# Learning to Teach English Abroad: Shifting Identities in a Multilingual Student Teacher[1]

**Melanie L. Schneider[2], University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Whitewater, WI, USA**

**M. Martha Lengeling[3], Universidad de Guanajuato, Guanajuato, Mexico**

## Abstract

Although teacher identity formation in student teachers and novice teachers has been widely studied, the special circumstances of international student teaching warrant further research to understand the complexities of identity formation and teacher socialization while teaching abroad. This qualitative case study examines the experiences of one student teacher from the United States who taught English in a primary school in Mexico. The teacher's shifts in teacher identity are explored using the concepts of agency, tensions, and sense-making (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). Qualitative data gathered from teaching observations, weekly reflections, and a semi-structured interview were analyzed using Beijaard and Meijer's teacher identity framework. Results showed how the teacher faced different challenges, which led to tensions between her internal beliefs and her external teaching context. She resolved most tensions with pedagogical strategies, demonstrating agency, and sense-making, which together helped shape her teacher identity. Study findings are relevant for teacher educators, practicing teachers, and preservice teachers to better comprehend the challenges student teachers face when teaching abroad and later in their home countries. The results also reinforce the importance of incorporating teacher identity construction into teacher preparation programs.

## Resumen

Aunque la formación de la identidad docente en los estudiantes de su práctica y los docentes novatos ha sido ampliamente estudiada, las circunstancias especiales de las practicas de docentes internacionales justifican una mayor investigación para comprender las complejidades de la formación de la identidad y la socialización de los docentes mientras enseñan en el extranjero. Este estudio de caso cualitativo examina las experiencias de una estudiante en formación de los Estados Unidos que enseñaba inglés en una escuela primaria en Mexico. Se exploran los cambios de la estudiante en la identidad docente utilizando los conceptos de agencia, tensiones y creación de sentido (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). Los datos cualitativos recopilados a partir de observaciones docentes, reflexiones semanales y una entrevista semiestructurada fueron analizados utilizando el marco de identidad docente de Beijaard y Meijer. Los resultados mostraron cómo la estudiante en formación enfrentó diferentes desafíos, lo que generó tensiones entre sus creencias internas y su contexto de enseñanza externo. Resolvió la mayoría de las tensiones con estrategias pedagógicas, que demostraban agencia, y creación de sentido, que en conjunto ayudaron a moldear su identidad como maestra. Los hallazgos del estudio son relevantes para los formadores de docentes, los docentes en ejercicio y los futuros docentes para comprender mejor los desafíos que enfrentan cuando enseñan en el extranjero y más tarde en sus paises de origen. Además, refuerzan la importancia de incorporar la construcción de la identidad docente en los programas de formación docente.

## Introduction

> *…in Mexico, there's a lot of adjustment to working just out of your brain and maybe a book that they give you, one book, and a whiteboard, or a chalkboard.*

In the above words, a student teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Mexico is both describing and trying to make sense of her challenging student teaching experience. Part of her socialization into the teaching profession and her developing teacher professional identity involved adjusting to a very different teaching context abroad, which prompted changes in her developing teacher identity. Shifts in teacher identity occur throughout a teacher's career, influenced by personal beliefs and different teaching contexts, including classroom experiences, curriculum, students, and encounters with colleagues, administrators, and students' families (Agbenyega, 2011). For student teachers especially, these shifts can be rapid and sometimes perplexing, as they adjust to the changing circumstances of teaching, sometimes in two or more school placements.

The construct of teacher identity, or one's view of self as a teacher, has been succinctly described as "complex, dynamic, and changing" (Beijaard, 2017, p. 141). Day (2004) expands on the complexities of teacher identity formation:

> *Teachers' professional identities—who and what they are, their self-image, the meanings they attach to themselves and their work, and the meanings that are attributed to them by others—are, then, associated with both the subject*

[1] This is a refereed article. Received: 24 April, 2023. Accepted: 27 February, 2024. Published: December, 2025.
[2] schneidm@uww.edu, 0000-0001-6497-2157
[3] lengelin@ugto.mx, 0000-0002-2570-5002

> *they teach…their relationships with the pupils they teach, their roles, and the connections between these and their lives outside the school.* (p. 53)

Importantly, though, teacher identity goes beyond complex and changing teaching contexts to include how teachers see themselves as persons as well as the connections they have with what they teach and their students. These aspects are woven together to create a professional identity, consisting of a dynamic interplay between both the personal and professional realms (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). An important goal of this study is to trace the development of teacher identity in a student teacher who has taught language abroad, exploring the interplay between personal and professional belief systems as well as teacher socialization.

## Review of Literature

Teacher professional identity (TPI)[4] has become more prominent in teacher education research in the last three decades (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard & Meijer, 2017; Jenlink, 2021; Meijer et al., 2014; Trent 2012; Varghese et al., 2005). More recently, TPI has begun to be more widely researched in both preservice and novice teachers.[5] For example, Varghese et al. (2005) reported on three studies of preservice and in-service bilingual teachers and adult ESL learners in the United States. The authors identified three themes or central ideas related to teacher identity that were emerging in the literature and are now generally accepted: 1) identity is not a fixed or internally consistent concept, 2) identity is integrally related to the social, cultural, and political contexts in which teachers work and live, and 3) identity is socially constructed through interaction and discourse.

Turning to teacher identity of novice language teachers, Trent (2012) explored the identity construction of eight beginning English teachers in Hong Kong while Lengeling et al. (2017) examined the professional identity, teacher socialization, and challenges of nine EFL teachers starting to teach in public primary schools in Mexico. In a one-year study employing critical ethnography, Kuteyi (2013) followed five beginning secondary teachers in Western Australia (roughly grades 7-12). A major finding from the study was that beginning teachers' relationships with their students played a significant role in the development of their teacher identity, which parallels the influence of students on shaping the student teacher's classroom practice and professional identity in our study. Finally, Jenlink's (2021) edited volume documents the development of teacher identity in novice and preservice teachers in different subject areas while also emphasizing the importance of identity construction in teacher preparation programs before and during student teaching.

