

# Rural Novice English Teachers' Identity

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## Abstract

The current problem of teacher attrition among young rural teachers is relatively common in China. The identity status of rural novice teachers reflects their job satisfaction. The results of this study can provide help in solving the problem of rural novice teachers' attrition. The study focuses on the level of identity of the new generation of rural novice English teachers and its influencing factors. The theoretical basis of this study is socio-cultural theory. It focuses on the influence of the environment on people, and Xunyang's English teacher identity questionnaire was used to investigate the identity status of rural novice teachers. The questionnaire's subjects are 0-6 years of rural novice English teachers, 339 people participated in this study. The questionnaire mainly investigated the identity status of rural novice English teachers from eight aspects. It was found that the identity level of rural English teachers was moderate to high, which was influenced by the growth background, teaching experience and job title. The identity level of novice teachers with rural life experience is higher, and the teaching years and job title have a positive influence on the identity level. Finally, the correlations among the eight factors affecting identity were analyzed by regression analysis.

**Keywords:** Rural Novice English Teachers, Identity, Influencing Factors

## Introduction

Teachers' identity level is directly related to teachers' job satisfaction. In order to understand the current status of the identity of rural novice English teachers, the study used the teachers' identity questionnaire compiled by Xunyang to investigate the identity status of rural novice English teachers in China. The questionnaire was administered to novice rural English teachers from 0-6 years, and 339 teachers participated in this study. Due to the scarcity of teachers in remote villages and in order to exclude regional differences, the scope of the survey in this paper is determined to be the rural novice English teachers near the townships. The questionnaire was mainly in the form of a web-based questionnaire and strictly adhered to the research ethics by adopting an anonymous form that would not involve the disclosure of personal information. The questionnaire mainly consists of two parts, the basic information of the individual and the body of the questionnaire. The questionnaire mainly investigates rural novice English teachers in seven aspects.

Identity is formed as a result of experiences and interactions, in how others are perceived and their views of me (Johnston, 2003). Identity is a perception of the subject's self, which refers to an individual's identification with a particular social culture (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Teacher identity is the way in which individual teachers perceive themselves and the professional roles they play in their respective environments. (Varghese, 2006). Akkerman and Meijer (2011) studied teacher identity from the perspective of dialogue theory and finally concluded that teacher identity development is characterized by unity and diversity, continuity and disconnectedness, social and personal. Teachers' identity is a changing and continuous process. Teachers' professional identity is a process of growing through challenges and anxieties (Cui, 2018). The stress and anxiety of novice teachers are more pronounced in the early stages of their career. Novice teachers are generally defined as teachers who are in an internship or have just entered the work for a year (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2013). Novice teachers are those who have been in the profession for one to three or five years (Farrell, 2012; Wu, 2008). Based on the process of gaining experience as a novice teacher, Berliner (1988) classified teacher development into five stages: novice stage, skilled novice stage, competent stage, business savvy stage, and expert stage. The novice stage is the initial 1-2 years, who is not flexible enough to deal with problems. The skilled novice stage is the 2-3 years period when practice and knowledge can be combined and there is some flexibility in dealing with problems. Katz (1972) believes that teachers grow through 5 stages: the first year of generation, 2-3 years of consolidation, 3-4 years of renewal and maturity is the fifth year. Katz suggests that teachers grow through at least five stages: generation (1 year), consolidation (2-3 years), renewal (3-4 years), and maturity (5+ years). Qi Mingjun (2019) identified the range of novice teachers as 0-6 years. In summary, this study identifies the scope of rural novice English teachers is 0-6 years. Novice teachers face various difficulties and challenges at the beginning of their career (Farrell, 2012; Qi, 2019). Novice teachers' identities are constructed in the context of ongoing teaching practice (Kanno & Stuart, 2011).

The challenges and difficulties of novice teachers are mainly about their ability to be supported and recognized by the unit and the practice of teaching methods. The resolution of these issues is directly related to their retention in the education profession. The challenges novice teachers face in their first few years of teaching come from three main areas: support, recognition and pedagogy. They determine whether novice teachers stay in education. Educational leaders should give more support to novice teachers and endeavor to provide novice teachers with the necessary environment to develop their sense of security, belonging, and self-esteem (Karatas & Karaman, 2013). A study conducted by Flores (2016) from the perspective of individual and environmental factors found that support and mentoring conditions polarized the group of novice teachers. Schaefer & Clandinin (2018) argued that personal knowledge background is closely related to a novice teacher's careers. Therefore, this paper explores the identity of novice teachers in terms of their personal and sociocultural perspective. This study contributes to the understanding of the causes of rural teacher attrition.

