

Factors Affecting the Learning Experiences of Two EFL Teacher Students in Vietnam and South Korea

Phan Ngoc Tuong Vy¹, Trinh Quoc Lap¹, Le Cong Tuan¹, Tat Thien Thu¹, Ly Thi Bich Phuong¹, Le Xuan Mai^{1,*}

1. School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Can Tho, Vietnam

* E-mail of the corresponding author: lxmai@ctu.edu.vn

Abstract

This study investigates the learning experiences of two Vietnamese undergraduate students enrolled in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education programs in Vietnam and South Korea. Using a comparative narrative inquiry design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective artifacts (a practicum journal and a teaching portfolio). Korthagen's Onion Model of Teacher Development was adapted as the analytical framework to explore the factors shaping EFL teacher students' learning trajectories (1) navigating structure and culture in different academic systems (environment), (2) growing through trial, error, and reflection (behavior, competencies) and (3) expanding teacher identity through emotional and relational work (beliefs, identity, and mission). The study concludes that teacher development is not linear nor one-size-fits-all, but deeply shaped by learners' individual meaning-making processes within culturally situated contexts. Implications are offered for training programs and teacher educators seeking to balance structure and autonomy in responsive, context-sensitive ways.

Keywords: EFL teacher education, undergraduate, narrative inquiry, Vietnam, South Korea, learning experiences

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1. Introduction

1.1 The study background

Undergraduate or bachelor's-level programs in higher education play a foundational role in preparing pre-service teachers for the demands of the teaching profession. As the entry-level phase of professional education, undergraduate programs in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education provide students with core pedagogical knowledge, linguistic competence, and opportunities for identity development (Gisbert-Cervera, Usart, & Lázaro-Cantabrana, 2022). These programs serve as crucial training grounds where students begin to form their professional values and beliefs, often encountering formal pedagogical theories for the first time. In the context of global English language teaching, strengthening the quality of undergraduate EFL teacher preparation is essential for building a future-ready teaching workforce, especially in countries like Vietnam and South Korea where English language education is a national priority.

1.2 An overview of related literature

The term EFL teacher students in this study specifically refers to undergraduate or bachelor's degree (BA) students enrolled in formal programs designed to prepare them for teaching English as a Foreign Language at the primary or secondary level (Liu & Li, 2023). These students engage in both academic and practice-based learning activities to develop their competencies, pedagogical knowledge, and professional identities. Among the many dimensions of professional formation, learning experiences hold a central place. According to standalone from other types of experiences, such as personal life events or casual exposure to language, "learning experiences" refer to structured and semi-structured encounters within educational settings that actively shape a student's cognitive, emotional, and professional growth (Moye, 2021). These could include classroom participation, engagement with academic materials, practicum teaching, reflective assignments, and interactions with peers and mentors (Stephenson, 2019). Understanding learning experiences is critical because they directly inform how teacher students construct pedagogical beliefs, enact teaching behaviors, and make meaning of their developing identity (Sardone, 2019). Regarding the prolonged roles, learning experiences provide the platform where theory meets practice, and where abstract knowledge is transformed into embodied professional understanding (Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2020).

Existing research highlights that learning to teach is a multifaceted and nonlinear process, particularly at the undergraduate level where learners are still forming their adult identities. EFL teacher students undergo significant cognitive, emotional, and behavioral shifts during their training. Studies by Elyashiv and Rozenberg (2024) have shown that teacher education at this stage affects not only the acquisition of teaching techniques but also students'