Multiple studies have examined the construction of teacher professional identity in student teachers. For example, Chao et al. (2019) analyzed the developing teacher identity of six U.S. and Australian preservice teachers during their five weeks of EFL teaching in China. Constantinou (2015) carried out a longitudinal qualitative study of 17 U.S. health and physical education student teachers in Cyprus, using reflective journals to explore their identity and cultural competency. In another qualitative study, Varghese and Snyder (2018) analyzed TPI in relation to the agency of four preservice dual language student teachers in the United States whose teacher education program was largely monolingual in orientation. As a result, during student teaching, these dual language student teachers needed to consciously construct their teacher identity as bilingual/bicultural teachers of multilingual students. Positioned within sociocultural theories of learning, specifically through the lens of whiteness studies, Shedrow (2017) investigated one white U.S. student teacher in an international student teaching program in Uganda. In her exploration of the student teacher's meaning-making experience, Shedrow found that the student teacher's experience in Uganda sensitized her to "the normalization of whiteness" (p. 284) in the United States and pushed her to integrate different cultural practices and student interests into her lessons when back in the United States.

Returning to teacher professional identity, Beijaard and Meijer (2017) discuss four core concepts that contribute to TPI development: ownership, sense-making, agency, and tensions. The first concept, ownership, refers to teachers having a stake in the teaching profession and the motivation to push forward in their teaching. As the authors state, "Through ownership, student teachers feel the urge or necessity for learning and, subsequently, are willing to invest time and energy in that" (p. 182). The second notion, sense-making, occurs when teachers integrate new experiences and knowledge into their past experiences and beliefs through "active cognitive and emotional processes" (p. 183). However, sense-making involves

[4] In this article, the terms teacher professional identity and teacher identity are used interchangeably.

[5] The term preservice teacher is used to refer to someone enrolled in a teacher preparation program that ends with successful student teaching. Thus, preservice teacher is broader in scope than student teacher. Novice teacher is used to refer to a teacher's first years of teaching after becoming employed as a teacher.

more than simply understanding a message or the particularities of one's teaching context; it also requires the active processes of 'enactment' and 'reflection,' which build on each other. Enactment refers to the application of theory in the classroom, and active reflection ties teaching experiences back to one's beliefs and theoretical knowledge (p. 183). The third concept, agency, can be viewed as taking control, developing a plan, and having the intentionality to carry it out. Varghese et al. (2005) tie agency to identity formation as a means to better understand "individuals as intentional beings" (p. 23). If ownership involves having a stake in the teaching profession, and sense-making requires relating old to new experiences and beliefs, then agency involves teachers acting on their experiences and beliefs. Finally, the fourth concept, tensions, describes conflicts between teachers' personal beliefs and the educational contexts in which they work. Focusing on student teachers, Beijaard and Meijer (2017) note:

> *…tensions may arise between what is personally found relevant by the student teacher from inside and what is professionally seen as relevant to the profession by others from outside. These may emerge as conflicts or constraints ('identity issues') in student teachers' professional identity development.* (p. 181)

These tensions may influence the initial formation and ongoing development of a teacher's professional identity. Beijaard and Meijer (2017) introduce the pedagogical practice of "working on tensions" as a process that first acknowledges the existence of tensions and then involves working alone or with others to transform them into "opportunities for learning" (p. 186). According to the authors, these tensions should be recognized and addressed by teacher educators as a way to foster greater awareness among preservice teachers that conflicts between teacher beliefs (internal) and the realities of teaching (external) are normal and expected. These internal struggles can then be addressed by creating spaces for student teachers to discuss and 'work out' how to learn from them.

Summing up, teacher identity is complicated by the multiple aspects of the contexts in which teachers navigate. In the case of student teachers teaching abroad, these new contexts may be different from those in which they have been brought up and experienced in the field, resulting in tensions that may challenge their beliefs. These conflicts, in turn, create potential spaces for teachers to make sense of their beliefs, which can influence their developing teacher identity.

The development of teacher identity in preservice teachers teaching language abroad is one area that needs to be expanded in the literature in order to better understand how student teachers become socialized as language teachers (Uştuk, 2021; Üzüm, 2018; Zeichner & Gore, 1990), how they begin to develop their teacher identity as student teachers, and how teacher identity can be incorporated more deeply in teacher education. Broadly speaking, teacher socialization refers to becoming a participating member of a group of teachers at a local or higher level. It involves the integration of formal and informal norms of schooling, acceptance of teaching practices, and expectations for professional behaviors and performance (Mesa Villa, 2017, p. 84). For beginning teachers, teacher socialization and teacher identity formation often take place in tandem; they are related, even overlapping, but not the same. Whereas the aim of teacher socialization is to become a member of a group of teachers and learn their practices, teacher identity is largely an internal act of forming a belief system that integrates personal and professional principles about teaching and becoming/being a teacher through reflection and social interaction. Although the intertwining of teacher socialization and identity construction in new teachers is acknowledged, this study primarily focuses on teacher identity. Accordingly, two research questions guided the study: 1) How does a student teacher of English begin to develop her teacher identity during her student teaching abroad experience? and 2) How do key concepts from Beijaard and Meijer's (2017) framework contribute to her construction of teacher identity?

## Methods

In this section, a rationale for using a qualitative case study methodology is provided. Then the case study participant and her teaching context are introduced and the techniques used to collect the data are outlined.[6] Following this, the key concepts used to analyze the data are described.