### **Methodology**

This study is research on the identity of rural novice English teachers based on sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory was proposed by Vygotsky of the former Soviet Union in 1987. He believed that human psychological development is the result of the influence of social environment. Human cognition is formed in the process of mutual influence of social, cultural

and historical environment. The core of sociocultural theory is that an individual's development takes place in interaction with the surrounding environment, and it is a dynamic, ever-changing process. In short, sociocultural theory emphasizes the influence of the environment on people (Wertsch, 1995; Vygotsky, 1987).

### **Subjects**

The respondents of the survey were rural novice English teachers in the 0-6-year period. Combined with the age of entry and years of education, this group of novice teachers was born between 1990-1999, with an age structure between 21-35 years old, and most of them have a bachelor's degree. The questionnaires were distributed to primary schools in villages, as villages are mainly set up with primary schools and secondary schools are usually set up in townships. In order to exclude the level of economic development from interfering with this study, the selected rural scopes were rural primary schools close to towns. The researcher explained the questionnaire in detail before the questionnaire was started and finally a total of 340 questionnaires were collected, one of which was invalid and 339 qualified questionnaires.

### **Instrument**

The study used the Questionnaire on Foreign Language Teachers' Identity developed by Xun Yang, Sun Li and Peng Fang (2014). This questionnaire was developed by combining the national conditions of China and the characteristics of foreign language teaching in China. The questionnaire is mainly based on sociocultural theory, starting from the personal and sociocultural perspectives, and contains four dimensions, namely, work engagement, organizational support, ELT beliefs, professional values, professional belonging, language proficiency, reform attitudes and professional behavior tendency. The scale was based on a 5-point Likert scale. 1-5 is from very non-conforming to very conforming.

### **Data Analysis**

The software used for data analysis was spss 21. In the data analysis, the first is the descriptive analysis, the test of reliability and validity of the scales. The reliability test mainly used Cronbach's alpha to measure the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The validity analysis consisted of three parts: exploratory factor analysis to measure the structural validity of the scale; validation factor analysis to detect the fit of the variables and factors; and calculation of the convergent and discriminant validity of each variable to comprehensively determine the construct validity of the scale. After that, the correlations among the eight variables were analyzed using Pearson analysis. Then, regression analysis was performed. Regression analysis was used to observe the extent to which a variable was influenced by other variables.

## Results

### The overall status of rural novice English teachers' identity

Table 1

*Mean and standard deviation of eight variables*

variables	N	M	SD
work engagement	339	3.329	1.044
organizational support	339	3.366	1.027
ELT beliefs	339	3.543	0.969
professional values	339	3.249	0.972
Professional belonging	339	3.391	0.919
language proficiency	339	3.563	0.964
reform attitude	339	3.596	0.720
professional behaviour tendency	339	3.816	0.923

The above descriptive statistics results (Table 1) are based on the analysis of data from 339 rural novice English teachers. The mean values of the variables are below 4, which indicates that the level of identity of the rural novice English teachers is moderately high. Among the results of the eight variables, the highest mean value is the professional behavior tendency 3.816. The mean value of reform attitude 3,563 is in the second place. English language proficiency 3.563 and EFL beliefs 3.543 were ranked third and fourth. The last two were organizational support and professional values with mean values of 3.329 and 3.249 respectively. Novice teachers face many challenges and difficulties at the beginning of their careers, and the lack of organizational support can trigger the idea of leaving the profession. Compared to the other six variables, organizational support scores are low. Professional values determine the work attitude of novice teachers. And among the eight variables, professional values scored the lowest.

