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Reconstructing Teacher Identity in the AI Era: A Qualitative Study of EFL Teachers in a Chinese Private College

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Abstract: ***This study explores the professional identity reconstruction of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers amid the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into education. Using a qualitative multiple-case design, four English teachers from a Chinese private college participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were thematically analyzed, and four core dimensions were identified: (1) duality of teachers' emotional experiences in AI integration; (2) diverse pathways of identity reconstruction; (3) multi-level interactive influences; and (4) ethical considerations in identity reconstruction. Based on the findings, the study highlights the need for comprehensive support systems covering technical training, psychological support, ethical guidance, and institutional backing. These insights help with discussions about EFL teacher development. They also help create educational policies that support AI use in English teaching.***

Keywords: AI in EFL teaching, Teacher identity reconstruction, Emotional experiences, Chinese private colleges**.**

1. Introduction

Driven by national digital education strategies, China's higher education is increasingly integrating artificial intelligence (AI) technology into teaching practices. As an important part of China's higher education system, private colleges have also embraced this trend. However, structural limitations such as insufficient funding, faculty shortages, and uneven AI literacy are restricting their transformation process.

Against this background, the role of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Chinese higher education is being redefined. Teacher identity refers to how teachers define their professional roles, which encompasses both self-perception and socio-professional recognition [1]. It is generally believed that teacher identity is not static but a dynamic process continuously reconstructed throughout one's career.

In Chinese private colleges, where resources are significantly limited, EFL teachers are under dual pressure. On the one hand, they need to cope with the pressure that AI may replace the functions of traditional language teachers, for example, in grammar correction. On the other hand, they must adapt to the new model of AI-assisted teaching. These tensions require teachers to continuously renegotiate their professional identities.

Although the research on the integration of AI in education is growing, most studies focus on students or take public institutions as the research context. Furthermore, current research mainly emphasizes cognitive factors and often neglects the emotional dimension in the adoption of technology. Therefore, in Chinese private colleges, where institutional environments may intensify challenges, the emotional struggles and identity dilemmas of EFL teachers have not received enough attention. To fill this research gap, this study explores how EFL teachers in Chinese private colleges reconstruct their professional identities during AI integration from an emotional perspective. The research focuses on the following questions:

1) How do EFL teachers in Chinese private colleges perceive and respond to the integration of AI into teaching at the emotional level?

2) How do these emotional experiences affect the reconstruction of their professional identities?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to clarify how teachers cope with identity negotiation in an under-resourced educational environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Role of AI in Language Education

Current research shows that AI offers diverse technological benefits in education. Its core functions are mainly reflected in three key aspects: personalized learning support, multimodal content creation, and intelligent assessment. In language education, AI demonstrates remarkable adaptability and innovation, reshaping traditional education models. Firstly, AI can break the time and space limitations of traditional teaching. By systematically analyzing students' learning data, it can promote personalized learning process [2]. This capability effectively addresses individual learning differences and enhances educational inclusivity [3]. Moreover, multimodal large language models (MLLMs) represented by GPT-4 and Gemini, have redefined the way teaching resources are generated. Unlike traditional single-modal forms, MLLMs can integrate text, images, audio, and video materials to help build comprehensive language learning content and provide learners with a multi-dimensional language input environment. In terms of language assessment and feedback, AI is timelier and more accurate than human teachers [4]. In oral speech analysis, AI tools can instantly provide feedback on pronunciation, speech flow, and fluency issues, significantly improving the

efficiency of oral training. In written language assessment, AI can automatically identify grammatical errors, enhancing the accuracy of language use [5].

With its continuous integration into teaching practice, AI is undergoing a transformation from an auxiliary tool to an active participant in education. The synergy of its functions—personalization, multimodal content, and intelligent assessment—drives a reconstruction in language education from a "teacher-centered" to a "learner-centered" model. Consequently, there is a potential shift of the educator's role [6]. Despite the obvious advantages of AI, it also raises many concerns including academic integrity, the veracity of AI-generated content, data privacy, the erosion of critical thinking skills, and even fundamental questions about educational values [7]. Teachers' own understanding of AI and educational concepts have exacerbated these challenges. Although they generally recognize that AI may bring a range of opportunities to education, many believe they lack sufficient knowledge of AI. It poses challenges for integrating AI into teaching [8]. In addition, current research has not paid much attention to the actual teaching situations, resulting in the weakening of teaching autonomy, a loss of control, and worries that AI may devalue teachers' professional worth [9] [10]. As a result, some teachers have relatively limited interest or motivation to incorporate AI into the classroom.

