

Impact of Professional Identity on English Learning Engagement of English Majors from a University in Ethnic Minority Regions

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Abstract: This study examines the mediating mechanism of professional identity on English learning engagement through a questionnaire survey of 206 English majors from one of the universities in ethnic minority regions. Based on the participation-identification model, learning engagement theory and the previous research on professional identity, academic self-efficacy and learning engagement, the author proposes two hypotheses: (1) English majors' professional identity positively predicates their English learning engagement; (2) English majors' English academic self-efficacy plays a mediating role in the relationship between their professional identity and their English learning engagement. The results demonstrate that under the premise of including the control variable, professional identity can significantly influence English learning engagement of English majors from the university in ethnic minority regions with a strong effect. Besides, English academic self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between professional identity and English learning engagement. This study provides some pedagogical implications for facilitating English majors' English learning engagement.

Keywords: Professional identity; English academic self-efficacy; English learning engagement; English majors; University in ethnic minority regions

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1. Introduction

English learning engagement refers to the extent of continuous dedication and concentration exhibited by learners during the process of acquiring English ^[1]. According to Finn's participation-identification model, participation in school activities, successful performance outcomes and identification with the school are considered as a dynamic and circular process with two basic components named identification and participation ^[2]. This model concentrates on the effect of emotional identification on individuals' learning engagement. From the students' perspective, this model could manifest a form of emotional identification with their profession and school. Learners with robust professional identity are inclined to exhibit positive learning behavior and engage in school life proactively, which is called learning engagement. Professional identity encapsulates learners' emotional cognition grounded

in their comprehension of discipline and embracing it as a lifelong advancement objective through constructive behavior^[3]. The extent of professional identity influences the psychological stress of college students^[4]. Additionally, prior studies have demonstrated that college students with a high level of professional identity, serving as the antecedent variable of some behavioral or psychological variables, are inclined to devote more time and energy to study^[5,6].

The previous study has pointed out that professional identity can improve college students' learning interests, and learning will is the indispensable premise of facilitating college students' academic self-efficacy^[7]. Hence, in the realm of EFL learning, English academic self-efficacy can be defined as the psychological state of individuals, where they subjectively evaluate their capability to complete English learning assignments in the present study. In addition to the above theoretical foundations, prior empirical evidence from previous studies has confirmed that professional identity is positively associated with students' academic self-efficacy^[8-10].

According to the learning engagement theory, it is postulated that individual self-efficacy serves as a critical variable for augmenting effort levels^[11]. Meanwhile, the result of the previous study indicates that individuals with high self-efficacy possess strong confidence in the execution of a positive learning behavior, enabling them to be inclined to actualize the behavior^[12]. Conversely, English majors who exhibit low proficiency in English academic self-efficacy feel unable to successfully complete their English learning, which subsequently deters them from investing more time and energy into their English learning.

Based on participation-identification model, learning engagement theory and the previous research associating professional identity, academic self-efficacy and learning engagement, the author proposes:

- (1) Hypothesis 1: English majors' professional identity positively predicates their English learning engagement.
- (2) Hypothesis 2: English majors' English academic self-efficacy mediates the association between their professional identity and English learning engagement.

In light of the aforementioned literature, the aims of this study are to investigate the association among professional identity, English academic self-efficacy and English learning engagement of English majors and to probe into the influencing factors and mechanism of English majors' English learning engagement from the university in ethnic minority regions to provide a theoretical basis for improving their English learning engagement.

2. Research subjects and method

2.1. Research subjects

By adopting the methodology of questionnaire investigation and cluster sampling, the present study selects English majors from universities in ethnic minority regions as research participants, spanning from freshmen to seniors. In addition, students from different genders, ethnic groups and locations of home are recruited to guarantee an adequate sample size. Furthermore, the questionnaire investigation was administered online and offline within the university in ethnic minority regions. All participants were reassured that their personal data was confidential to ensure the validity of the questionnaires. A total of 219 questionnaires were disseminated in the present study and 206 valid surveys were retrieved with a response efficiency of 94.06%. The research subjects consisted of 186 female participants and 20 male participants, accounting for 90.29% and 9.71%, respectively. Regarding the location of the home, there are 143 students from rural areas, comprising 69.42% of the total sample, and 63 students are drawn from urban areas, accounting for 30.58% of all participants. Notably, the distribution of research subjects is well-balanced with various academic levels. In summary, the samples drawn from the universities in ethnic minority regions are relatively balanced, which is conducive to

promoting research results.