emerging sense of self and commitment to teaching. Two broad categories of influences have been widely discussed in the literature: personal factors and contextual factors. Personal factors include students' prior educational experiences, language learning histories, personality traits, motivations for entering teaching, and their beliefs about what makes a good teacher (Maaranen & Stenberg, 2020). Regarding background experiences, prior exposure to English may affect confidence and active participation in methodology classes (Takagi, 2022). Regarding the presence and future, students' imagined ideal selves significantly influenced how they interpreted and responded to course content and teaching challenges (Liu, Zhang, & Zhang, 2023). Contextual factors, on the other hand, refer to the institutional, cultural, and curricular environments in which students are situated (Othman et al., 2019). These include the structure of the teacher education program, the language of instruction, teaching and assessment practices, classroom culture, and the level of academic support provided by faculty (Mai & Pham, 2018). Flores (2022) emphasized that sociocultural expectations, such as how teachers are perceived in society or how students are expected to behave, add layers of complexity to the learning experience of EFL teacher students, especially in multilingual and exam-oriented contexts. Despite the growing body of international research on these issues, few studies in the research setting examine how internal characteristics and external conditions interact throughout the learning process of EFL teacher students. This leads to a need for investigating these interconnections across contrasting educational contexts, using frameworks that can account for the multiple dimensions of pre-service teachers' development.

1.3 The conceptual framework guiding the study

To analyze and interpret the learning experiences of pre-service EFL teachers, this study employs an adapted version of Korthagen's Onion Model of Teacher Development (2014) (see Figure 1). The original model conceptualizes teacher development as a layered structure comprising six nested and interacting levels: environment, behavior, competencies, beliefs, identity, and mission. In the context of undergraduate EFL teacher education, where students are still in the process of becoming teachers, these layers are redefined to align with their developmental status: (1) the environment refers to the institutional and educational conditions. Behavior involves the students' academic engagement and participation in learning activities within their programs. Competencies encompass the professional skills being developed throughout their programs. Beliefs represent the students' emerging understandings of teaching, learning, and the role of language educators. Identity reflects their evolving sense of self as future teachers. At the core of the model, mission is reinterpreted as the students' commitment to finish their course and become a qualified teacher.

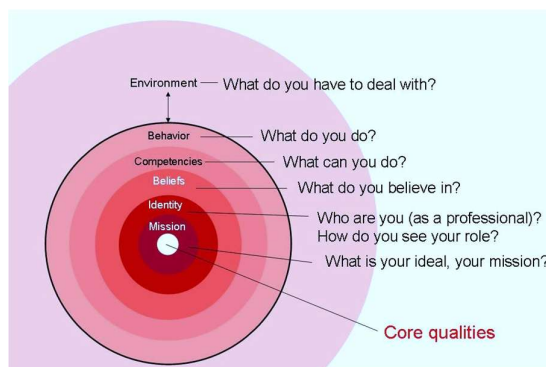


Figure 1. Onion Model of Teacher Development (Korthagen, 2014)

Guided by this framework, the study aims to address the following question:

What factors affect the learning experiences of two undergraduate students in EFL teacher education programs in Vietnam and South Korea?

2. Materials/Methods

2.1 Research design and participants

This study adopts a comparative narrative inquiry approach to explore and contrast the lived learning experiences of two Vietnamese undergraduate students enrolled in EFL teacher education programs in different national contexts. Narrative inquiry, grounded in participants' stories, provides a means to understand how individuals make sense of their educational journeys over time and within particular sociocultural settings (Barkhuizen, 2016). This approach allows for an in-depth, context-sensitive exploration of how institutional structures, curricular

experiences, and personal histories converge in the meaning-making processes of future teachers (Duan, Chu, & Liu, 2023).

Two Vietnamese undergraduate students were selected through purposive sampling based on three main criteria: (1) enrollment in a four-year EFL teacher education program, current standing in their final year of study; and (2) comparable age and academic background, with one student studying in Vietnam and the other in South Korea, enabling a meaningful cross-context comparison.