### Differences in the status of rural novice English teachers' identity

#### a. Difference on identity status of different growth background

Table 2

*Differences in variables by different growth background*

variables	born, residence (before working)in areas	study, (before rural	born in rural areas, study and residence (before working) in city	born, residence (before working)in city
	M±SD		M±SD	M±SD
work engagement	3.46±1.025		3.21±1.004	3.03±1.082
organizational support	3.52±1.002		3.21±0.998	3.25±1.067
ELT beliefs	3.69±0.894		3.36±0.971	3.49±1.035
professional values	3.48±0.897		3.02±1.078	2.95±0.806
professional belonging	3.52±0.88		3.21±0.922	3.41±0.994
language proficiency	3.69±0.899		3.44±1.026	3.47±0.942

reform attitude	3.78±0.663	3.42±0.712	3.46±0.541
professional behaviour tendency	3.94±0.851	3.68±0.989	3.78±0.977

A test of differences between the eight variables on different life backgrounds using one-way ANOVA found that rural novice English teachers from different life backgrounds were engaged in their work. There was a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ). The novice rural English teachers with rural life background had higher mean values for work engagement, organizational support, ELT beliefs, professional values, professional belonging, language proficiency, reform attitudes, professional behaviour tendency than those without rural life experience. Among them, the mean values of novice rural English teachers with country life were higher than those of the latter two categories in the eight dimensions, which also indicated that the level of identity of these teachers was higher than that of the other two categories.

### b. Different levels of identity depending on teaching years

Table 3

#### *Differences in Variables by Teaching Years*

	0-2years M±SD	3-4years M±SD	5-6years M±SD	F	P
work engagement	2.99±1.075	3.31±1.044	3.57±0.968	7.575	0.001
organizational support	3.2±1.121	3.32±1.009	3.52±0.972	2.526	0.081
ELT beliefs	3.26±1.077	3.57±0.965	3.7±0.865	5.045	0.007
professional values	3.05±0.913	3.26±1.02	3.36±0.939	2.343	0.098
professional belonging	3.24±0.933	3.34±0.955	3.55±0.849	3.004	0.051
language proficiency	3.4±1.063	3.52±1.021	3.72±0.801	2.766	0.064
reform attitude	3.32±0.83	3.61±0.736	3.75±0.564	8.923	0.000
professional behavior tendency	3.67±1.003	3.7±0.944	4.05±0.8	6.05	0.003

A one-way ANOVA ( Table 3) showed that there were significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) in the four dimensions of job commitment, ELT beliefs, language proficiency, reform attitude, and professional behavior tendency among rural novice English teachers with different teaching experience.

As the years of teaching increased, the higher the mean value of teachers in work engagement, ELT beliefs, reform attitude and professional behavior tendency. It indicates that there is a positive correlation between the level of identity and the years of teaching.

**c. Different levels of identity by job titles**

Table 4

*Differences in variables by different job titles*

	assistant M±SD	junior M±SD	intermediate M±SD	F	P
work engagement	3.28±1.04	3.3±1.371	3.79±0.955	3.85	0.022
organizational support	3.34±1.03	3.35±1.36	3.58±0.973	0.821	0.441
ELT beliefs	3.51±0.976	3.2±0.833	3.86±0.883	2.273	0.105
professional values	3.2±0.968	3.5±1.732	3.64±0.837	3.331	0.037
professional belonging	3.36±0.942	3.25±1.198	3.64±0.633	1.441	0.238
language proficiency	3.54±0.974	2.67±1.155	3.9±0.744	3.992	0.019
reform attitude	3.59±0.731	3.92±0.918	3.64±0.607	0.48	0.619
professional behavior tendency	3.77±0.934	3.8±1.046	4.2±0.732	3.428	0.034

The use of one-way ANOVA test for the differences between different job titles on each variable shows that there are significant differences between rural novice English teachers with different job titles in six factors: work engagement, professional values, professional belonging, language proficiency, reform attitude, and professional behavior tendency. Therefore, different job titles affect the level of identity of rural novice teachers.

**Relationship Between Influencing Factors**

Table 5

*Pearson correlations between eight factors*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
work engagement	1							
organizational support	.383*	1						
ELT beliefs	.514*	.507*	1					
professional values	.396*	.526*	.426*	1				
professional belonging	.419*	.442*	.436*	.398*	1			
language proficiency	.376*	.529*	.514*	.442*	.449*	1		
reform attitude	.443*	.473*	.536*	.462*	.428*	.414*	1	
professional behavior tendency	.483*	.645*	.570*	.569*	.534*	.580*	.482*	1

\*\* 0.01 level (two-tailed), indicating significant correlation

The correlation analyse was conducted among the variables of the scale using Pearson correlation analysis. Table 5 shows that the p value of the correlation coefficients for work engagement, organizational support, ELT beliefs, professional values, professional belonging, language proficiency, reform attitudes, professional behavior tendency are all less than 0.01, indicating that all eight variables are significantly correlated.

### Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of Eight Variables

Table 6

*Multiple linear regression of work engagement, organizational support, ELT beliefs, professional values, professional belonging, language proficiency on reform attitude*

	dependent variable			
	reform attitude			
	B	$\beta$	t	VIF
constant	1.490		9.998	
work engagement	0.089	0.129	2.488	1.501
organizational support	0.093	0.133	2.348	1.780
ELT beliefs	0.194	0.261	4.620	1.773
professional values	0.124	0.167	3.155	1.554
professional belonging	0.094	0.120	2.324	1.483
language proficiency	0.025	0.033	0.602	1.672
F	37.228			
R <sup>2</sup>	0.402			
adjust R <sup>2</sup>	0.391			

Regression analysis is to analyze the dependence between variables and the pattern of change between variables is the focus of regression analysis. Regression equations can help to recognize the extent to which a variable is influenced by other variables. Table 6 is modeled with reform attitude as the dependent variable and work engagement, organizational support, ELT beliefs, professional values, professional belonging, language proficiency as the independent variables to build the model. The coefficient of determination of the model is 0.402, adjusted coefficient of determination is 0.391, F value is 37.228 and significance 0.000 is less than 0.05. Therefore, the model is valid.

The results of regression model validation (Table 6) are shown below:

The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable work engagement on reform attitude is 0.129, t is 2.488, and P is 0.013, which indicates that work engagement has a significant positive effect on reform attitude. The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable organizational support on reform attitudes is 0.133. t is 2.348, P is 0.019, indicating that organizational support has a significant positive effect on the reform attitude. The  $\beta$ -value of the independent variable ELT beliefs on the reform attitude is 0.261, the t value is 4.620, and the p value is 0.000, indicating that ELT beliefs has a significant positive effect on the reform attitude. The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable professional values on the reform attitude is 0.167, the t value is 3.155, and the p value is 0.002, indicating that professional values has a significant positive effect on the reform attitude. The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable professional belonging on the reform attitude is 0.120, the t value is 2.324, and the p value is 0.021, indicating that professional belonging has a significant positive effect on the reform attitude. The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable language proficiency on the reform attitude is 0.033, the t value is

0.602, and the p value is 0.547, indicating that language proficiency does not have a significant positive effect on the reform attitude.

Table 7

*Multiple linear regression of work engagement, organizational support, ELT beliefs, professional values, professional belonging, language proficiency on professional behavior tendency*

	dependent variable			
	professional behavior tendency			
	B	$\beta$	t	VIF
constant	0.514		3.275	
work engagement	0.089	0.101	2.362	1.501
organizational support	0.250	0.278	5.976	1.780
ELT beliefs	0.136	0.143	3.081	1.773
professional values	0.175	0.184	4.241	1.554
professional belonging	0.157	0.157	3.690	1.483
language proficiency	0.163	0.170	3.765	1.672
F	81.797			
R <sup>2</sup>	0.596			
adjust R <sup>2</sup>	0.589			

Table 7 shows the model of professional behavior tendency as the dependent variable and work engagement, organizational support, ELT beliefs, professional values, professional belonging, language proficiency as independent variable. The coefficient of determination of the model is 0.596 and the adjusted coefficient of determination is 0.589 and the F value is 81.797 and the significance 0.000 is less than 0.05. Therefore, the model is valid.

The results of the regression model validation (Table 7) are shown below:

The independent variable work engagement on professional behavior tendency has  $\beta$  value of 0.101, t value of 2.362, and P value of 0.019, indicating that work engagement has a significant positive effect on professional behavior tendency. The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable organizational support on professional behavior tendency is 0.278, the t value is 5.976, and the p value is 0.000, indicating that organizational support has a significant positive effect on the professional behavior tendency. The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable ELT beliefs on professional behavior tendency is 0.143, the t value is 3.081, and the p value is 0.000, indicating that ELT beliefs has a significant positive effect on the professional behavior tendency. The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable professional values on professional behavior tendency is 0.184, the t value is 4.241, and the p value is 0.000, indicating that professional values has a significant positive effect on the professional behavior tendency. The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable professional belonging on professional behavior tendency is 0.157, the t value is 3.690, and the p value is 0.000, indicating that professional belonging has a significant positive effect on the professional behavior tendency. The  $\beta$  value of the independent variable language proficiency on professional behavior tendency is 0.170, the t value is 3.765, and the p value is 0.000, indicating that language proficiency has a significant positive effect on the professional behavior tendency.