2.2. Research method

In this research, referring to the existing questionnaires, the author employed some modifications to the original scales according to the current situation, which finalized the questionnaire about the professional identity, English academic self-efficacy and English learning engagement of English majors ^[13–15]. The questionnaire is incorporated into two sections. The first section of the questionnaire encompasses seven questions, which mainly involve the fundamental information of research participants, such as grade, gender, nationality and so forth. The second segment of the questionnaire comprises three distinctive scales with a total of 38 questions, namely the professional identity, English academic self-efficacy and English learning engagement. To be specific, the professional identity scale consists of four dimensions, including professional cognition, professional action, professional emotion and professional goal, respectively. Then, there are two sub-dimensions encompassing the English academic self-efficacy scale: English learning ability self-efficacy and English learning behavior self-efficacy. There are three sub-dimensions incorporated into the learning engagement scale, namely energy, dedication and focus, respectively. All three distinctive scales are compiled with the five-point scoring method of Likert in which the critical score is 3, which indicates that the high scores accompany participants' high proficiency in professional identity, English academic self-efficacy and English learning engagement.

2.3. Statistical treatment

In this research, the 24.0 version of SPSS and 3.5 version of Process are utilized for the statistical analysis of the quantitative data. First of all, the quantitative data was analyzed by employing the 24.0 version of SPSS, encompassing descriptive analysis, reliability and validity testing, correlation analysis and regression analysis. Subsequently, the mediation effect test was scrutinized through Model 4 of the SPSS Process 3.5 add-in developed by Hayes, utilizing the Bootstrap methodology (5000 iterations) to evaluate the mediating effect of English academic self-efficacy.

The entire study commences with the pretest of the questionnaire, and 53 questionnaires are distributed, of which 51 are confirmed as valid. Furthermore, the corresponding questions are altered and eliminated to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, reducing the 38 items of the original questionnaire to 21 items.

Therefore, through the examination of the validity, the KMO values of the total scale about professional identity, English academic self-efficacy and English learning engagement are found to be 0.741, 0.821 and 0.76, respectively, which suggests that all of the KMO values surpass the critical threshold of 0.7, indicating an adequate correlation between variables and the data from the scale are suitable for the factor analysis. After appropriate revision and improvement, the internal consistency coefficient value of the entire questionnaire about the professional identity, English academic self-efficacy and English learning engagement of English majors stands at 0.909. In terms of the reliability of three distinctive scales, including the professional identity scale, the English academic self-efficacy scale and the English learning engagement scale, the values of the internal consistency coefficient fluctuate around 0.807 and 0.829, which confirms the good reliability of the total questionnaire that can be adopted in the present study.

2.4. Research variables

This research primarily endeavors to examine the correlation among English major undergraduates' professional identity, English academic self-efficacy and English learning engagement from the university in ethnic minority regions. Therefore, the primary elements of the present study are professional identity, English academic self-

efficacy and English learning engagement, with English majors' professional identification being considered as the independent variable, English academic self-efficacy as the mediating variable and English learning engagement as the dependent variable. Furthermore, apart from the independent variable, dependent variable and mediating variable, this study will endeavor to incorporate the manner of their major selection as the control variable.

3.1. Common method biases

In this research, Harman's single factor test is implemented to finish the common method biases. On the one hand, it is discerned from the common method biases that there are six factors whose eigenvalues exceed the value of one. On the other hand, the variance explanation rate of the factor possessing the highest eigenvalue is less than forty percent. From the two points mentioned above, it can be concluded that there are no serious common method biases involved in the present study.