2.2 Teacher Identity and Their Emotions

Teacher identity shapes teachers' "dispositions, where they place their effort, whether and how they seek out professional development opportunities, and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role" [11]. As AI transforms language education, it has evolved from an auxiliary tool into a shaper of the teaching environment. This shift not only affects teaching efficiency but also deeply impacts teachers' role perception, emotional investment, and judgment of professional value. AI now challenges and reconstructs teacher identity, triggering dynamic negotiations among teachers' emotions, beliefs, and value systems.

Existing studies largely acknowledge the dynamic nature of teacher identity. Yazan proposed a theoretical framework consisting of six core constructs: (a) teacher learning, (b) teacher cognition, (c) participation in communities of practice, (d) contextual factors, (e) teacher biographies, and (f) teacher emotions [12]. Lasky further emphasized professional training, socio-political contexts, and historical values collectively and continuously shape teachers' identity formation, especially during periods of educational reform [1].

It is necessary to clarify the essential difference between identity and role: a role defines what a teacher should do, while identity stems from what a teacher feels. This distinction highlights the importance of emotional investment in the construction of teacher identity [13]. Therefore, in studies on teacher identity construction, many scholars have emphasized the fundamental role of emotions recently. Zembylas examined the emotional dimensions of teacher identity, hoping to gain a deeper understanding of teacher self [14]. Reio found when faced with ambiguity and uncertainty of change, teachers' emotions can affect their risk-taking, learning and development, and identity formation [15]. Clarke proposed a four-axis framework for teacher identity construction, in which emotions, together with elements such as values and behaviors, are emphasized as core components [16].

However, existing research mainly adopts technology acceptance models to understand AI adoption through cognitive dimensions like perceived usefulness and ease of use [17], often neglecting the emotional experience of teachers. Studies indicate that teachers often face emotional challenges when using AI, including trust anxiety, perceived loss of autonomy, and confusion regarding their professional value [18]. For instance, when suggestions AI generates conflict with teachers' own judgments, teachers may experience uncertainty, resistance, or even an identity crisis [19].

In essence, teacher identity encompasses teachers' emotional experiences. It not only influences teaching decisions and practices but also feeds back to identity reconstruction through teaching experience.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

This study adopted a qualitative research design, aiming to explore the identity reconstruction experiences of EFL teachers in Chinese private colleges under the background of the integration of artificial intelligence technology. To ensure the scientific validity and reliability of the study, this research strictly followed the interpretive constructivist research paradigm. Research participants were selected through purposive sampling, data were collected via semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis method was used to systematically process the data.

A purposive sampling strategy was used in this study, with 4 English teachers selected from a private college in China as research participants. Three dimensions—teaching experience, technology acceptance, and disciplinary background—were fully considered during sampling to ensure the representativeness and information richness of the sample. The basic information of the participants is as follows: Teacher A (4 years of teaching experience, active technology integrator), Teacher B (4 years of teaching experience, facing difficulties in technology exploration), Teacher C (14 years of teaching experience, cautious experimenter), and Teacher D (15 years of teaching experience, conservative observer). All participants taught English major courses and volunteered to participate in this study.

Data collection mainly relied on semi-structured interviews. To align with the research questions, the interview outline was designed to cover the following three dimensions: (1) AI technology application practices (e.g. "In which teaching sessions do you usually use AI?"); (2) emotional experiences (e.g. "How do you feel when using AI?"); (3) professional identity perception (e.g. "How does AI affect your role as a teacher?"). To comply with research ethics, interview transcripts were anonymized, using codes instead of real names and identifiable information.