### *Case study methodology*

To carry out this research, a qualitative case study methodology was used to examine the actions of one social actor, the student teacher, within a natural context, which provided an interpretation of these actions and the actor (Richards, 2003). According to Schwandt and Gates (2018), case study methodology "is

[6] This research has been reviewed and approved by an authorized representative of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB), Protocol Number: IRB-FY2020-2021-99. The participant has seen an earlier version of this manuscript and gave her informed consent for publication.

neither a straightforward nor uncomplicated undertaking…because there is no single understanding of 'case study' or of 'case' in the social behavioral sciences" (p. 341). At its most basic level, a case can be an example, an incident, a person, or a unit of something and may occur at various levels: micro (persons and interpersonal relations), meso (organization, institution), or macro (communities, democracies, societies) (Swanborn, 2010). Focusing on the micro level, our case study is both descriptive and qualitative in orientation.

A central goal of any descriptive case study is to create a complete, detailed portrait of the unit of study in order "to get the story down for the possible benefit of policymakers, scholars, and other citizens" (Odell, 2001, p. 162). Although the purpose of descriptive case studies is usually not to generalize to a larger population, they may contribute to "naturalistic generalization" through detailed descriptions and well-chosen examples (Stake, 1995, p. 85). Stake describes this notion as a deeply engaging personal experience or participation in a vicarious experience so convincing that individuals can make tangible connections to their own lives.

Although quantitative designs usually begin with theoretical frameworks developed *a priori*, it is acceptable to approach a qualitative case study differently, without a preconceived theoretical framework, and allow a framework to emerge from the data analysis (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Ridder, 2017). Ridder (2017) identifies four case study research designs and analyzes their contributions to theory building. Of particular interest to our study is his third design, Social Construction of Reality, which holds that real-world understandings do not exist independent of the human mind but rather are constructed through "human mental activity and symbolic language" (p. 288). This design aligns to our theoretical orientation because it acknowledges that cognition and social interaction are at the heart of teacher identity construction. It also partly coincides with the third theme of teacher identity (Varghese et al., 2005) mentioned earlier, which maintains that identity is socially constructed through interaction and discourse. Summarizing our view, teacher identity formation does not develop solely through individual thought and reflection but also evolves through meaningful interaction with others.

### *Participant*

The participant in this study, called Elena[7] for anonymity, was a university student in her early twenties from a mid-sized university in the North Central United States. She was a preservice teacher in Elementary/Middle Education with an English as a second language (ESL) minor. Although Elena was born in the United States, her mother is from Hungary and her father is from Argentina. As a result, she grew up speaking English, Hungarian, and some Spanish and had traveled abroad to visit relatives on several occasions. Her multilingual and multicultural background contrasted with that of other students at her university, who were mostly white, monolingual speakers of English. Although she was schooled in English and considered herself to be English-dominant, she was proud of her multicultural and multilingual heritage.

### *Teaching context*

As part of her teacher education program, Elena chose to complete the first part of her fall student teaching experience in Mexico, where she taught for eight weeks. Elena was placed at a public primary school in a medium-sized city in central Mexico, where she taught EFL in grades 5 and 6. Her supervising teacher at the school, Carlos (a pseudonym), was fluent in English and an experienced teacher of English. English teachers in this Mexican state do not have their own classrooms but instead move from classroom to classroom in 50-minute periods, carrying all books and materials with them. As a result, EFL teachers need to keep careful track of time to allow for changing classrooms and setup. After finishing her student teaching in Mexico, Elena returned to the United States to complete her teaching practicum in a public middle school with a culturally and linguistically diverse student population near her home university.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Data were collected using three techniques: 1) teaching observations (TO), 2) weekly reflections (WR), and 3) a post-student teaching interview (PSTI). Together these three data techniques helped us to achieve triangulation of the data (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003). During her teaching practicum in Mexico, Elena was observed three times, twice by the in-country program supervisor (Author 2) and once by the university

[7] In another study with the same participant, Lengeling and Schneider (2023) explored how the concepts of teacher socialization and a growth mindset contributed to lessons learned by this student teacher while teaching EFL in Mexico. In contrast, this article focuses on teacher professional identity and uses the concepts of agency, tension, and sense-making (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017) as a framework to analyze and understand this student teacher's shifts in teacher identity.

supervisor (Author 1), who visited Mexico on a professional visit. These observations were required and written up as ethnographic notes with times listed for each change in activity and comments added at the end. Comments considered the practicum teacher's personal characteristics, lesson planning, lesson implementation and assessment, and positive points and recommendations. While in Mexico, Elena completed eight weekly reflections and emailed them to her university supervisor, who responded to them via email. The weekly reflections were added to promote ongoing interaction between the practicum teacher and her university supervisor. Additionally, they provided a forum for understanding the student teaching experience and for voicing any concerns the practicum student may have had. The weekly reflections varied from week to week and were prompted by open-ended guiding questions. Topics for reflection included a general description of the teaching context (Window on the Classroom, Week 1), a narrative of highs and lows for that week (Weeks 2-3, 5-7), a mid-point reflection (Week 4), and an end-of student teaching reflection (Week 8). (See Appendix A for an abbreviated description of these reflection topics.) After Elena returned to the United States to finish her teaching practicum, a semi-structured interview was conducted by the university supervisor. Although the interview was required for participants in this international student teaching program, more importantly, it provided insights into the practicum teacher's learning and perspectives on the student teaching experience. The interview was audio recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed manually; no software was used in the transcription. (See Appendix B for the interview questions).

To analyze the data, the three key concepts from Beijaard and Meijer (2017)–agency, tension, and sense-making--became our framework for analyzing the language data. It was decided to focus on these three concepts rather than ownership because they were more readily observable in the data and could be identified by specific behaviors during the analysis.

## Coding

To code the data, the three sources of data (teacher observations, weekly reflections, and the interview) were read independently by each author, looking for evidence of agency, tension, and sense—making. These were then compared. The definitions for each term, which guided the coding, are described below. Any differences in coding were resolved by going back to the original data to review the context. With problematic examples, evidence was sought in at least one other data source to cross-check the coding, a form of triangulation.