3.2. Descriptive statistics, convergent validity and discriminant validity

Table 1 delineates that the correlation coefficient values of the three pivotal variables in this research span from 0.572 to 0.698. The mean scores and standard deviation values are likewise illustrated in the table, all meeting the research expectations.

According to the results from Table 1, it is evident that the factor loading values of three variables with a total of twenty-one measured questions span from 0.724 to 0.981, CR-values from 0.917 to 0.952 and AVE-values from 0.649 to 0.798. In addition, it can be discerned from Table 1 that the values of AVE after the square root range from 0.806 to 0.893, and the values of all correlation coefficients range from 0.572 to 0.698, which are all below the values of AVE after the square root. Combined with the internal consistency coefficient values of the three scales, it is suggested that the questionnaire employed in this study has good convergent validity and discriminant validity.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics analysis, convergent validity and discriminant validity

	Descriptive statistics		Convergent validity			Discriminant validity		
	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor loading	CR	AVE	PI	EASE	ELE
PI	3.424	0.570	0.724–0.901	0.952	0.666	0.816		
EASE	3.362	0.684	0.778–0.870	0.917	0.649	0.698**	0.806	
ELE	3.154	0.773	0.851–0.981	0.952	0.798	0.572**	0.640**	0.893

** $P < 0.01$. These black bold values are the values of AVE after the square root. PI stands for professional identification; EASE represents English academic self-efficacy; ELE denotes English learning engagement.

3.3. Examination of mediating effect

Conform to preceding investigations, there are significant positive correlations among English majors' professional identity, English academic self-efficacy and English learning engagement. Nevertheless, this investigation necessitates a more thorough examination of the mediating effect of English academic self-efficacy on the relationship between English majors' professional identity and English learning engagement. Hence, professional identity is considered the independent variable, English academic self-efficacy is the mediating variable, and English learning engagement is the dependent variable. If the impact of professional identity on English learning engagement can only be instigated through English academic self-efficacy, then English academic self-efficacy is regarded as a complete mediator; otherwise, it is partially mediated. The Bootstrap methodology proposed by Hayes is utilized to scrutinize the mediation effect and the Process program developed by Hayes is selected as the

research instrument. Moreover, model four and the ninety-five percent confidence interval are selected to evaluate the mediation effect and the ninety-five percent confidence interval signifies that if the confidence interval of the mediation effect does not encompass zero, the mediation effect is significant.

In addition to the independent variable, dependent variable and mediating variable mentioned above, this study incorporated the selection manner of major as the control variable and executed data analysis on the three pivotal variables to examine the mediating effect of participants' English academic self-efficacy, as evidenced by previous research demonstrating that the selection manner of college students' major is a significant determinant of their learning engagement. As discerned in the mediating model test of English academic self-efficacy, professional identity significantly correlates with English academic self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.845, t = 13.922, P < 0.001$), English academic self-efficacy significantly influences English learning engagement ($\beta = 0.519, t = 6.306, P < 0.001$), and professional identity significantly impacts English learning engagement ($\beta = 0.361, t = 3.632, P < 0.001$). Upon inclusion of the mediating variable of English academic self-efficacy, professional identity can still significantly influence English learning engagement ($\beta = 0.438, t = 4.977, P < 0.001$), verifying the first hypothesis.

Meanwhile, as illustrated in Table 2, the indirect effect value of professional identity affecting English learning engagement via English academic self-efficacy is 0.438, with the Bootstrap confidence interval spanning from 0.266 to 0.616, which excludes zero. This indicates that the mediating effect is significant, contributing to 54.82% of the total effect observed. Consequently, it can be observed that English academic self-efficacy partially mediates between professional identity and English learning engagement, verifying the second hypothesis.