Data collection took place during the participants' final academic semester and involved two sources: semi-structured interviews and reflective artifacts. Each participant completed a 35–40-minute online interview in Vietnamese, focusing on their academic experiences, pedagogical challenges, identity development, and future aspirations. To complement the interviews, Hoa submitted a practicum journal, while Kim provided a teaching portfolio, based on the availability of their reflective materials. These artifacts offered supplementary insights into their learning experiences besides dialogical responses to interview questions. Regarding ethical safeguards, informed consent was obtained, participation was voluntary, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities, and all data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants and data sources

Pseudonym (Age)	Country of study	Year of study	Data source	
Hoa (22)	Vietnam	Final year (4-year program)	Interview (60 minutes)	Practicum journal
Kim (22)	South Korea	Final year (4-year program)	Interview (50 minutes)	Teacher portfolio

2.2 Data analysis

Data from interviews and reflective artifacts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and journals; (2) generating initial codes by hand; (3) searching for themes that corresponded to the six layers of Korthagen's Onion Model, environment, behavior, competencies, beliefs, identity, and mission; (4) reviewing and refining themes for coherence and relevance; (5) defining and naming the themes to reflect the participants' self-reported experiences; and (6) producing the final report with illustrative quotes.

Themes were aligned with the six layers of the Onion Model and used as initial coding categories to guide the interpretation of both the interviews and the reflective documents. Due to the small scale of this two-case study, all coding was conducted manually. Two researchers independently coded the data and engaged in peer debriefing to discuss and reconcile differences, ensuring consistency and enhancing the credibility of the findings. Themes were labeled in alignment with the Onion Model to fit the developmental narratives described in participants' self-reports. An overview of the initial codes and theme alignment is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. An overview of themes and initial codes

Onion Layer	Thematic representation	Initial codes
Environment	<i>"I learn in a system, but it reflects my culture too"</i>	Curriculum pacing, institutional expectations, dynamic relationship, academic culture.
Behavior + Competencies	<i>"I try, I achieve, I make mistakes, I learn from failure"</i>	Class participation and collaborative activities for developing English proficiency and pedagogy.
Beliefs + Identity + Mission	<i>"A teacher wears many hats – I'm learning to wear them"</i>	Changes in teaching approaches, self-positioning, confidence development, imagining future roles.

To further ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, a member-checking process was conducted. Participants were invited to review a summary of the interpreted themes and confirm the accuracy of representation. Their feedback was used to refine the thematic structure prior to presenting the findings (Anney, 2015).

3. Findings and Discussion

There is a Vietnamese saying: *"Như một củ hành tây, càng bóc càng cay mắt"* (Like an onion, the more layers you peel, the more it stings your eyes). This metaphor aligns meaningfully with Korthagen's Onion Model of Teacher Development, which conceptualizes teacher learning and identity formation as a layered process, from

the outermost layer of environment to the innermost layer of professional mission. Likewise, the lived experience of becoming a teacher is emotionally layered with rigorous learning but also uncertainty, discomfort, and reflection. The following themes reflect how Hoa and Kim made sense of their development across multiple layers, structured environments, evolving competencies, and shifting beliefs, identities with multiple teaching purposes through their EFL teacher education programs.

3.1 *"I learn in a system, but it reflects my culture too"*

Both Hoa and Kim recognized and adapted themselves to institutional structures shaped by formal curriculum design and culturally embedded expectations. Despite studying in different countries, their teacher education programs both followed comprehensive curricula that combined mandatory core subjects with electives, offering broad exposure to educational theory and practice.

However, their experiences diverged in terms of perceived learner autonomy. Kim, studying in South Korea, described a system that was still structured yet more learner-oriented in its execution. She reflected,

"At first, I thought, what if the topic I choose is boring or way too far from the umbrella term? But then I realized, whatever you choose, you have to commit to it. Since then, I have appreciated that we can choose everything from topics to supporting materials. It feels like the program trusts us."

She also valued the transparent design and clear categorization of subject groups, which not only helped her organize her learning but also envision a future academic path.

"Thanks to the syllabus with smart categorization, I have already started thinking about pursuing a Master's in the emotional education branch."

At one side, Hoa's program in Vietnam somehow involved more top-down organization, where instructors typically pre-assigned topics and tasks to avoid "getting lost" in a subject. She initially found this lack of choice unsettling:

"I was panicked when I got a topic I did not like at all. But at least I could save a bit time and had clear objectives and did not need to worry about overlapping with others."

