at this stage. The second source of the caveat was the small number of the participants, which could affect the results of the research. This means that caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferrable to other, similar contexts. It is recommended that a further study be undertaken to explore the contribution of the voice of other groups of pre-service teachers in different contexts while considering additional factors such as gender, age and qualifications as well as different educational contexts, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds, all of which may play a role in the engagement of pre-service teachers.

## CONCLUSION

The present study was undertaken to report the process in which Iranian pre-service teachers came to identify themselves as EFL teachers through engagement in classroom activities. The findings of the current research are valuable as they could convince teacher educators and curriculum designers to devote more time to the pre-service teachers' need to both engage in the components of the new social community and negotiate their PIs at the primary stage of a training programme. The findings indicate that the relevance of the engagement can be supported by the results of this research and that curriculum designers and teacher educators should take engagement as a centre of their consideration when designing TE programmes. However, to understand the steps of PI formation in pre-service teachers, it is necessary to move beyond engagement to experience the second and third modes of Wenger's (1998) belonging concepts.

The findings advocate for the establishment of successful negotiations. Accordingly, there is a need to encourage pre-service teachers to participate actively in activities and to engage emotionally in teaching knowledge and practices. In doing so, the establishment of modes of belonging and identity through engagement must happen in a systematic and circular mode. In addition to these, it was also shown that the activities should be selected from varieties of reading, writing, speaking and listening to capture all types of student teachers' motives and intelligence. For these materials to be efficient, they need to be structured, specialised, consistent and meaningful in the primary stages of becoming a teacher. Moreover, the findings revealed that, generally, pre-service teachers learn through watching, listening and doing practical activities. And, last but not least, in order to apply a successful negotiation leading to the engagement of pre-service teachers, teacher educators are required to establish a swift trust. This kind of trust should be employed at the beginning of the practicum and requires carefully planned TE programmes as well as mentor teachers' suitable teaching styles, insightful behaviour, and their interaction with student teachers.

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