Table 2. Total effect, direct effect and indirect effect

	Effect	SE	<i>t</i>	LLCI	ULCI	Effect ratio
Total effect	0.799	0.078	10.299***	0.646	0.952	
Direct effect	0.361	0.099	3.632***	0.165	0.557	45.18%
Indirect effect	0.438	0.088	4.977***	0.266	0.616	54.82%

*** $P < 0.001$.

4. Research discussion

4.1. Influence of professional identity on English learning engagement

The research findings indicate that the professional identity of English majors from universities in ethnic minority regions can positively predict English learning engagement. This reveals that English majors' high proficiency in professional identity accompanies their high level of English learning engagement. The crucial discovery is consistent with the result of the previous study. Finn's participation-identification model confirms the significant influence of emotional identification on learning engagement. Although the model is depicted in a cyclical pattern that begins with early forms of student behavior (participation), leading over time to bonding with school (identification). Besides, it is advocated by the participation-identification model that the motivation of children's participation in school activities is primarily triggered by the encouragement derived from familial and academic environments. Nonetheless, unlike children, college students are inclined to engage in diverse learning activities on the condition of identification with the activities due to their elevated autonomy. Consequently, the higher the degree of identity students possess in their major, the more time and effort they are willing to dedicate to their major learning.

4.2. Mediating effect of English academic self-efficacy

The research findings revealed that English academic self-efficacy partially mediates English majors' professional identity and English learning engagement from the university in ethnic minority regions. In other words, the professional identity of English majors can directly impact their proficiency in English learning engagement, and it can also predict English learning engagement through the indirect effect of English academic self-efficacy, which aligns with the findings of previous studies.

Professional identity, the process of the individual internalizing the value of the studied major, is a form of consciousness formation and an integral component of one's self-image. Self-image pertains to one's cognition and evaluation of oneself and profoundly relates to self-efficacy. From the perspective of students, the more accepting they are of their studied major, the more willingly they strive to adapt to professional requirements, the easier it is to stimulate their learning confidence, and the stronger their academic self-efficacy becomes.

In accordance with Bandura's self-efficacy theory, students' expectations and judgments of their capabilities during the process of executing learning activities will affect their learning behavior (learning engagement or learning burnout) and academic achievement. To be specific, if learners perceive that they can complete English learning assignments during the process of English learning, they tend to immerse themselves in the subsequent English learning and invest enough time and energy to English learning. Therefore, a higher degree of self-efficacy will lead to higher learners' learning engagement.

4.3. Research significance and deficiency

This study investigates the influencing factors and mechanisms of English majors' English learning engagement at the university in ethnic minority regions, which helps provide a theoretical basis for boosting their engagement.

The results of this research indicate that there are notable disparities demonstrated in English majors' professional identity, English academic self-efficacy and English learning engagement from the university in ethnic minority regions in aspect of the manner of their major selection. The reason for this phenomenon is that students' comprehension and appreciation of the major will be elevated when they decide to choose an English major, along with an enhanced degree of professional identity and foreign English academic self-efficacy. Consequently, professional identity and English academic self-efficacy are proved to be two significant factors in amplifying the level of English learning engagement significantly. Therefore, schools, parents and students should pay sufficient attention to the issue of major selection. Then, students are encouraged to decide on their future major independently.

English majors serve as the principal part of English learning, with professional identity being a subjective experience. Consequently, it is imperative to enhance students' English learning engagement from the perspective of altering the perception and attitude of English majors. Firstly, addressing the professional identity predicament of English majors necessitates the collective cooperation of students, educators, and schools alike. Secondly, the mediating effect of English academic self-efficacy suggests that teachers should give full play of the role model in teaching, organize excellent students to share their successful learning experience and enhance their confidence in the belief that they can achieve certain learning objectives by adopting certain learning methods.

5. Conclusion

Nevertheless, there are some limitations that deserve further improvement. First of all, the research employs a cross-sectional design, incapable of generating causal conclusions. It is suggested that future researchers could incorporate experimental investigation to further validate the mechanism underpinning these effects. Secondly, the sample size of this study was inadequate; it solely focused on English majors drawn from one of the

universities in the ethnic minority regions. Thus, the amount of samples can be further expanded to enhance the generalization of the research findings in the future.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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