

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

First Time in the Classroom: Imagined and Negotiated Language Teacher Identities of Non-Education Degree Students in Voluntary Practicum

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ABSTRACT

Language teacher identity (LTI) research has primarily focused on pre-service and in-service teachers, with limited attention to how non-education degree students develop teacher identities in alternative certification programmes. This study uses the communities of practice framework and Wenger's dual process of identity formation to explore the imagined and negotiated identities of 14 English Literature students during an 8-week voluntary practicum. Data from interviews and reflective tasks reveal that participation in the community helps students actively shape their teacher identities. Personal biographies, prior teaching experiences, and professional interactions also influence this process. The findings show both alignment and divergence between imagined and negotiated identities, offering insights into LTI development for non-education students and the effectiveness of alternative certification pathways. The results have implications for designing tailored support and training to foster identity development of teacher candidates in such programmes, enhancing their preparation for teaching roles.

1 | Introduction

Language teacher identity (LTI) development, referring to how individuals perceive and construct their professional selves as language teachers, influenced by their experiences, interactions, and social contexts, is a complex, dynamic process that has attracted significant research interest, reflecting Johnson's (2009) shift from a positivist to a sociocultural perspective. It is seen as an ongoing construction through interactions in physical and social realms, where individuals' unique pathways contribute to their dynamic self-conception as they road-test their identities to become teachers (Yazan 2018). However, many novice teachers experience a reality shock (Xu 2013) in their first years of teaching, particularly graduates of non-education degree departments who construct their teacher identities through alternative teacher certification programmes (ATCP). These are

non-traditional routes to becoming certified teachers, typically designed for those who hold degrees outside education and seek pedagogical qualifications through additional coursework and practicum. It is important to scrutinise how teacher candidates who participate in ATCPs imagine, fashion, and enact their identities as teachers (Yazan 2018), which are operationalised as imagined and negotiated identities in the current study. Despite the predominance of research on pre-service and in-service teachers in traditional teacher education programmes, little attention has been paid to those who become teachers through alternative pathways like ATCP. These programmes are prevalent in Türkiye and worldwide (Aksoy 2017; Darling-Hammond et al. 2002; Do and Hoang 2023; Matsko et al. 2022), driven by teacher shortages and economic crises (Donitsa-Schmidt and Weinberger 2014), but raise concerns about standardisation and teacher quality (Flores 2023; González-Moncada 2009).

In Türkiye, since 1982, teacher education has been carried out at the 4-year teacher education departments at the Faculties of Education at universities under the supervision of the Council of Higher Education in Türkiye (CoHE). Nevertheless, since these teacher education programmes' graduates fail to meet the high demands for English language teachers in Türkiye, alternative routes have been offered to train additional teachers with varying curricular characteristics and duration (Seferoglu 2004). ATCPs, or *pedagogical formation education*, as commonly known in Türkiye (Tur. *pedagojik formasyon eğitimi*), are the most common alternative route to become a teacher. These programmes offer a pathway to non-education degree graduates that includes 10 additional courses (60 ECTS) in two semesters about educational sciences, instructional principles and technologies, classroom management, testing and assessment, along with two teaching practice experience courses. Issues of teacher professionalism, professional identity development, and the competencies of teachers obtaining their teaching certification through this ATCP have been discussed in the literature in terms of a need for reorganising the structure of these programmes to include opportunities for induction, acculturation and in-service training (Durmaz and Yiğitoğlu 2017; Seferoglu 2004). Contrary to criticisms of and concerns for these ATCPs, it is common practice for non-education degree students and graduates, such as those studying in Social Sciences (e.g., Languages, Literature, History), to apply for teaching certificates upon graduating.

In light of all these, studying the imagined and negotiated LTIs of these non-education degree students is significant as it would enable the portrayal of transformation in professional identity construction from a more developmental perspective and address the experiences of those who are underrepresented in the literature. To this end, this qualitative study, informed by a sociocultural perspective on LTI (Johnson 2009), which views identity as a dynamic and socially constructed process, aims to uncover the imagined and negotiated identities (Xu 2013) of fourth-year non-education degree students by asking the following research question: How do non-education degree students negotiate language teacher identities through voluntary practicum? In this qualitative study, the term voluntary practicum refers to an optional, school-based observational experience offered alongside the TEYL course in a non-education degree programme. Students could choose to engage in real classroom settings to observe and, in some cases, assist with teaching. This practicum was not a formal part of the curriculum nor included in course grading but was organised by the instructor to provide additional practical experience prior to graduation.

2 | Theoretical Framework

2.1 | Social Theory of Learning and Dual Process of Identity Formation

This study bases language teacher learning and identity development on Wenger's (1998) *social theory of learning* and *the dual process of identity formation*, including identification and negotiability, as it aligns with Johnson's (2009) sociocultural perspective underpinning the approach in this study. The social

theory of learning views learning as a form of social participation, grounded in lived experiences and shaped by our inherently social nature as human beings (Wenger 1998). According to Wenger (1998), people construct meaning as they engage in relationships with others. Such a conceptualisation of meaning in our understanding of the world and of our learning processes implicates participation in the communities of practice by integrating the components of *meaning* (our changing ability to experience our life and world as meaningful), *practice* (shared historical and social resources and perspectives to sustain engagement in action), *community* (social configurations defining our enterprises), and *identity* (how learning changes who we are in the context of our communities).