To identify examples of *agency* in the data, excerpts showing a sense of authority or taking control, developing a plan, and either carrying it out or having the intention to do so were collected. For example, in Elena's Week 1 Reflection, she acknowledged that students had only minimal materials, a notebook for English class and a Spanish-English dictionary (no textbook). Instead of voicing concern, she viewed this "as a positive challenge," one which would enable her to "think outside of the box when it comes to lessons and assignments" (WR 1). This shows Elena's "take charge" attitude towards an early classroom challenge and her intention to overcome it.

*Tensions* were identified as struggles that occurred between the teacher's personal and professional beliefs and the educational contexts in which she worked. With Elena, these tensions often manifested themselves as conflicts between her beliefs about teaching and the reality of teaching EFL in Mexico. An example occurred in Elena's Week 3 Reflections when she expressed frustration between her desire to use only English in class and her students' reluctance to respond in English. As she stated, "...it is difficult to adjust to working ideally solely in a new language, but it still surprises me how many of the students understand [English] and answer in Spanish but will refuse to use English" (WR 3). This example illustrates the tension between using English as much as possible (Elena's desired goal) and her students' preference for Spanish (the reality of teaching).

*Sense-making* was coded when the student teacher demonstrated her integration of new experiences and knowledge into her past experiences and beliefs through active reflection. Elena frequently used "I think" statements to mark sense-making. For example, in the post-student teaching interview, Elena reflected:

> *I think there is a point where I did commit to using as much English as I could, not because I didn't want to use their L1* [Spanish], *but I knew that they were capable of using their L2* [English]. *I think what I did learn, though, is the point where I did have to refer to Spanish… to connect English to Spanish or translate, not full sentences or phrases but words.* (PSTI, p. 4)

This excerpt shows how Elena resolved the tension between her original goal of using only English and her students' need to understand instruction: she modified the goal and occasionally used Spanish translation or strategic use of Spanish, a form of translanguaging (García et al., 2017). While there was little evidence

that Elena was aware of her use of Spanish as a translanguaging stance or as a related set of beliefs leading to a translanguaging pedagogy, she did at times use Spanish to boost her students' understanding, as an unplanned moment-to-moment change in the classroom, or a translanguaging shift.

## Results

The major findings of this research are presented in this section. Rather than provide examples of agency, tension, and sense-making separately in each of the data three data sources, examples from the different sources are woven together to create a narrative of Elena's developing teacher identity. The examples presented here are illustrative of the three key concepts; they do not represent an exhaustive list.

### *Agency*

An early example of agency occurred in Elena's Week 1 reflections when she was faced with minimal materials in her English classes:

> *The students are required to have a notebook specifically for English lessons, an English-Spanish dictionary, and a 'desire to learn…' This I see as a positive challenge, one that will make me think outside of the box when it comes to lessons and assignments…* (WR1*)*

The phrase "positive challenge" captures Elena's proactive response to a lack of materials, which many other student teachers would more likely view with apprehension. Coupled with the opening quotation at the beginning of the article, this excerpt reveals a sense of agency in Elena's commitment to work around the difficulties associated with limited materials.

Another example of agency took place during Elena's first teaching observation (Week 4). She had decided to use English as the language of instruction with her fifth and sixth-grade students, whose English language proficiency (ELP) was mostly at a false beginner level since most students had been exposed to English since first grade. She and her supervising teacher worked together to accomplish this goal, which was not typical of most EFL teaching in Mexico. As the in-country supervisor noted in her first observation report,

> *I found that both of the teachers used English throughout the lesson, which showed that they could be positive models of the language. Often teachers do not use English in other classes and contexts of this program because they feel the students cannot understand English. This was not the case for these two teachers, and I feel this is positive on Elena's part*. (TO1)

A third example of agency occurred during Week 5 when Elena was inspired to let students write the date at the beginning of class rather than having them copy it from the whiteboard. In her words:

> *...this week I had an idea that came to me suddenly as I was about to write the date on the board myself. I thought, Why would I do this when I know they can? So, after having the whole class repeat the date to me…, I called up an eager boy and an apprehensive girl to the board. I handed them both a marker and said, "I want you to write the date as fast and as correct* [sic] *as you can. Ready. Set. GO!" The two raced in writing the date; the entire class cheering them on as they wrote. (WR5)*

Elena's idea to engage students by having them compete with each other to write the date came to her in the moment of teaching, and she implemented it on the spot. While it is a small pedagogical turn, it illustrates Elena's sense of authority as a teacher in her ability to make changes. These examples of agency in the data contributed to Elena's sense of efficacy in the classroom, which, in turn, strengthened her developing teacher identity.

### *Tensions and sense-making*

Challenges in teaching often arise early in student teaching, creating tensions between the internal beliefs of the teacher and the external expectations at the assigned school. These teaching challenges may occur more frequently with a student teacher in an international context, especially one that is culturally and linguistically different from the home country. Elena also encountered a series of challenges in her first weeks of student teaching. In Week 1, Elena was jolted by the low English language proficiency of her students, despite their having had English classes since first grade. As she recounted,

> *While I was teaching, the first week I was handed the classes, I was very unaware of how low the students' English level was. I had observed it, but I didn't think it would impact my teaching so much. And I got up in front of the classes thinking, if I just spoke slower, they would understand. And it was a big mistake on my part.* (PSTI, p. 1)

This excerpt illustrates the difference between learning by observation and learning by experience in the classroom. Elena had observed her students' low level of English, but had not yet processed its implication for teaching. Instead, a tension developed between Elena's expectation that she could effectively teach by slowing her speaking and the reality of her students' low level of English comprehension. It impacted her

teaching plans, and she was initially thrown off by the disparity between her expectations and the reality of the classroom. Early on in her teaching, however, Elena was able to resolve this initial tension through sense-making and adjustment of her teaching techniques:

> *I think it took that first class to really understand how I had to communicate with the students. I had to not only slow down my language, not to a condescending point, but slow it down so that they could really pick apart the words I was saying, use simpler terms, use cognates if I could, use a lot of hand gestures, a lot of repetition.* (PSTI, p. 3)

Elena seemed to understand that a way to make sense of her students' lower than expected English level was to embed language supports into her English language instruction. In this example, the tension that Elena experienced was followed by her sense-making of it, resulting in a change in her teaching. It is important to point out, however, that not all tensions in the data were resolved or could be directly linked to sense-making in the data.