This study used NVivo software for analysis and finally

identified four core dimensions: (1) duality of teachers' emotional experiences in AI integration; (2) diverse pathways of identity reconstruction; (3) multi-level interactive influences; and (4) ethical considerations in identity reconstruction.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Duality of Emotional Experiences: Coexistence of Technological Optimism and Professional Anxiety

The study found that during the integration of AI technology, teachers experienced complex emotional experiences, showing obvious dual characteristics. Positive emotions mainly stemmed from efficiency improvements and enhanced professional autonomy. For instance, Teacher A described vividly: "After AI helped me finish those mechanical grading tasks, I suddenly had an entire weekend. This feeling was not just relief, but also a kind of professional liberation—I could finally focus on the truly important teaching aspects." This sense of liberation came not only from the reduction of work burden but also from the fact that teachers could devote their energy to more creative teaching activities, thereby achieving stronger professional fulfillment.

However, alongside technological optimism, there existed profound professional anxiety. This anxiety manifested in three aspects: the technical aspect (e.g. Teacher B's worry about "technical failures"), the professional aspect (e.g. Teacher D's concern about "diminished authority"), and the ethical aspect (e.g. Teacher C mentioned "worry about teaching quality"). Teacher B's interview revealed a typical expression of this anxiety: "Before trying new technologies every time, I have to test it again and again. I fear that problems will occur in class. As young teachers, we are still establishing our professional credibility. Sometimes, a single technical failure may make students question my ability."

The introduction of AI technology has reconfigured teachers' emotional space: on the one hand, it has created new emotional identification (e.g. the sense of pride as a technology-enabled educator); on the other hand, it has led to the emergence of emotional distance (e.g. the sense of alienation from students caused by the technological gap). Therefore, emotions have become a core driving mechanism for teachers' identity reconstruction—positive emotions promote technology acceptance and identity expansion, while negative emotions trigger identity protection and behavioral adjustment.

4.2 Diverse Pathways of Identity Reconstruction: From Knowledge Authority to Intelligent Educational Designer

Data analysis revealed that teachers' identity reconstruction presented three distinct pathways, reflecting different levels of technology acceptance and identity negotiation strategies.

The identity expansion pathway of technology integrators, represented by Teacher A, showed the characteristics of proactive identity reconstruction. By deeply integrating AI technology into teaching practice, such teachers successfully achieved role expansion: "I am no longer just a knowledge transmitter, but more like a designer of the learning ecosystem. I need to design and plan the interaction between AI and students, which requires me to possess new skills." This identity transformation not only involved changes in teaching behaviors but also included in-depth reconstruction of professional cognition—shifting from the traditional "knowledge authority" to an "intelligent educational designer".

The identity negotiation pathway of technology explorers was reflected in Teacher B's experience, showing a contradictory and struggling process of identity negotiation: "I know I should use technology, but every time I try, I worry about poor results. Sometimes I spend several nights preparing an AI-related activity, but it only lasts 10 minutes in class, and various problems may still arise." These teachers are in the transition period of identity transformation—on the one hand, they are eager to construct a new identity as an "innovative teacher" through technology application; on the other hand, they retreat to the "protective zone" of their traditional identity due to insufficient capabilities.

The identity solidification pathway of technology conservatives, represented by Teacher D, demonstrated obvious characteristics of identity defense: "My years of teaching have proven that traditional methods are effective. While technology seems exciting, the essence of teaching still lies in human communication. AI can't replace that." By emphasizing the essential attributes of education and the irreplaceability of their own experience, such teachers strengthen the boundaries of their existing identity and resist the pressure of identity transformation brought by technology.

The introduction of AI technology has changed the way teachers participate in the community of teaching practice, prompting them to reposition their roles and status in educational practice through identity negotiation. Based on their professional beliefs, experience, and technical capabilities, different teachers have chosen different identity negotiation strategies, thus forming distinct pathways of identity reconstruction.

4.3 Multi-level Interactive Influences: Synergistic Effects of Individual, Organizational, and Technological Systems

The study found that the process of teachers' identity reconstruction was jointly influenced by factors at multiple levels, and there were complex interactive relationships between these factors.