Wenger (1998) mentions that identities are constructed in a dual process involving negotiability and identification, that is, our ability to negotiate the meanings within specific social contexts, namely. Negotiability is 'the ability, facility, and legitimacy to contribute to, take responsibility for, and shape the meanings that matter within a social configuration' (Wenger 1998, 197). In other words, negotiability provides the degree to which these non-education degree students have control over the meanings they are invested in by participating in the school community. Identification, on the other hand, provides opportunities and experiences to build identities by investing the self in relationships of participation and non-participation. In the context of a practicum, identification refers to the process whereby non-education degree students define what kind of teachers they are by aligning their self-images as future teachers in the school context. In addition to evoking a sense of affinity within the community of practice, identity may also yield 'a reaction of dissociation and a consequent identity of non-participation' (Wenger 1998, 195). Non-participation refers to teachers' seeing themselves in the periphery since teaching is their second career (Trent and Gao 2009), or some novice teachers may judge experienced teachers' work and consider them as 'old-timers' (Yazan 2018, 222). In other words, teachers may construct their identities by not appreciating others' practices and not aligning with them.

In short, taking the social theory of learning and the dual process of identity formation as our theoretical framework allows us to portray how non-education degree students negotiate their language identities. Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning, grounded in a sociocultural perspective, offers a flexible framework for understanding identity as dynamic, relational, and socially situated. In this study, we draw on Wenger's concepts of identification and negotiability to explore how participants construct their professional identities through engagement (or non-engagement) in communities of practice (i.e., the voluntary practicum in our case). This theoretical lens is particularly relevant for examining LTI, a complex and evolving construct shaped by how non-education degree students see themselves and are seen by others within school communities. Given that our participants are entering the profession through alternative pathways, their trajectories are often marked by complex positions (e.g., non-participation), which Wenger (1998) considers meaningful sites of identity negotiation. At the same time, we align these with the narrative perspectives offered by Yazan (2018, 2023) and Barkhuizen (2016, 2017), who conceptualise teacher identity as fluid, multiple, and discursively constructed (i.e., reflections and interviews in our case). This narrative lens guides

our approach to data collection and interpretation, particularly in how we analyse participants' reflections and interviews. Thus, our approach is informed by integrating these two traditions: we recognise identity as socially shaped through participation (Wenger) and also as individually constructed, storied, and context-dependent (Yazan, Barkhuizen).

2.2 | LTI: Emerging and Negotiated Identities

Building on this foundation, we focus specifically on LTI as a professional identity that is both socially constructed and contextually negotiated. LTI is particularly distinctive due to its emotionally charged, situated, cognitive, and social nature (Barkhuizen 2017). Understanding LTI is important because it influences how teachers perceive their roles, engage with students, and negotiate their place within the school community. Yazan (2023) claims that teachers negotiate their identities throughout their professional lives, and this process involves and contributes to teacher learning; that is, as teachers professionally develop, their identities change. LTI is defined as 'teachers' dynamic self-conception and imagination of themselves as teachers, which shifts as they participate in varying communities, interact with other individuals, and position themselves (and are positioned by others) in social contexts' (Yazan 2023, 185).

LTI also has a performative aspect (Do and Hoang 2023) since it is always described with action words, and it involves 'being and doing, feeling and imagining, and storying' (Barkhuizen 2017, 4). It is always a construction and reconstruction process as teachers interact with others, and there are cultural, contextual, and biographical factors (Flores and Day 2006). Teacher candidates, with their biographies as former students at school, named as an *apprenticeship of observation* by Lortie (1975), gradually develop their language teacher identities. By attaching meaning to their prior experiences and significant memories as students, teacher candidates choose teaching as a professional career (Crowe and McGarr 2022) and draw upon their previous experience, shaping the kind of teacher they want to be.

Since teacher identity construction is an ongoing, dynamic process, it involves different stages and dimensions, such as imagined and negotiated identities. Imagined teacher identity refers to one's imagination of themselves and the world with limited experience (Xu 2013). In contrast, negotiated teacher identity refers to reconstructing one's identity as one interacts with others and gains experience in a specific instructional setting (Xu 2013). Imagination in this sense is 'looking at an apple seed and seeing a tree' (Wenger 1998, 176). It is related to the imagined future of individuals and their desire to create that future by investing (Barkhuizen 2017). Identity formation starts with imagination 'to fit into the classroom context' (Tokoz-Goktepe and Kunt 2021, 11). Once they enter the classroom, teachers face classroom realities and negotiate their imagined identities. Teacher candidates also negotiate their identities as they experience various contextual factors in instructional settings, such as students' low language proficiency or classroom management issues (Tokoz-Goktepe and Kunt 2021). They question their previously held beliefs and opinions about teaching, resulting in identity negotiation.

There are plenty of studies on the identity development of pre-service language teachers (ELT majors) from different perspectives, primarily longitudinal studies to trace the identity development of novice teachers in various contexts, both in the national and international literature (Flores and Day 2006; Tokoz-Goktepe and Kunt 2021; Xu 2013) and explain novice teachers' professional development journey through the lens of teacher identity. However, regarding the teachers who are graduates of non-education departments, there are not many studies resting on the teacher identity framework (see Do and Hoang 2023; Durmaz and Yiğitoğlu 2017). The existing literature mainly focuses on the comparison between ELT majors and non-education degree students (Aksoy 2017), the limited teaching abilities of non-education degree students (Mirici and Ölmez-Çağlar 2017), and teaching anxiety (Kazazoğlu 2020). Drawing on this theoretical foundation and the identified research gap, this study formulates research questions aimed at exploring how non-education degree students construct their teacher identities during their voluntary practicum. The data collection through reflections and interviews is guided by these conceptualisations of identity as dynamic, socially situated, and individually storied.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Context and Participants

This qualitative study was conducted in an English Language and Literature (ELL) programme at a moderately populated university in North-East Türkiye. Along with literature and culture studies, the curriculum of the ELL programme also includes language methodology and teaching courses that could benefit students when they graduate and apply for teaching certificates, as most programme graduates aspire to become language teachers. In the 2022 Fall semester, Author 1 taught the elective *Teaching English to Young Learners* (TEYL) course to fourth-year English Literature students. The instructor designed the TEYL course to allow volunteering students to visit schools to observe actual teaching practices for 8 weeks. Volunteers would participate in English classes, 2h a week, under the guidance of mentor teachers who monitored their attendance. The practicum was originally designed as an observational experience, and all participants were expected to primarily observe classroom instruction. However, in practice, some mentor teachers invited students to take on limited teaching responsibilities, such as leading short activities or assisting during lessons. These teaching opportunities were not planned by the researchers but emerged organically through mentor–student interactions. As such, the level of active participation varied across participants.