Another example of tension occurred in Elena's Week 2 reflections. She was struggling with her students not completing the assigned homework, which involved completing a sentence frame (*I should be patient when* ___) and an accompanying drawing. In her words:

> *I think that the assignment itself was easy enough to follow and work with, and I was pleased with the responses all the groups had, but it was a little difficult to motivate the students with doing* [sic] *the first homework assignment, a low that I will continue to work on.* (WR2)

The tension between her expectation that students complete assigned homework and the fact that few students did so left her wondering how to better motivate her students. It also shows that in Week 2 Elena attributed students' low level of homework completion to their lack of motivation, which she took responsibility for ("a low that I will continue to work on"). Still, this phrase illustrates Elena's sense of control over the situation and her intention to do something about it, an indication of agency.

In fact, it was not until near the end of her student teaching experience that Elena realized that assigning and completing homework rarely occurred in English classes in her Mexican context. Two contributing factors were 1) the heavy workload of English teachers in the public schools and 2) the non-graded status of English as a subject area in the school. The heavy workload—upwards of 120 students in the morning and often the same number at another school in the afternoon—effectively left English language teachers with no time to correct homework. Likewise, because English was not a graded subject, students were less likely to complete any assigned homework, instead prioritizing their efforts in other graded content areas. The following excerpt from the post-student teaching interview reveals Elena's evolving sense-making regarding the role of homework:

> *I think the expectation of completing homework on time is not set in place, especially with English. To finish homework in an English classroom really yields no positive or negative consequence for the students grade-wise. …because a lot of the times, if there is homework assigned, which it rarely is, because the teachers don't have time to assess the homework, they will just get a check even if the homework is right or wrong.* (PSTI, pp. 6-7)

In this excerpt, Elena alluded to the practice of "signing off" to mark the completion of homework. After finishing their homework, students would line up with their notebooks in the classroom, and the English teacher would then check off their homework and initial the homework page. This practice, which Elena eventually adopted, demonstrates one way in which Elena adjusted to the EFL context of her teaching. Although she was not pleased by the lack of feedback this system entailed, she realized that it at least acknowledged her students' homework efforts.

During Week 4, halfway through her student teaching in Mexico, Elena reported in her weekly reflections that the English textbooks for students had finally arrived. After reviewing the books, Elena's initial elation gave way to concern when she realized that the content for teaching English was considerably beyond the level of her students. This created a tension between her desire to adjust her teaching to their level of comprehension and the expectation that she use the assigned English textbooks and curriculum. As she stated in her Week 4 reflections,

> *It is difficult, sometimes, to use the lessons in the books that were provided to the students and to use them throughout the year… Many times the lessons are too difficult, requiring knowledge beyond their current levels of English, or the lessons are decontextualized and only work in the setting of the activity presented in the book.* (WR4)

Layered onto the dilemma of using new textbooks was the expectation that in a school with a limited budget and teaching resources, new materials should be used. However, this created tension in Elena due to the fact that the new books were too difficult for her students and sometimes included culturally unfamiliar material. This tension was one that was never fully resolved through sense-making evidenced in the data. Elena and her cooperating teacher tried various strategies to work around texts that were too difficult for

the students, such as using themes from the book and creating their materials and activities based on them or changing the context of language practice exercises to one more familiar to the students. These pedagogical work-arounds also illustrate their combined agency in response to inappropriate materials. Despite these attempted work-arounds, this tension remained, due in part to Elena's limited teaching time in Mexico and her belief that she should not alter the teaching context very much. As she shared in her Week 3 reflections:

> *I do not want to stray too far from my cooperating teacher's teaching style since he will be left with the class for the rest of the year once I leave for* [the U.S.], *but I do want to try some things out* [on] *my own to see how they do…* (WR3)

In this excerpt, Elena's awareness of her temporary status as a student teacher conflicted with her desire to add a personal stamp on her teaching that could potentially clash with her cooperating teacher, another example of tension.

The PSTI, which took place about one month after Elena's return to the United States, prompted insightful reflection on her part (see Appendix 2), which, in turn, provided multiple examples of sense-making. An important example of sense-making encapsulated Elena's emerging confidence as a teacher. It occurred at the beginning of the interview, in response to Question 1, which asked her to reflect on the pros and cons of the student teaching program in Mexico.

> *I liked that you had to feel like you were free-falling a little bit as a teacher… I think that [now] I'd just be able to be put into a classroom and maybe not pick it up gracefully where it left off but eventually be able to run the classroom smoothly, based off of how I teach, how I can analyze the students and assess what they're learning, and how we could grow together. I think that the less structure inside of it* [student teaching in Mexico] *really helped me to feel more structured in my own teaching.* (PSTI, p. 1)

For Elena, a clear positive in her mind was that she was sometimes left to figure it out on her own in the classroom. By the end of her student teaching in Mexico, Elena felt empowered by her teaching experience and, in her view, had developed the basic tools she needed to complete her student teaching in the United States and in future teaching settings. Paradoxically, it appeared that the challenging teaching context in Mexico—large classes, small classrooms, and minimal materials and structure—enabled her to fall back on her "self" as a teacher, hone her teaching skills, and build a resilient teacher identity. However, this constructed identity is not necessarily fixed or stable; it is entirely possible that despite Elena's unique personal characteristics and teaching experiences before and during student teaching, her teacher identity would again shift in response to changes in her teaching situation when she returned to the United States. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Elena viewed the challenges of student teaching in Mexico as "positive challenges" (WR 1) from the beginning.