At the individual level, teachers' technological self-efficacy and professional development stage are key factors. Young teachers (e.g. Teachers A and B) have a high level of technology acceptance, but they lack sufficient teaching experience to balance technology and teaching; senior teachers (e.g. Teachers C and D) have rich teaching experience, but face greater difficulties in technology learning and have stronger resistance to transformation. Teacher C's interview reflected this tension: "I know the benefits of AI, but integrating my more than ten years of teaching experience with technology requires a lot of redesigns, and not to mention, this process is full of uncertainties."

At the organizational level, the school support system and

professional development culture play a crucial role. All teachers mentioned that the lack of systematic training and support was a major problem in a private college. Teacher B noted: "What we need most is not theoretical training, but specific practical guidance, like how to design an AI-related teaching activity and what to do when problems occur." In addition, the absence of a collaborative culture has intensified teachers' sense of isolation: "Basically, we explore on our own, with no one to discuss with, and we dare not talk about failures."

At the technological level, the reliability and applicability of AI tools directly affect teachers' acceptance. The instability of tools and the mismatch with teaching scenarios will strengthen teachers' negative experiences and hinder identity reconstruction.

Teachers' identity reconstruction occurs in the multi-level interaction of teaching practice, school organization, technological development, and educational policies. Only when a positive interaction is formed between various systems can teachers be supported to successfully complete their identity transformation.

4.4 Ethical Considerations in Identity Reconstruction: Between Technological Rationality and the Essence of Education

An important finding is that teachers' identity reconstruction involves profound ethical reflection and value choices. This ethical consideration is mainly reflected in three aspects:

1) Educational legitimacy of technology application

Teachers generally paid attention to whether the use of AI truly served educational goals. Teacher C stated: "I keep asking myself: am I using this technology to seek attention through novelty, or to truly promote learning? If we use technology just for the sake of using it, we are putting the cart before the horse." This reflection has prompted teachers to develop a critical attitude towards technology application, avoiding falling into the trap of technological determinism.

2) Responsibility boundary of human-machine collaboration

As AI undertakes more teaching tasks, teachers need to redefine their responsibility scopes. Teacher A mentioned: "After AI provides feedback, I still need to review and supplement it, because ultimately, it is me, not the machine, who is responsible for students' learning." Maintaining this sense of responsibility is the core to teachers' professional identity, and it should not be weakened even in the context of technology integration.

3) Considerations of educational equity

Teachers have noticed that technology may exacerbate educational inequality. Teacher B pointed out: "Some students master AI tools quickly, while others struggle. If I rely too much on technology, it may widen the gap between students." This awareness of equity has prompted teachers to adopt more cautious and inclusive strategies in technology integration.

These ethical considerations indicate that teachers' identity reconstruction is not only a transformation of technology and pedagogy but also a process of value choice and ethical positioning. The ultimately formed identity needs to balance multiple considerations, such as technological efficiency and educational value, innovation and tradition, and personalization and equity, reflecting the judgment and sense of responsibility of teachers.

5. Conclusion

Under the guidance of the interpretive constructivist paradigm, this study explores the reconstruction process of professional identity among EFL teachers in a Chinese private college during AI integration. Research has found that complex emotions, ranging from excitement to anxiety, are not merely by-products but rather the core forces driving teachers to reconstruct their professional identities. It also reveals that teachers are undergoing a shift from traditional roles to modern identities. Although this shift has been driven by the improvement of teaching efficiency and student participation, it is heavily constrained by practical factors, such as time constraints, a lack of targeted training, and unresolved ethical dilemmas. The study indicates that supporting teachers in this identity reconstruction process cannot rely solely on technological supply. Instead, it requires collaborative efforts: First, develop structured professional development programs to address the emotional and teaching challenges. Second, establish communities of practice to promote collaborative learning. Third, formulate clear institutional policies to provide clear guidance and recognize the extra efforts teachers make. Ultimately, the key to successful adaptation lies in empowering teachers. This means enabling them to use AI strategically—so that AI enhances, rather than replaces, the unique human professional wisdom in education.

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