The practicum was an optional component of the TEYL course in which students could observe and assist in real young learner classrooms. It was not part of the official curriculum or the course grade but was organised by the instructor to offer additional practical experience. A total of 25 students volunteered to take part and were placed in English classrooms at both primary and secondary levels. Some participants discontinued their school visits over time, and ultimately, 14 students who regularly attended the practicum sessions and participated in all data collection phases were included in this study. The Appendix A:

Table A1 presents further information about participants (age, gender, prior teaching experience, and practicum school levels).

3.2 | Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection tools used in this study were the Early Teacher Identity Measure, originally developed by Friesen and Besley (2013), translated into Turkish and validated by Arpacı and Bardakçı (2015), individual face-to-face pre-practicum and post-practicum interviews (Appendix B), and pre- and post-practicum written reflections (Appendix C). Table 1 outlines the data collection tools and their areas of focus. The data collection took place in two phases.

In the first, pre-practicum phase, all students enrolled in the TEYL course completed the questionnaire, which was used as a self-report tool to help the researchers better understand participants' initial views and aspirations regarding teaching and their imagined teacher identities. The purpose of using the questionnaire was not to conduct quantitative analysis but to sensitise the researchers to participants' orientations towards teaching and to guide the subsequent qualitative phases of the study. They also completed reflection tasks about their imagined identities and expected experiences before they visited the schools. In the second, post-practicum phase, the same participants were interviewed again by Author 1 to explore their practicum experiences in greater depth. They also wrote reflections on their observations, teaching practice, feelings and teaching philosophies.

During the practicum, participants completed a set of reflection tasks prepared by the researchers. These were designed to help them engage with the school context, mentors, students, and classroom dynamics. The reflection tasks related to their first-day impressions, experiences, and teaching philosophies aimed to provide the participants with opportunities to reflect on language use in the classroom, student behaviours, teacher actions to these behaviours, and overall observations of how teachers taught in the classrooms.

The Early Teacher Identity Measure was originally developed by Friesen and Besley (2013), and its Turkish version developed

and validated by Arpacı and Bardakçı (2015) was used in this study. It includes 17 items on 5-point Likert scales, measuring students' imagined identities for teaching in general, teaching children, and how/whether they considered themselves suitable for being and becoming a teacher. It also includes open-ended questions to elicit information about whether they aspired to become teachers, the educational level at which they would teach, and their past experiences in teaching (including private tutoring).

The interview questions were developed based on the concepts in previous literature (i.e., Tokoz-Goktepe and Kunt 2021; Xu 2013; Yazan 2018) to encapsulate the non-education degree students' feelings, aspirations, perceptions, experiences, and any changes in their imagined and negotiated teacher identity development. The first draft of the interview guide was piloted with two students in one of the researchers' home institutions to clarify arguments. The piloting necessitated improving the clarity through a few changes in wording (e.g., 'what is your imagined identity' was reworded as 'how do you envision yourself as an English teacher in the future') and expanding on some unfamiliar concepts or providing examples to elicit focused responses (e.g., *Why did you choose to study English Literature?* revised as *What is your motivation for choosing the English Literature department?* and in cases where the students remained silent or limited in response, the following extensions were provided: 'Was it because your score wasn't high enough for a teaching department, or did you actually want to be a teacher?') for easier understanding. The piloting data were not included in further analyses.

The instructor conducted face-to-face interviews in Turkish, the native language of the participants, to elicit detailed information regarding their teacher identities. These interviews, totaling over 6 h, aimed to minimise potential bias by acknowledging the researcher's positionality and subjectivity. They were then translated into English by one of the researchers and reviewed by an expert in translation and interpreting studies. It should be acknowledged that the approach to translation involved certain reductions in that some discourse properties inherent in the transcriptions of spoken data had to be either improved or summarised during the written translation process. The researchers

TABLE 1 | Data collection tools and their foci.

Phase	Instrument	Focus
Pre-practicum	Early Teacher Identity Measure (Friesen and Besley 2013)	Obtaining a general understanding of the participants' perceptions, aspirations, feelings, and perceptions for being/becoming a teacher through a survey
	Pre-practicum interviews	Obtaining detailed information about the participants' perceptions, aspirations, feelings, and perceptions for being/becoming a teacher; measuring their readiness and feelings for the practicum
	Reflection tasks	Allowing participants to reflect on their feelings and teaching philosophy
Post-practicum	Post-practicum interviews	Obtaining detailed information about any change in the participants' teacher identities
	Reflection tasks	Allowing participants to reflect on their observations, teaching practice, feelings and teaching philosophy

obtained approval from the Ethics Board of Scientific Research and Publication of [masked for anonymity] University.

The first step of the qualitative data analysis was to gather all the data sources (interviews and reflection reports). Secondly, the researchers transcribed all the interviews, read them and the reflection reports to condense the data into themes based on inductive reasoning through the researchers' constant comparison (Patton 2015). The data were then subject to open and axial coding processes (see Appendix D, Table A2) to first attach initial codes to the data and later to draw connections between the codes (Corbin and Strauss 2014) and eventually come up with the themes. In the open coding process, the researchers immersed themselves in the data to identify the initial codes such as beliefs about teaching in general, changing views of teaching (after seeing mentor practice), views of future teacher self-image, relationship with the practicum mentor, and challenges of teaching in actual classrooms. This inductive approach allowed themes to emerge organically from the data.