## Discussion

In this section, the findings of the study are discussed by relating them to the two research questions posed earlier.

### *Research questions*

Evidence of the first question (How does this student teacher begin to develop her teacher identity during student teaching abroad?) can be seen early in Elena's teaching practicum.

The example of goal setting in the language of instruction illustrates how language data from the three instruments contribute to an understanding of Elena's developing teacher identity. Already by Week 2 in her weekly reflections (WR 2), Elena had set the goal of using only English in her EFL lessons. She believed that her grade 5-6 students knew more English than they revealed, since they had started instruction in English in grade 1. However, the decision to use English as the language of instruction was challenging to carry out for several reasons: the lower than expected language proficiency of her students, the lack of materials (the books had not yet arrived), and her perception that the main classroom teachers (not her EFL cooperating teacher) did little to encourage the English language development of their students. It can be seen that by Week 2 of teaching, Elena had sufficient autonomy and agency as a teacher to make this decision. Her cooperating teacher also supported her in this choice. In her Week 3 reflection, Elena acknowledged a growing tension between using English as much as possible and her students' resistance to using English. After reflecting on this stumbling block, Elena made sense of it by modifying her original 'English only' stance to include the strategic use of Spanish when needed. By Week 4, when her first teaching observation occurred (TO 1), she had implemented the goal of teaching in English, with occasional Spanish

translation of words and phrases, which continued in her two remaining teaching observations (TO 2, TO 3). In the PSTI, Elena commented on other strategies she used to communicate with her students in English:

> *I think it took that first class to really understand how I had to communicate with the students. I had to not only slow down my language…but slow it down so that they could really pick apart the words I was saying, use simpler terms, use cognates if I could, use a lot of hand gestures, a lot of repetition*. (PSTI, pp. 2-3)

In this extended example, Elena established a teaching goal based on her belief in the students' underlying English abilities, demonstrating her agency as a teacher. When faced with her students' difficulties comprehending instruction in English only, she experienced conflict (tension) between her belief in their knowledge of English and their reluctance to use English because of lower comprehension levels. In a sense-making move, she modified that belief to include limited use of Spanish. Later in the PSTI, Elena added information about how she additionally used simpler words, cognates, and other strategies to support her instruction in English. The combined information from the three data sources creates a picture of a teacher who perseveres, reflects on her teaching beliefs, and tries out possible solutions in the face of challenges. These changes in her belief system and her subsequent actions became part of Elena's teacher identity. Together examples of tension, agency, and sense-making from the three sources enrich our understanding of Elena's developing teacher identity.

The abstract nature of teacher identity, its dynamic quality in teachers, and its variability across teachers can make teacher identity challenging to define and fully grasp. Considering the second question (How do key concepts from Beijaard and Meijer's (2017) framework contribute to the construction of her teacher identity?), a possible answer is that examples of agency, tension, and sense-making in the data work together to make teacher identity more concrete, operational, and visible. Looking more closely at the three instruments used to collect language data (teaching observations, Elena's weekly reflections, and the post-student teaching interview), it was found that they all contained examples of teacher agency, tensions, and sense-making. However, these concepts did not occur in equal numbers in each of the instruments. For example, relatively few examples of agency, tension, and sense-making were encountered in the teacher observations, which consisted of three 50-minute observations. A possible explanation for the few examples is that observations of teaching are snapshots of a teacher's teaching, and observation notes capture only a part of what transpires in the classroom. Additionally, the descriptive nature of our teacher observation notes, which focused more on real-time teaching, student-teacher interactions, and assessment, may have hindered observations of tensions and sense-making.

In contrast, Elena's weekly reflections included multiple examples of agency, tensions, and sense-making across the eight weeks of student teaching in Mexico. The reflective nature of weekly reflections and the task of describing highs and lows of the teaching week may have contributed to the increased frequency of tensions and sense-making in particular. The total length of the weekly reflections also exceeded the observation reports, which would increase the likelihood of finding more examples of the identity concepts. In the PSTI, which took place after Elena had returned to the U.S. to complete her teaching practicum, multiple examples of the three concepts, especially sense-making, were identified. Again, this may be attributable in part to the reflective nature of the questions (See Appendix 2) and Elena's lengthy responses to them. Analysis of agency, tensions, and sense-making in the three instruments provided different perspectives on Elena's developing teacher identity. Without them, a one-sided view of Elena's progress as a teacher would have resulted.

From a broader viewpoint, identifying examples of teacher agency, tensions, and sense-making in other studies may also help to anchor the concepts as part of identity construction in teachers. To our knowledge, this study is one of the first to apply these three concepts to language data from a student-teacher experience. If applied more widely in case studies, the findings could potentially result in categorical comparisons across multiple cases of these constructs, one goal of the Social Construction of Reality case study design (Ridder, 2017).

## Conclusions

This section begins by considering the limitations of the study. Then the key findings of the study are summarized and its implications for understanding the impact of international student teaching on teacher identity formation, teacher education programs, and future preservice teachers are discussed.

### *Limitations of the study*

As a qualitative case study of one individual, there are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Because multiple examples of agency, tensions, and sense-making in the data contributed to creating a

resilient teacher identity in this student teacher, it is tempting to think that similarly prepared student teachers would also develop analogous teacher identities. However, as a single case, the results of this study cannot be generalized to a wider population of student teachers teaching abroad. One way to enhance this study's generalizability would be to increase the number of student teachers in a similar international teaching setting.

Another possible limitation pertains to the narrative language data collected in this study. The three sources of data (teacher observations, weekly reflections, and the post-student teaching interview) may not tell the whole story. Adding a pre-student teaching interview would be one way to compare a student teacher's teacher identity formation pre- and post-student teaching. Extending studies of identity construction in international student teaching to include student teaching in the home country before or after the international teaching experience would also provide an important source of comparison.