However, over time, her perspective has changed:

"Later, I had to agree that I was really learning something new, something I would never choose myself. Now I am thankful for that. Also, since everyone had different topics, I learned a lot from their presentations too. It's not 'my learning' but 'our learning', we are like pieces of a puzzle."

Hoa's perspective is captured through the Vietnamese saying "*Không bổ bề ngang thì bổ bề dọc*", which literally means "if it does not nourish you horizontally, it nourishes you vertically." The proverb reflects the belief that even when a learning experience does not meet initial preferences or expectations, it may still offer valuable intellectual or personal growth in unexpected ways.

The two teacher students' reflections reveal the emotional dimension of institutional design. Although both learners come from the same Vietnamese cultural background, one felt empowered by autonomy, while the other gradually discovered comfort and meaning in structured learning. Their experiences speak to a broader pedagogical tension: whether teachers should assign topics or allow learners to make their own choices. Rather than engaging in an endless debate over which approach is superior, the narratives in this study illustrate that there is no universal model in teacher education that suits all learners. In summary, the findings indicate that institutional and cultural factors may support learning in one student while posing challenges for another; however, both experiences can contribute to meaningful development. This aligns with observations reported in studies by Mai and Pham (2018) and Liu and Li (2023)

The experiences of Hoa and Kim suggest that teacher education should not be guided solely by either structural control or learner autonomy, but by a deep understanding of who the learners are, how they respond to different levels of freedom and support, and what scaffolding they may need at particular stages. Effective teaching requires flexibility, knowing when to offer structure and when to allow autonomy, rather than adhering rigidly to a single pedagogical approach. Teacher educators must be responsive to individual differences, infusing appropriate guidance and challenge in ways that align with learners' needs, cultural backgrounds, and developmental trajectories.

In terms of socio-cultural influences, both participants' academic environments were embedded in a shared cultural context shaped by collectivist values and long-standing Confucian traditions (*đông văn*), where students are socialized to revere teachers, uphold harmony, and respect structured authority. Within this tradition, teachers are positioned as high-status figures whose behaviors, attitudes, and even personal characteristics are expected to be exemplary and carefully nurtured (Nguyen, 2023). As products of this cultural milieu, both learners tended to align with these expectations, which demonstrated deference toward instructors, valuing respectful classroom conduct,

and aspiring to embody the moral and interpersonal qualities associated with the teaching profession.

3.2 *"I try, I achieve, I make mistakes, I learn from failure"*

In their learning journeys, both students engaged in action-oriented experiences that allowed them to experiment with the practices of teaching. These included teaching simulations, group presentations, and classroom discussions, where they began to perform aspects of the teacher role in a relatively safe and scaffolded environment. These moments of doing, not merely observing or theorizing, served as crucial sites for transformation. Through active participation, they developed greater confidence in their teaching voices, but also encountered obstacles that forced them to confront their limitations and reconsider their strategies.

Kim described her progress in classroom participation and teaching practice as gradual but steady. She actively engaged in presentations, group work, and teaching simulations, which helped her refine both her pedagogical strategies and Korean language use.

"At first, it took me a while to follow everything in Korean, I have learned Korean but it still feels not enough for real-life situations. A Vietnamese teaching Korean kids English, crazy right? Thankfully, my classmates and mentors were more than wonderful, the more they helped me practice, the more confident I became in both preparing and delivering lessons in the classrooms."

Through repeated cycles of doing and adjusting, she began to internalize the rhythm of classroom instruction and classroom management. These experiences strengthened her ability to perform the teacher role and deepened her awareness of what effective teaching requires in practice, not only knowing what to teach, but how to communicate it clearly and responsively.

For Hoa, she described an early moment of struggle during a microteaching session:

"I didn't manage time well. My friends were confused and I felt frustrated. I looked like a clown. Never thought being a teacher could be that pressuring. But after that, I became more thick-skinned. I just practiced, and you know what, practice cannot make you perfect, but it makes you proud, and makes others proud of you too."