Moving to a deductive phase, the researchers aligned these open codes into further categories in the axial coding phase based on Wenger's (1998) framework of dual process of identity formation, including identification and negotiability. For instance, the emerging codes 'beliefs about teaching in general' and 'changing views of teaching' were merged under 'imagined and negotiated identities'; 'relationship with the practicum mentor' was merged under 'participation in the community of practice'; and 'challenges of teaching in actual classrooms' were merged under 'questioning emerging teacher identities'. This hybrid inductive–deductive approach, combining initial inductive coding with a deductive framework, ensured a comprehensive analysis of the data.

To ensure analytic rigour and consistency, we conducted peer debriefings and regular collaborative coding discussions, which allowed us to negotiate meanings and resolve any discrepancies. Credibility was ensured through consensus-building and transparent dialogue during the coding process. In addition, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness were followed, particularly focusing on credibility and confirmability, to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' narratives.

4 | Findings

As a first step in presenting the findings, it is useful to highlight some key participant characteristics that emerged from the Early Teacher Identity Measure in order to provide context for the qualitative analyses. Many of the participants had already gained some experience in teaching, often through voluntary private tutoring. While a few were uncertain about pursuing a teaching career or undertaking pedagogical formation, the majority expressed a clear interest in teaching and working with children. The survey responses painted a picture of participants who felt happy and motivated to support children's learning and who enjoyed helping them discover new things. They also expressed confidence in their potential to become good teachers and believed they could develop the necessary skills and methods to do so. These insights suggest that participants already

held imagined identities of themselves as competent and caring future educators. This is also confirmed by their regular participation in the practicum and completion of all interviews and tasks. The voluntary practicum, then, served as a valuable opportunity for them to explore, test, and further shape these emerging teacher identities—an aspect that came through strongly in the qualitative findings.

Three general findings emerged from the interviews and reflections: (1) The non-education degree students *road-tested* and negotiated their imagined LTIs through the voluntary practicum, (2) Knowledgeable others (mentor teachers) and the community of practice (practicum contexts) had a significant role in non-education degree students' LTI negotiation, and (3) The non-education degree students negotiated emerging identities they had not imagined before participating in the community of practice. These three main findings will be further elaborated on in the following subsections.

4.1 | Road-Testing: Imagined and Negotiated Language Teacher Identities

Pre-interviews revealed that most participants had private tutoring experience as they aspired to become English language teachers. Though such teaching experiences shaped their imagined teacher identities, they believed coaching one student for high school entrance exams and teaching in a classroom setting were utterly different practices. Therefore, they expressed their insecurities about being a teacher in a classroom. For instance, one mentioned: 'It sounds horrible to say that I can teach... in an environment that I've never known. There is a huge difference between tutoring two or three students and lecturing a whole class' (Canan, pre-interview), which relates to *beliefs about teaching in general*.

Participants' definitions of what kind of teachers they envisioned becoming also played a significant part in their imagined identities as English language teachers. When participants were asked about the type of teacher they imagined being, they mostly described teachers they disapproved of: 'You know, the kinds of teachers that teach the same things over the years and never bother to develop professionally simply because they do not have to—I do not want to be one of them' (Baran, pre-interview), illustrating *future teacher self-image*. Similarly, one mentioned: 'I always criticise my brother's foreign language teacher because they are giving strict and boring rules of language and force them to memorise a lot of vocabulary at once. This may demotivate and discourage students in language learning.' (Ömercan, pre-reflection). As seen in these quotes, before the practicum, participants portrayed ideas about how not to teach a language, e.g., heavy focus on grammar, memorisation of words, etc. However, they did not comment on the ideal ways to teach it. Rather, they emphasised the distinctive features of a language teacher such as 'English is very different from other subjects' (Beyza) and 'an English teacher should have a way with words' (Baran) in their teaching philosophies.

When participants were asked to reflect on their teaching philosophies after the practicum, many of them focused on specific methodological principles and teaching techniques. For instance,

they described ideal language teacher images by referring to the mentor teachers who ‘minimises use of Turkish in the classroom and prepares lots of activities’ (Hasret) and ‘uses music to teach words’ (Kamer). It seems that practicum experience offers some concrete teacher images so that they can also negotiate their language teacher identities. However, both post-practicum reflections and interviews revealed that a majority of the non-education degree students focused less on language-related issues; rather, they mostly mentioned the classroom dynamics and relationships with the students at different ages. For instance, Esma mentioned:

I told myself: ‘You should have a class like this. You should have your own students. You would be a friend when they need it and a teacher as necessary, or sometimes they could share their problems with you as if you are their mother’. That’s why (this experience) had positive effects on me. (primary, post-interview)

They also tested their abilities to teach and saw the results: ‘I was delighted I was able to transfer something. I could teach what was on my presentation. I said to myself: “yes, this is where I should be; in front of the blackboard”’ (Canan, secondary, post-interview). This experience could be seen as *road-testing* (Yazan 2018) for them to consider the teaching profession as a possible future job for themselves. For instance, after this experience, Kamer recognised that she would not want to be a primary school teacher:

Primary school is not suitable for me. I now have energy, but I do not see that energy in me in the upcoming years, so I decided not to work at the primary level, absolutely not. (primary, post-interview)

In another example, Firat who did not have any teaching experience, had some presuppositions about teaching children which turned out to be wrong:

I was hesitant- I had never taught a student before. I was expecting that the kids would misbehave, they would be loud, and it would ruin my day. However, it was not like that. We went there and had lots of fun. (secondary, post-interview)

All in all, the findings suggest that the non-education degree students had the chance to *road-test* their LTIs via the practicum. They negotiated their beliefs about teaching in general, teaching English, specific grades, career plans, and future selves as the kinds of teachers they aspired to be. These imagined and negotiated identities sometimes matched or mismatched depending on their aspirations and the teaching context.