Related to questions about the language data, it is possible that Elena tried to emphasize positive responses to the teaching challenges to her in-country supervisor and university supervisor and downplay any frustrations or negative feelings. However, neither supervisor was a stranger to Elena. Before student teaching, she had met her in-country supervisor in the U.S. and had taken courses with her university supervisor. These facts, combined with the multiple incidences of Elena sharing challenges in her teaching and overcoming them, seem to militate against this possibility.

It is a credit to Elena's personal and professional experiences as a multilingual and multicultural preservice teacher that she developed such a strong and resilient teacher identity in a few short weeks. Part of that credit could also be attributed to her status as a student teacher from the United States who had access to affordable education, varied clinical teaching experiences, and multiple forms of educational technology in her teacher preparation program (Shedrow, 2017). From a more critical stance, however, there was little evidence in the language data collected that Elena questioned her approaches to teaching EFL from a critical perspective on English language teaching, for example, the kind of English and English teaching methods children in Mexico need to advance their education. Still, Elena was open-minded about her approaches to teaching, interested in the cultural aspects of teaching and daily life, and curious about EFL teachers in Mexico. In her post-student teaching interview, she shared:

> *I wish I would have known a little bit more about how the English teachers got to where they were. I didn't know that the English teachers were sent by the government* [to a specific school]*. They're not part of the school. They're not seen as staff of the school, so I think that other teachers treat them a little bit differently too.* (PSTI, p. 9)

That general education teachers and English language teachers occupy separate spheres in Mexican public schools was an eye-opener for Elena. She was aware that the heavy workload of English language teachers in Mexican public schools also contributed to the separation between these two groups of teachers and effectively hampered any substantial collaboration between them. Looking forward, this information is a reminder of the importance of providing cultural and educational background knowledge on the host country to teachers planning to teach abroad.

### *Key findings and implications*

In this study, the lived experience of a U.S. student teacher teaching EFL in Mexico for eight weeks was investigated by 1) exploring the development of teacher identity in the student teacher and 2) examining the contribution of key concepts to describe that identity from Beijaard and Meijer's (2017) teacher identity framework. Agency, tensions, and sense-making were focused on to analyze the construction of Elena's teacher identity. Elena encountered a number of challenges in her teaching context which led to several tensions between her internal beliefs and the circumstances of her teaching placement in Mexico. She took on these challenges by adjusting her teaching in response to these issues (teaching in English, unsuccessful teaching techniques) or adapting materials to her students (choosing more relevant activities or themes), showing agency as a young teacher. Elena also revealed her thinking on how and why she made decisions as a student teacher (for example, why she modified her stance on using English in the class), illustrating sense-making. These examples contributed to her evolving teacher identity while teaching English abroad and can also be linked to the design Social Construction of Reality"(Ridder, 2017) through sense-making. For social constructionists, "[t]he meaning-making activities themselves are of central interest…simply because it is the meaning-making/sense making attributional activities that shape action or (inaction)" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 197).

Although teacher professional identity is being researched more widely in student teachers and beginning teachers, its place in teacher preparation programs is not yet fully established. TPI is a concept that needs to be addressed more completely in teacher education programs so that early on preservice teachers

understand the cognitive and emotional processes that are part of the student teaching experience and the first years of teaching. For example, as part of teacher preparation courses, preservice teachers could be introduced to the notion of teacher identity and its dynamic nature. Treating struggles and tensions in early clinical experiences in schools and in student teaching as opportunities for understanding and teacher growth rather than examples of failure could contribute to creating more resilient teacher identities among our newest teachers. More resilient student teachers may become teachers who are capable of withstanding setbacks in the field and who develop more "staying power" in the profession. Exploring TPI could help beginning teachers, teacher educators, and program coordinators become aware of the struggles and opportunities for agency and sense-making that *all* teachers experience. As Jenlink (2021) points out:

> *Teacher identity greatly influences the decisions that teachers make in relation to teaching practices, content of teaching, and teacher-student relationships. One's identity as teacher influences all aspects of being a teacher. Teacher preparation programs are considered one of the most important stages for teacher identity formation.* (p. ix)

TPI should be a core aspect of teacher preparation programs and not simply left to chance. Our study takes a step in that direction by helping teacher educators see how beginning teachers, through the eyes of a student teacher teaching English abroad, can navigate the process of becoming a teacher and the challenges and sense-making that go with it. Nurturing TPI and understanding the ebb and flow of tensions in relation to sense-making in the personal and professional arenas can contribute to a sense of resiliency in a teacher.

**Acknowledgments**

The authors are grateful to the student teacher and cooperating teacher for their participation in the study and their willingness to share materials and open up their classroom to us.

***References***

Agbenyega, J. S. (2011). Building new identities in teacher preparation for inclusive education in Ghana. *Current Issues in Education, 14*(1). https://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/554/166

Beijaard, D. (2017). Learning teacher identity in teacher education. In D. J. Clandinin & J. Husu (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of research in teacher education* (pp. 139-142). Sage.

Beijaard, D., & Meijer, P. C. (2017). Developing the personal and professional in making a teacher identity. In D. J. Clandinin & J. Husu (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of research in teacher education* (pp.177-192). Sage.

Chao, X., Xue, M. Jetmore, R., Fritsch, R., Kang, B., & Xu, M. (2019). "Organic learning": Teaching abroad as a figured world for preservice teachers' identity development. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *46*(2), 7-29. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26746032

Constantinou, P. (2015). The impact of international student teaching experience on teacher identity and cultural competency. *The International Journal of Diversity in Education, 15*(3), 17-32.

Day, C. (2004). *A passion for teaching.* Routledge.

García, O., Ibarra Johnson, S., & Selzer, K. (2017). *The translanguaging classroom: Leveraging student bilingualism for learning*. Caslon.

Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your "house." *Administrative Issues Journal*, 4(2), 12-26. https://doi.org/10.5929/2014.4.2.9

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, (3rd ed., pp. 191–215). Sage.