Table 8

*Multiple linear regression of reform attitude on professional behavior tendency*

	dependent variable			
	professional behavior tendency			
	B	$\beta$	t	VIF
constant	1.593		7.098	
reform attitude	0.618	0.482	10.104	1.000
F	102.090			
R <sup>2</sup>	0.233			
adjust R <sup>2</sup>	0.230			

Table 8 shows the model with professional behavior tendency as dependent variable and reform attitude as independent variable. The coefficient of determination of the model is 0.233 and the adjusted coefficient of determination is 0.230 with F value of 102.090 and significance 0.000 is less than 0.05. Hence the model is valid.

The results of regression model validation (Table 8) are shown below:

The  $\beta$ -value of the independent variable reform attitude on the professional behavior tendency of is 0.482, the t value is 10.104, and the P is 0.000, which indicates that the reform attitude has a significant positive effect on professional behavior tendency.

### Conclusion

From the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that the mean value of the overall level of identity is 3.481, which indicates that the level of identity of novice English teachers in the countryside is in the middle to upper level. Lu Qianqian's (2021) level of identity for novice English teachers in junior high schools in the townships is 3.92. The level of identity of novice English teachers in the rural primary schools in the present study is lower than that of the novice teachers in the junior high schools. The main reasons are as follows. Compared to rural primary schools, the teaching conditions of middle schools are better. Because middle schools are commonly established at the level of township or above, and the economic conditions of townships are better than those of villages. Secondly, all aspects of treatment of schools in township are better than in rural villages. Out of the eight influencing factors, the mean values in descending order are: professional behavior tendency, reform attitude, language proficiency, ELT beliefs, professional belonging, organizational support, work engagement, professional values. Among them, professional behavior tendency scored the highest with 3.816. Professional behavior tendency refers to the tendency of teachers to respond correctly in accomplishing the teaching work, assuming the role of a teacher and so on. Teaching work, teacher-student communication and teaching effectiveness can respond to teachers' professional behavior tendency (Xun, 2012). Therefore, the higher the score of professional behavior tendency, the higher the job completion, the better the teacher-student communication and the better the teaching effectiveness of novice rural English teachers. professional values scored the lowest of the eight factors at 3.249. The sense of belonging at the heart of professional values. Sense of professional belonging is a feeling that individuals have when they feel recognized and accepted by others or by a group (Xun, 2012). Rural teachers' sense of belonging is the feeling that rural teachers are recognized and accepted by

the society and teachers' collective. Low professional values indicate that teachers' sense of professional belonging is also low, which means that teachers are more likely to leave.

### **Differences in the status of rural novice English teachers' identity**

Firstly, the one-way ANOVA analysis revealed that rural novice English teachers from different growth backgrounds had different levels of identity. The highest level of identity was found in novice English teachers who had always lived in the countryside, followed by novice English teachers who had both urban and rural life experiences, and the lowest was found in rural novice English teachers who had always lived in the city. The results indicate that the richer the rural life experience, the higher the level of identity, the higher the loyalty to the teaching job, and the lower the likelihood of leaving the job. Secondly, the study revealed that the level of identity of rural novice English teachers varied by teaching years. Working years was positively related to job commitment, ELT beliefs, reform attitudes, and professional behavior tendency. The longer a novice teacher works, the less likely she is to leave the job. Thirdly, it is found that different job titles had higher levels of identity for rural novice English teachers. Teachers' titles are closely related to teachers' salary level, which is related to teachers' basic interests. The job title of rural novice English teachers is positively related to work commitment, professional values, language proficiency and professional behavior tendency. The higher the level of the rural novice English teachers' job titles, the higher the level of teachers' identity.

### **Relationship Between Influencing Factors of Identity**

The stronger the job engagement, the organizational support, the ELT beliefs, the professional values and the professional belonging, the stronger the reform attitude. The stronger the job commitment, the organizational support, the ELT beliefs, the professional values and the professional belonging and language proficiency, the stronger the professional behavior tendency. The stronger the reform attitude, the stronger the professional behavior tendency. Therefore, we can understand the novice rural English teachers' professional behavior tendency through its reform attitude. Professional behavior tendency is a behavior intention (Phan, 2008), which is the trend of behavior and guides individual behavior. Therefore, paying attention to the needs of novice teachers for pedagogical reform can improve their level of identity. The State and schools should take effective measures to help novice teachers to renew their ideas and improve their teaching skills.

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