4.2 | Participation in the Community of Practice: Professional Encounters

Professional encounters with knowledgeable others (mentor teachers) and the community of practice (practicum contexts) had a significant role in shaping the non-education degree

students’ LTI formation depending on participation and non-participation (Wenger 1998). The welcoming attitude of mentor teachers and receiving respect from them changed the participants’ perspectives regarding the voluntary practicum which exemplifies the *relationship with the mentor*. Esma asserted:

I had some hesitations before going to the school. I was expecting to see a simple classroom, a traditional teacher instructing students—students would be bored, and they would not listen. However, we met Teacher E, who, thankfully, was really a good, experienced teacher. Even on our first day, E met us at the door, welcomed us, and introduced us to the students (primary, post-interview)

On the other hand, the experiences with the mentor teachers also posited a mismatch between some of the participants’ imagined vs. negotiated teacher identities. Nida clearly stated that their mentor teacher’s attitude negatively affected their experience, which again relates to their *relationship with the mentor*:

Our mentor teacher would never remember when we were going there. How come you can forget us? We had to wait outside a few times, and they did not show up. Once, the weather was too cold, and, ultimately, we decided to go in and wait there. When we went in, they were surprised and asked: ‘Were you here?’ I mean, their indifference negatively affected us. (secondary, post-interview)

Beyza, likewise, from the same middle school also commented that this practicum experience did not meet their expectations. She clearly stated they ‘expected [their] mentor to care more about [them]’ and that it would have been better ‘if [they] could have felt the taste of teaching’ (secondary, post-interview).

Some of the participants also observed the mentor teachers at schools and thought about what they would have done if they had been the teachers. For instance, Hasret commented: ‘I think Teacher E was an ideal teacher. Sometimes they lose their temper. But if I were in their shoes, I would react similarly’. Hasret found Teacher E’s teaching style ideal and thereby defined their own ‘ideal language teacher’ who ‘involves all students, minimises Turkish use, and is prepared’ (primary, post-practicum reflection). In addition, observing a mentor teacher dealing with classroom issues successfully influenced some participants and helped them reflect on the specific instances, sometimes revealing their insecurities and hesitations about their self-efficacy regarding classroom management. Firat reflects on an anecdote:

Children occasionally make humorous mistakes and jokes, which often leads to laughter. However, Teacher T effectively manages these situations. When dealing with a disruptive student who misbehaves and teases a classmate, Teacher T addresses the behavior by reminding the student of the classroom context. In contrast, if I were the teacher, I might laugh along,

which could lead to the students continuing to mock their peers. (secondary, post-interview)

In short, the findings show that non-education degree students' participation in the school community involved diverse relationships with their mentors, with some reporting positive, supportive experiences while others expressed dissatisfaction or challenges. Nevertheless, despite the short duration of their practicum, all participants had the opportunity to closely observe teachers and students in the classroom, prompting reflective questions such as, 'What would I do if I were the teacher?'

4.3 | Questioning Emerging Teacher Identities

The non-education degree students negotiated emerging identities they did not imagine before participating in the community of practice. In other words, concerns about diverse student backgrounds and practices were negotiated after the experience, and the non-education degree students envisioned their future selves as teachers based on the practices observed in the community. For instance, participants were asked about their opinions on teaching before the practicum, and they revealed their ideal teacher images and identities, such as a *teacher bringing games to the class*. This practicum experience challenged preconceptions about teaching young learners and provided opportunities to reflect on the mentor teacher's practice. As a result, participants formed their theories, as seen in Beyza's comment:

In the pre-interview, I said that I would always prefer tasks that would keep students active if I were a teacher. Moreover, our mentor teacher was doing the same. However, after a while, I recognised that this should be limited because it turned into chaos. Students always wanted more games and got angry if there were no games. (secondary, post-interview)

Beyza thought that a teacher should always bring games to the young learners' classroom, and apparently, the mentor did the same; however, she recognised that it did not always work. Observing students in their classroom clearly showed them the realities and students' needs, which may help participants shape their future teacher identities.

Another challenge and conflict in their identity negotiation emerged when they met diversity in the classroom. When Hasret was asked about the effect of the practicum experience on their decision to become a teacher, she touched upon the diverse needs of the students and commented that it would be a problem since she did not know how to involve students with specific needs in the classroom. It is also clear that she could not observe the mentor involving them either. This situation made the participants think that this is the most problematic part of teaching, which points out the *challenges of actual teaching*:

We had two students with special needs. They have a hard time learning English. No matter how much

the teacher tried to include them, they couldn't even participate. That's a problem. If I were the teacher myself, what would I do? Would I be more inclusive or what? (Hasret, secondary, post-interview)

A serious dilemma that participants experienced was observing their ideal teacher acting in a non-ideal way. Baran below questioned their mentor teacher's behaviour towards a student with special needs who did not yet know how to read and write in Turkish. This comment also shows the participant's reflection and questions about teaching:

Even though Teacher E is good, they said that they wouldn't deal with the kid (who was illiterate) anymore and that it was the problem of the kid's family. Teacher E said they would just ignore that pupil. No matter how good you are as a teacher, does it happen over the years? I don't know. (primary, post-interview)

Nida's experience with one student also demonstrated that this experience helped participants question the role and the identity of a young learners' teacher:

There was a kid who was very sick. The teacher saw them coughing, ignored it, and walked out of the room without saying anything. We even asked if the kid needed something, maybe herbal tea. If that were a high school kid, they would buy their tea or soup, but that kid was too young to take care of herself. I would feel obliged to help at that moment. This affected me a little when the teacher didn't do such a thing. (secondary, post-interview)

The results showed that the participants did not think about a classroom's diverse needs and characteristics, especially of young learners, before the practicum. When they met them in the classroom, they questioned their previous beliefs and theories related to teaching. They thought about how to be a caring teacher for one specific student while simultaneously catching up with the curriculum or questioning the roles and duties of a young learners' teacher in case of a sick student. Those questions and dilemmas show that participants were in the process of starting to form a teacher identity.