Jenlink, P. M. (2021). *Understanding teacher identity. The complexities of forming an identity as professional teachers.* Rowman & Littlefield.

Kuteyi, O. (2013). *Caught in the middle: (Re)constructing beginning teachers' identities*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation], Murdoch University. https://researchportal.murdoch.edu.au/esploro/outputs/991005542347807891

Lengeling, M. M., Mora Pablo, I., & Barrios Gasca, L. (2017). Teacher socialization of EFL teachers at public school levels in central Mexico. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *19*(1), 41-54. http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/profile.v19n1.53244

Lengeling, M. M., & Schneider, M. L. (2023). A preservice teacher's experiences teaching English abroad: From ESL to EFL. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, 25*(2), 81-94. https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v25n2.101608

Meijer, P. C., Oolbekkink, H. W., Pillen, M., & Aardema, A. (2014). Pedagogies of developing teacher identity. *International Teacher Education: Promising Pedagogies (Part A) Advances in Research on Teaching*, *22*, 293-309. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-368720140000022018

Mesa Villa, C. P. (2017). The socialization of a novice teacher of English: Becoming an agent of change. *HOW Journal*, *24*(1), 83-100. https://doi.org/10.19183/how.24.1.318

Odell, J. S. (2001). Case study methods in international political economy. *International Studies Perspectives*, *2*(2), 161-176. https://doi.org/10.1111/1528-3577.00047

O'Donoghue, T., & Punch, K. (2003). *Qualitative educational research in action: Doing and reflecting.* Routledge.

Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL.* Palgrave Macmillan.
Ridder, H.-G. (2017). The theory contribution of case study research designs. *Business Research*, *10*, 281-305. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40685-017-0045-z
Schwandt, T., & Gates, E. F. (2018). Case study methodology. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed., pp. 341-358). Sage.
Shedrow, S. J. (2017). Cross-cultural student teaching: Examining the meaning-making of one white, female, middle class preservice teacher. *Journal of International Students*, *7*(2) 270-290. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i2.381
Stake, R. E. (2000). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 435-454). Sage.
Swanborn, P. (2010). *Case study research: What, why, and how?* Sage.
Trent, J. (2012). Becoming a teacher: The identity construction experiences of beginning English language teachers in Hong Kong. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 39, 363-383. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-012-0067-7
Uştuk, Ö. (2021). "Not me with my American flag": Transnational teachers' trajectories of language teacher socialization. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ), 25*(3). https://tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej99/a6.pdf
Uzum, B. (2017). Uncovering the layers of foreign language teacher socialization: A qualitative case study of Fulbright language teaching assistants. *Language Teaching Research*, *21*(2), 241-257.
Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., & Johnson, K. A. (2005). Theorizing language teacher identity: Three perspectives and beyond. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, 4*(1), 21-44. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327701jlie0401_2
Varghese, M. M., & Snyder, R. (2018). Critically examining the agency and professional identity development of novice dual language teachers through figured worlds. *International Multilingual Research Journal, 12*(3), 145-159. https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2018.1474060
Zeichner, K., & Gore, J. M. (1990). Teacher socialization. In W. Robert Houston (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 329-348). Macmillan.

## Appendix 1

## Weekly Reflection Topics

| WEEK | TOPIC |
|---|---|
| 1 | Window on your school and your classroom (2-3 pages). This assignment asks you to observe your classes and cooperative teacher using ethnographic notes. Imagine that you are taking notes for someone who is completely unfamiliar with the classroom, school, and school culture of your teaching practicum site. Please write this assignment as a narrative description, not as answers to the following:<br>1. School, cooperating teacher, grade level(s), content area (if secondary student teaching), and number of students in your classes<br>2. Physical arrangement of the classroom (helpful to include a diagram or photo)<br>3. Who your students are (e.g., racial/ethnic background, special education, students with special health concerns, other)<br>4. Learning styles of students (what you've noticed about how they learn)<br>5. Dynamics of the classroom (how students and the teacher interact with each other)<br>Please do not use names of students in your description. At the end of your description, include 2-3 questions you have about the class, teacher, school or EFL program. |
| 2-3, 5-7 | Weekly highs and lows (2-3 pages). In general terms, briefly describe what you did in class this week. Then choose 1-2 things that struck you as important or interesting in your classroom teaching, at school, or in your experiences outside of school, and 1-2 things you found difficult or challenging. Describe these things in greater depth. What can you learn from these experiences? Are there any lessons you can apply to your growth as a teacher or as a person? Or to your understanding of how culture influences learning and teaching? |
| 4 | Midpoint reflection (2-3 pages). What do you think is going well with your teaching and what do you think you could improve on? How will you try to accomplish this? What goals do you have for yourself for the rest of your teaching practicum in Mexico? |
| 8 | Reflecting on your experience (3-4 pages). Reflect on your student teaching experience in Mexico. Choose 3-4 things that have struck you as important lessons about teaching in Mexico and describe them. How might these "lessons learned" be applied to your teaching practicum in [U.S. state] or more generally, to your future teaching? |

## Appendix 2

## Post Student Teaching Interview Questions

1. Reflect back on the pros and cons of the student teaching program in Mexico. What were the pros and cons?
2. Think of the process of being observed by two supervisors, working with your cooperating teacher in an international context, and preparing materials for the edTPA [an evaluation instrument for preservice teachers published by Pearson]. How did that go for you?
3. Were there any critical incidents that pushed you to make changes in your teaching practice? If so, explain.
4. What are 2-3 things you learned about yourself or about your teaching in Mexico?
5. What kinds of knowledge are needed to teach EFL successfully to upper elementary students in a Mexican school?
6. How do these types of knowledge compare to the U.S. context for teaching ESL in elementary or middle schools?
7. How do expectations for behavior and classroom management practices in the Mexican school compare to those of U.S. elementary or middle schools?
8. Do you have any recommendations for future teachers who would be placed in a similar school in Mexico?