Her reflection illustrates a strong capacity for self-awareness and adaptability. Rather than being discouraged by failure, she treated the experience as a learning opportunity, recognizing that teaching competence is built through repetition, reflection, and gradual confidence-building. Her story reinforces the idea that behavioral engagement and skill development emerge through struggle, not in its absence, aligning with findings of Duan et al. (2023) about early-career EFL teachers' resilience and sustainability.

Both narratives imply that growth in teaching competence is rarely linear but unexpected and full of curiosity, as described by (Farrell, 2022). In teacher education, success and failure are not opposites in these stories but instead, they appear as interconnected forces driving deeper engagement. As student teachers, Hoa and Kim were not merely acquiring pedagogical knowledge, but also learning how to cope with performance pressure, self-doubt, and unexpected classroom dynamics. These experiences further echo the realities of being a teacher and teaching as emotionally and cognitively demanding practices (Karakus et al., 2024; Zhang & Yusof, 2024). Their stories also point to the importance of a learning environment that allows room for imperfection and growth. The emotional ups and downs they experienced, pride, frustration, renewed motivation, reinforce the inner work involved in becoming a teacher. Competence, in this sense, is not a static skill set, but a developing capacity shaped through cycles of trial, feedback, and reflection. The thematic arc of trying, achieving, making mistakes, and learning from failure captures this iterative process and supports the notion that teacher development is grounded not only in theory, but in lived experience (Mosquera-Pérez & Losada-Rivas, 2022; Trinh et al., 2025).

3.3 *"A teacher wears many hats – I'm learning to wear them"*

Both participants experienced gradual shifts in how they understood the role of a teacher. Initially, their views were shaped by their own school experiences, where teachers were largely seen as knowledge providers. However, as they progressed through their teacher education programs, their perceptions became more complex, encompassing emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions of teaching.

Kim reflected on the transformation in her thinking:

"My Korean professors listen to students' feelings. I used to think that was too much for just being a teacher, but now I understand why it matters. I am also a good listener, and I want to be a safe, pouring space for my learners."

In the same vein, Hoa shared,

"As a class entertainer, I often feel like a counselor, especially when classmates are stressed and I have to lift them up. My professors are also hilarious, in an academic way. I want to leverage my humor and optimistic spirit as a future teacher."

These reflections indicate a growing awareness that teaching extends far beyond the transmission of knowledge (Kim & Ko, 2020). Analysis of their reflective documents further revealed that both teacher students frequently engaged in lesson analysis and classroom problem-solving by drawing on emotional awareness and interpersonal sensitivity. Their reflections include classroom technical adjustments to include how their learners felt, how classroom dynamics unfolded, and how their own attitudes influenced the learning environment. Through this process, both students began to recognize that effective teaching involves building emotional trust, attending to students' well-being, and fostering a relational classroom climate that supports engagement and growth. Both students began to recognize that effective teaching involves building emotional trust, being attentive to students' well-being, and creating a relational classroom environment (Mahoney et al., 2020). Their beliefs reflect a shift toward a more human-centered and emotionally attuned understanding of teaching as a career that values empathy, emotional intelligence, and presence as much as pedagogical expertise (Klusmann, Aldrup, & Carstensen, 2022).

Beyond classroom roles, Kim's evolving teacher identity was shaped in part by her multilingual and cross-cultural experience in South Korea. According to her teaching portfolio, as a Vietnamese student navigating academic life in Korean, she frequently took on an informal but meaningful role as a language and cultural mediator, assisting her practicum learners with academic terms and clarifying expectations. Meanwhile, Hoa's practicum journal revealed her engagement with responsibilities such as designing test items and grading assignments for high school students. These experiences gave her practical insight into the evaluative and administrative tasks involved in teaching, helping her connect theory with the realities of classroom instruction.