In summary, the findings support our study's theoretical grounding in identity as a dynamic, negotiated process shaped by participation in a community of practice. Participants' imagined identities were affirmed, challenged, or reshaped through real classroom experiences and mentor interactions.

5 | Discussion

This study shows non-education degree students' first contact with a classroom and scrutinises their emerging LTIs. Throughout the study, we observed that the participants questioned their preconceived notions of teaching and adjusted their

identities based on the realities they encountered during the voluntary practicum. According to Wenger (1998), identities emerge as people 'invest in various forms of belonging and...negotiate the meanings that matter in these contexts (p. 188). Our participants' willingness to participate in this voluntary practicum shows a sign of belonging and investment in teaching in the first place. In addition, the study design, with a series of reflection tasks, observation, and teaching in a classroom, helps them both reveal their beliefs, expectations, and assumptions about teaching and teachers and, more importantly, influences their identity formation as they engage in the negotiation process. We discuss how this negotiation takes place in the following section.

5.1 | Imagined and Negotiated Teacher Identities

Before the practicum, the participants had certain beliefs and expectations about teaching, which were influenced by their prior experiences as former students at school or as private tutors. Most non-education degree students enrolled in the ELL department with the assumption that they would complete pedagogical formation certificates upon graduation and eventually become language teachers. Besides, almost all participants had teaching experience via private tutoring. Helping teacher candidates to think critically about their identities prepares them for the realities of teaching, and they may have a smoother transition into the classroom (Xu 2013). In this sense, our study provided such an opportunity for the participants.

On the one hand, we have seen that the participants had the chance to identify and verify their pre-existing teacher identities. However, the practicum also challenged their imagined LTIs. They negotiated their views on teaching and teaching practices, sometimes finding mismatches between their initial beliefs and observed reality. As Farrell (2018) mentions, 'over their careers, teachers construct and reconstruct (usually tacitly) a conceptual sense of who they are (their self-image), and this is manifested through what they do' (p. 4). Through reflecting on their experiences, the participants in this study also experienced a chance to envision their roles as teachers concerning their observations of mentor practices and the context, such as in cases of aggressive teacher behavior towards students. Though limited, they also had the chance to teach parts of the lesson. Such limited teaching experiences enabled the participants to reflect on action (Farrell 2015) and on the action of others (Salajan and Duffield 2019), shaping their emerging LTIs and enabling them to preview the challenges of learning to teach caused by the transition from being a student to teacher (Farrell 2003).

As Yazan (2018) reports, non-participation also plays a vital role in teacher candidates' identity negotiation. Though the non-education degree students willingly participated in the practicum, as individuals aspiring to become teachers, they do not necessarily construct their teacher identities based on the mentor teacher's practices. In other words, 'although teacher candidates seek recognition, legitimacy, and access, they have the space to choose not to participate in certain activities they do not value' (Yazan 2018, 222). Our data showed that the participants acknowledged their 'selves' by negotiating their imagined LTIs through the *I-positions*

(Akkerman and Meijer 2011) as mismatches occurred when what they experienced did not concur with their imaginings. This supports the idea that 'identity dialogically defines itself not only based on or by including others as positions within the self, but also by contrast with others that are part of what I am not.' (Akkerman and Meijer 2011, 315). In other words, as they invest in practicum and create a sense of belonging (Wenger 1998), they engage in a negotiation process of who they are and who they are not as teachers. This negotiation involves close observation of the context and, as a result, positioning themselves through *I-positions* (as in Hasret's interview 'If I were in their shoes, I would do the same'). In this negotiation and identification process, the role of mentor teachers seems to be significant.

5.2 | Role of Knowledgeable Others and Community of Practice

Mentor teachers and practicum contexts played a significant role in shaping the participants' teacher identity negotiation process. The attitudes and interactions with mentor teachers and the classroom environment influenced their perceptions of teaching. Positive encounters with mentor teachers led to positive reflections, while negative interactions posed challenges. According to Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework, social learning and scaffolding can occur when knowledgeable others are available to help and cooperate. However, this is not always possible in every community (Hamilton et al. 2016). Our findings indicate that not all teacher candidates begin their practice in a welcoming environment. Even in such circumstances, Harrison and McKeon (2008) noted that individuals may have varied experiences that either hinder or promote their participation in the community, depending on their unique characteristics (Hamilton et al. 2016). In our study, participants reported non-welcoming attitudes from mentor teachers, which negatively impacted their practicum experience. Their reflections suggest a need for observing helpful and cooperative mentors for two main reasons. First, a welcoming attitude is crucial for acceptance into a new community of practice. Second, prior to their practicum, participants had unidealised images of teachers. This experience allowed them to see ideal teacher behaviors, such as using English in class and incorporating music to teach vocabulary. Consequently, participants had opportunities to imagine and negotiate their identities with concrete examples from the classroom. Additionally, observing knowledgeable mentors handling various classroom issues helps participants envision themselves addressing similar challenges. Having helpful and cooperative mentors is essential for a successful practicum experience. However, in this study, it is important to acknowledge that mentors voluntarily accepted to be part of this practicum and opened their classrooms to the participants without any formal mentoring training. Therefore, we recommend equipping mentor teachers with the necessary skills and reducing their teaching hours. In this way, they can dedicate more time to supporting teacher candidates.

5.3 | The Emergence of New Identities

The participants developed new aspects of LTIs that they had not previously imagined. The practicum exposed them to diverse

student backgrounds and needs, prompting them to question and reconsider their teaching philosophies. They reflected on classroom management, engagement strategies, and the roles of future teachers as they examined and constructed their new identities. As Flores (2001) mentions, 'learning to teach entails a constellation of complex factors' (p. 146) that enable the beginning teachers to interpret their own experiences based on 'personal biographies, their beliefs and their expectations' (p. 144). In this respect, on the one hand, the identity development of non-education degree students is influenced by their participation in the community. On the other hand, we have seen that as their imagined identities are *road-tested* through participation, these evolve into negotiation, giving way to the emergence of new identities that had not been imagined before, as accorded by Wenger's (1998) dual process of identity formation, including identification and negotiation. Becoming a teacher, then, means conceptualising teacher learning as identity negotiation (Yazan 2023).

Identity is defined as 'being recognised as a certain kind of person' (Gee 2000, 99), and this study revealed how non-education degree students imagined, questioned, and negotiated their emerging LTIs. Similar to pre-service teachers who construct images of teaching based on their own experiences as former students at schools, the participants in our study construct teacher images drawing on their experiences as students at school. This shows that participants in our study have already imagined themselves as future teachers, even in a non-education degree department. Farrell (2006) argues for 'promoting the development of skills in anticipatory reflection so that beginning teachers become more aware of what they will face when they make the transition from the teacher education programme to the real world of the classroom' (p. 218). Therefore, we underscore the importance of understanding how even non-education degree students can form and negotiate their identities as teachers based on their observations, teaching practices, and past experiences.

6 | Conclusion and Implications

This study focuses on an underrepresented group of individuals who aspire to become teachers but follow alternative routes to enter the profession. While this is not uncommon, ATCPs in Türkiye have often been problematised for various reasons (Yildirim and Ok 2002), with prior research mainly addressing ELL students' motivations (Üstünbaş 2023) or comparisons between ELT and non-ELT majors (Aksoy 2017). By exploring non-education degree students who voluntarily pursue teaching careers, this study highlights a population whose identity formation has been largely overlooked.

While previous studies have explored teacher identity formation in traditional pre-service programmes, this study broadens the understanding by focusing on non-education degree students who begin constructing their LTIs through alternative certification routes. As seen in this study, their voluntary practicum, prior informal teaching experience, and critical reflection on mentor practices highlight a distinct pathway of identity development. These findings contribute to discussions on teacher preparation by emphasising identity work occurring within alternative certification contexts and suggest that, rather than

being solely criticised or compared to traditional programmes, these alternative routes also provide valuable support for reflective and engaged teacher candidates.

In recent decades, teacher education policies have undergone major reforms to meet evolving demands and improve teacher quality worldwide. However, these reforms often introduce complex practices, such as lowering entry requirements, creating short-track programmes, and relaxing standards to address teacher shortages. As shortages grow, policies increasingly promote short-term training alternatives, which risk deskilling teachers and deprofessionalising the field (Flores 2023; Meijer 2021).

One conclusion drawn from our study is that, rather than focusing solely on the negative aspects of alternative routes to teacher education, it is essential to view teachers as intellectual and reflective professionals whose education goes beyond technical knowledge to include critical inquiry and reflection. Enhancing the teaching profession requires educating teachers not only about what they need to know and do but also about how they think and why they do what they do (Flores 2023, 1). Our context, where literature departments offer elective courses combined with practicum experiences, provides an opportunity for students, most of whom aspire to a teaching career, to invest in teaching early and develop a strong sense of belonging.

While ATCPs are not intended to replace traditional teacher education programmes, they can serve as valuable complementary pathways that support the early development of teacher identity, particularly by fostering reflective engagement and a sense of professional belonging at earlier stages. Giving these individuals who study non-education degree programmes but aspire to become teachers the chance to systematically examine their beliefs, identities, and practices about teaching would yield results that empower them as teachers. Such an inquiry-based approach that foregrounds reflection may provide non-education degree students with 'a useful lens into "who" they are as teachers and how they construct and reconstruct their views of their roles as language teachers and themselves' (Farrell 2018, 5).

In light of ongoing discussions about the quality and professionalism of future teachers and the increasing use of alternative teacher education pathways, there is a critical need for teacher education policies 'to invest in quality initial teacher education seen as a space of transformation that acknowledges the complex, multifaceted and dynamic nature of teacher professionalism' (Flores 2023, 2). Our study's findings underscore this need by demonstrating how voluntary practicum experiences in English Literature programmes can enable non-education degree students to critically reflect on and negotiate their emerging teacher identities. Recognising and supporting such reflective engagement within alternative certification programmes can contribute to diversifying teacher profiles and strengthening the overall professionalism of the teaching workforce, without compromising the professionalism that is fundamental to effective teaching.

This study has certain limitations. The short-term nature of the research, including the brief duration of the practicum, may have limited our ability to observe deeper or sustained transformations

in participants' teaching identities. Additionally, the small sample size and case-specific design meant that quantitative data were used only to offer broad contextual descriptions alongside our qualitative findings. Given the evolving nature of teacher education and career trajectories, a longitudinal study could yield richer insights by tracking identity development as participants move into actual teaching roles. Future research might also examine the induction experiences of non-education degree students to better understand their ongoing professional growth, involving diverse samples.

On a final note, while this study was situated in a specific institutional context, it nevertheless offers insights into the reflective capacities and identity work of non-education degree students entering teaching through alternative routes. The voluntary nature of the practicum and the interview process may have functioned not only as data sources but also as spaces for critical reflection, potentially influencing participants' thinking about teaching. Although it was not intended as an intervention, it nonetheless had a formative influence on how participants reflected on and constructed their emerging teacher identities.