Both participants expressed that their emerging teacher identities were closely tied to empathy, responsibility, and care. Rather than viewing teaching as a single fixed role, they began to see it as a dynamic profession requiring multiple competencies and emotional investments (Richards, 2023). In this sense, they were learning to "wear many hats", as instructors, counselors, communicators, and cultural mediators. This deepening identity also connected to a broader sense of purpose in teaching. Kim noted, *"I want to be the teacher I needed when I was shy. Someone who sees students' efforts, not just their scores."* Hoa expressed a similar desire to innovate teaching in her local context: *"In my hometown, English teachers just usually teach grammar. I hope I can make it more alive for students there."* Both participants framed their future roles not only in terms of pedagogical skills, but also in relation to their values, equity, emotional support, and student-centered learning. These narratives reveal that identity and mission are closely linked in the learning-to-teach process. Their developing sense of who they are as future teachers is inseparable from their beliefs about what teaching should achieve (Liu et al., 2023).

4. Implications and Conclusion

Three central themes emerged from the data. First, both participants navigated academic environments rooted in shared Confucian traditions, yet interpreted structure and autonomy differently, reflecting personal agency and institutional variation. Second, they grew through cycles of trial, reflection, and practice, showing how behavioral engagement and competency-building are developed through both achievement and failure. Third, their narratives illustrated the expansion of teacher identity beyond content delivery to encompass roles such as mentor, counselor, language mediator, and change agent, all shaped by care and long-term purpose.

The narratives of Hoa and Kim suggest that the process of learning to teach involves continuous negotiation of structure, autonomy, emotional labor, and shifting self-perceptions. Their experiences point to how future teachers internalize learning through action, reflection, and relational engagement. While these insights cannot be generalized, they raise several considerations for teacher education programs and educators who support pre-service teacher development. One consideration involves the balance between structure and autonomy in curriculum design. The participants' differing responses to guided versus self-directed tasks suggest that flexible structures may accommodate a wider range of learning preferences, especially in culturally diverse classrooms. Programs might reflect on how curricular arrangements either constrain or empower students, and how clarity and choice can coexist in thoughtful ways.

A second consideration relates to the emotional and interpersonal aspects of teaching. Both participants reported moments where they acted not only as learners but also as supporters, mediators, and emotional anchors for peers. These experiences hint at the importance of fostering relational awareness in teacher education and training, not necessarily through formal coursework alone, but through space for reflection, collaboration, and peer connection (Trinh, Phan, & Ngo, 2025). The evolving roles that pre-service teachers occupy, such as informal mentors, translators, or morale boosters, may offer meaningful entry points into professional identity formation. Teacher educators might benefit from attending to these emergent roles as part of the broader developmental process, acknowledging that becoming a teacher involves more than acquiring techniques; it involves learning who one is in the classroom.

Finally, in cross-cultural or international contexts, the data suggest the value of culturally responsive mentorship.

While not all learners require the same kind of support, the participants' stories illustrate how sensitivity to language, background, and learning history can shape feelings of inclusion and belonging. Programs might reflect on how supervisory relationships can be adapted to meet the diverse needs of learners across settings. Taken together, these insights do not aim to prescribe best practices, but rather to open space for dialogue on how teacher education can more fully support the layered, lived experience of learning to teach. Listening carefully to students' narratives may allow institutions to better recognize the emotional and cultural dimensions of professional growth, and in doing so, help future teachers not only learn to teach, but learn to teach with self-awareness, empathy, and a deep sense of purpose.

While these insights contribute to a deeper understanding of undergraduate teacher learning across two national contexts, the study has several limitations. With only two participants, the findings are not generalizable but instead offer exploratory insights into personal and contextual influences on teacher development. The reliance on self-reported data may also reflect subjective and retrospective interpretations, which can limit objectivity. Besides, the study captures a snapshot of the participants' experiences at a single point in time. Therefore, future research could expand this inquiry by involving a larger, more diverse sample across different cultural and institutional settings, and by incorporating classroom observations or longitudinal methods to better trace identity development over time.

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