Ethics Statement

The researchers obtained the necessary ethical approvals from Artvin Çoruh University, Human Research Ethics Committee (dated 01.11.2022 and numbered E-18457941-050.99-68789). The participants consented for their interview transcripts to be used for academic research on the condition that their identities are kept anonymous.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix A

TABLE A1 | Participants.

	Participants (pseudonyms)	Age	Gender	Prior teaching experience?	School level
1	Baran	21	F	Yes	Primary
2	Canan	21	M	Yes	Secondary
3	Beyza	22	F	Yes	Secondary
4	Nida	21	F	Yes	Secondary
5	Fırat	21	M	No	Secondary
6	Ömercan	21	F	Yes	Secondary
7	Esmâ	22	F	Yes	Primary
8	Hasret	21	F	No	Primary
9	Rengin	21	F	No	Primary
10	Kamer	22	F	Yes	Primary
11	Tuğba	22	F	No	Primary
12	Uğur	21	M	No	Primary
13	Uğurcan	21	M	Yes	Secondary
14	Meltem	21	F	No	Primary

Appendix B

Interview questions.

Pre-practicum interviews

1. What is your motivation for choosing the English Literature department? (Was it because your score wasn't high enough for a teaching department, or did you actually want to be a teacher?)
2. Do you plan to become a teacher after graduation? If yes, at which level (primary school, middle school, high school, university, etc.) would you like to work?
3. Have you ever taught before? (Private tutoring? How was it? How did it make you feel?) If yes, please briefly describe this experience.
4. Why do you plan to get a teaching certificate?
5. How does it feel to be a prospective teacher?
6. Do you think you can teach?
7. How do you envision yourself as an English teacher in the future? What are your feelings about becoming a teacher?
8. In your opinion, who is an ideal English language teacher?
9. In your opinion, who is an ideal English language teacher for young learners?
10. Do you think you can teach English to young learners? Is there any difference between very young learners (ages 3–6) and young learners (ages 6–12)?
11. What are your general thoughts on your internship experience?
12. How do you feel about your upcoming voluntary practicum experience?

Post-practicum interviews

1. What has been the overall impact of the voluntary practicum?
2. How do you evaluate your voluntary practicum experience?
3. Did your voluntary practicum experience have a positive/negative impact on your decision to pursue teaching? How?
4. Experiences during the voluntary practicum that left a lasting impression on you (both positive and negative).
5. How did these experiences make you feel?
6. Did you have the opportunity to teach a lesson? How did that make you feel?
7. After the voluntary practicum, how do you envision yourself as an English teacher in the future?

8. After the voluntary practicum, in your opinion, who is an ideal English teacher?
9. After the voluntary practicum, who is an ideal English teacher for young learners?

Appendix C

Reflection tasks.

Reflection Task 1: First-day impressions and experiences.

A. Before your visit:

Please share your expectations about the school in general, and more specifically the environment, atmosphere, attitude of both teachers and students towards you.

B. After your visit:

Reflect on your first-day impressions and experiences at the school. Please include your feelings and thoughts *explaining* what *made you feel/think in this way*.

Reflection Task 2: My teaching philosophy (before the visit).

Please share your ideas about your teaching philosophy based on your expectations from the voluntary practicum.

Reflection Task 3: My teaching philosophy (after the visit).

Please share your ideas about your teaching philosophy based on your experiences from the voluntary practicum.

Appendix D

TABLE A2 | Sample coding table.

Phase	Data source	Sample quotes	Open codes	Axial codes
Pre-practicum phase	Interview	'I wondered whether I could convey the information directly and keep the students engaged in the lesson. Since there was no example of this, I was undecided about whether teaching is in my nature.'	Beliefs about teaching	Road-testing
	Interview	'Dealing with children requires more effort and more patience, and I think I don't have that much of those skills. That's why, for me, children are somewhat in the background compared to other levels. Middle school and high school students naturally have a foundation and vocabulary knowledge, and in my opinion, it's easier to build upon and develop that.'	Beliefs about teaching at specific grades	Road-testing
	Interview	'I want them to say, "How beautifully they teach," so that they always want to come to my class.'	Future teacher self-image	Road-testing
Post-practicum phase	Interview	I realised that I need to be open and go to class prepared. It's not something that can be done with just patience. You really need to prepare and be aware that the student's attention can be easily distracted, and you have to do something about it. They have so many requests, like 'let's not do this, let's do that,' etc., and you need to manage that. But I can probably handle it.	Negotiated self-image	Road-testing
	Interview	'We expected our teacher to be more involved, and I think it's not just me; all of my friends doing an internship with the same teacher have the same opinion. Besides that, of course, this shouldn't affect us too much because we didn't have a connection with the teacher, but we also wanted you to teach a class. The students also asked a lot, saying, "Teacher, will you teach a class?" It would have been better if we had experienced teaching a lesson as well.'	Relationship with the practicum mentor	Participation in the community of practice
	Reflection task	'After my internship, I witnessed that the English teacher was exactly the teacher I dreamed of being. She found the English resources given by the school insufficient and asked for different resources from the parents. Apart from these additional resources, she comes to class prepared every week.'	Relationship with the practicum mentor	Participation in the community of practice
	Reflection task	'I never thought this would be this much fun. I was expecting some annoying kids ruining my day, but it did not happen. It was way better than I thought. Children nowadays are very smart and have more materials than us. In the past, when I was at 5th grade, we did not even had smartboard. Now, it is easy to access such tech. It starts at 2nd grade which is another advantage.'	Challenges of actual teaching	Questioning emerging teacher identities
	Interview	'We had two students with special needs. They have a hard time learning English. No matter how much the teacher tried to include them, they couldn't even participate. That's a problem. If I were the teacher myself, what would I do? Would I be more inclusive or what?'	Challenges of actual teaching	Questioning emerging teacher identities