

Current Situation and Prospect of the Research on Chinese English Teachers' Professional Identity

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Abstract—The degree of English teachers' professional identity has a very important impact on their professional happiness, professional development prospect, teaching effects and so on. From the three aspects of research status, influencing factors and promotion strategies, this paper not only comprehensively reviewed the research achievements of Chinese English teachers' professional identity in recent years, but also pointed out the research limitations and proposed the future research direction in this field, so as to provide useful references for Chinese English teachers' professional identity research.

Keywords—English teacher; professional identity; research limitation and research prospect

I. INTRODUCTION

"American educator Varghese once pointed out that if we want to understand language teaching and learning, then we need to understand teachers first. In order to fully understand teachers, it is necessary to first understand teachers' perceived and external professional identity". [1] As everyone knows a good sense of professional identity can encourage teachers to constantly update more knowledge, improve and develop themselves, face their own work with a positive attitude, and solve all kinds of contradictions and pressures in work, so as to ensure high-quality teaching and high efficiency of students' learning. So "since the 1980s, teachers' professional identity has been concerned by education researchers as an independent research field" [2]. The research on English teachers' professional identity in China started relatively late, and few achievements have been made. According to incomplete statistics, the number of relevant research results is less than 100 papers. It is urgent to carry out some researches on the professional identity of Chinese English teachers, and a comprehensive review of the current research results on Chinese English teachers' professional identity can provide useful references for future research in this field.

II. DEFINITION OF TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The research on the connotation and dimension of teachers' professional identity has always been the focus in the academic circles at home and abroad. Up to now, there is no consistent research conclusion in this field. According to Beijaard (2000), "Teachers' professional identity means that teachers can accept the profession from bottom of their heart, appraise the profession from many aspects positively, and

are willing to engage in teacher career for a long period"[3]. Steely & Sherry. L (2005) pointed out "Teachers' professional identity involves the belief and practice of professional significance and individual's role in this profession" [4]. Then, for Chinese scholars, "Teachers' professional identity refers to both a process and a state; 'Process' means that teachers' professional identity is a process in which the individual gradually develops from his own experience and confirms his own role as a teacher; 'State' means that teachers' professional identity is the degree to which individual teachers identify themselves with the teaching profession" [5]. "Professional identity includes not only teachers' understanding of themselves, but also their relationship with others around them, the courses they teach and the social environment, including not only current professional identity, but also professional identity across time and space"[6]. Generally speaking, teachers' professional identity refers to the views on the goals, social values and other factors of the profession teachers are engaged in, which are consistent with the evaluation and expectation of the society on the profession. That is to say, teachers fully agree or approve of other people or groups' views and understandings about the profession-teaching.

III. RESEARCH STATUS

A. Research on the Status of English Teachers' Professional Identity

From the perspective of research objectives, the current research results on Chinese English teachers' professional identity mainly involve primary school English teachers, middle school English teachers, high school English teachers and college English teachers. In general, most research achievements are related to primary and middle school English teachers, there are very few research achievements about high school and college English teachers.

1) *Research achievements in primary school*: There are different conclusions about the status of professional identity of primary school English teachers. On the whole, most scholars believed that primary school English teachers have a high degree of professional recognition. Liang Wang (2016) took 32 English teachers in public primary schools and 33 teachers in private primary schools as research objectives and made a comparative study on the professional identity. The research results showed that "Both public and private

primary school English teachers have high professional identity and they all have the highest degree of recognition of professional behavior tendency and the lowest degree of recognition of professional will"[7]. Binyi Zhu (2016) studied the level of professional identity of beginning English teachers in rural areas, and the results showed that "The professional identity of the beginning English teachers is at a higher level" [8]. In 2017, Qingshan Ma took 26 English teachers from 17 primary schools in Mojiang County as the research objectives, and conducted the research from six aspects such as professional value identification. The results showed that: "Through the questionnaire, the researcher finds that the overall level of professional identity of primary school English teachers in Mojiang County is high, which means they largely identify with their occupation, believing that their profession can realize their value and holding a positive attitude toward their career. They are also confident with their teaching ability, and have a strong professional will to become an excellent English teacher in the life". [9] In 2019, Fuying Fu and Xiaoqian Zhou investigated the professional identity of 101 rural English teachers in Jiangxi province. The survey results showed that "Rural primary school English teachers have a high degree of professional identity. Among all the factors, vocational values score is the highest one and the vocational sense of belonging score is the lowest" [10]. Meanwhile, some scholars have come to different conclusions. For example, Xiu Li and Xiuyu Wang's research suggested that "The professional identity of rural primary school English teachers is at an average level. Among all the factors, rural primary school English teachers have the highest recognition of professional behavior and the lowest recognition of social reputation." [11] Taking 72 rural primary school English teachers in Henan province as research objectives, Jie Jin (2017) investigated their professional identity and analyzed the reasons. The results also showed that "The professional identity of English teachers in rural primary schools is at an average level, much lower than that of Chinese and mathematics teachers. The identification of professional behavior tendency and professional values is at a higher level". [12]

2) *Research achievements in middle school:* There are different conclusions about the status of professional identity of middle school English teachers. In general, most scholars believe that middle school English teachers have a high degree of professional recognition. For example, Yi Jiang (2015) studied the professional identity of 154 middle school English teachers in Jiangxi province and the results suggested that "At present, middle school English teachers have strong professional identity on the whole, and the degree of professional behavior inclination gets the highest score, and the degree of role values is the lowest" [13]. Hongxia Li (2016) studied the professional identity of 100 English teachers in 19 rural middle schools in Gansu province. The results also showed that "Middle school

English teachers in rural area have a strong consciousness about professional identity, but they have no sense of belonging for the teacher position" [14]. In 2018, Yan Jia conducted a research on 370 middle school English teachers in Inner Mongolia autonomous region, and the results suggested that "The overall level of novice and expert English teachers' professional identity in middle school is relatively high" [15]. Meanwhile, some scholars also have come to different conclusions. For example, Lili Wang (2016) conducted a comprehensive research on 66 middle school English teachers' professional identity by means of investigation and interview. The results suggested that "The overall level of middle school English teachers' professional identity is moderate. Professional behavior tendency has got top score and professional will is the lowest" [16]. Xiaomei Wan focused on the situation of professional identity of rural middle school English teachers in underdeveloped areas, and the results showed that "English teachers have low professional quality, serious job burnout, difficult professional development, low subjective well-being and career satisfaction" [17].

3) *Research achievements in high school:* There are relatively few research achievements on professional identity of high school English teachers. At present, only 3 literatures can be retrieved from the network. The research results of Xiu Li (2017) and Xiaoying Chang (2019) suggested that high school English teachers have a higher level of professional identity, but Yanmei Xie and Aijie Zhou (2016) believed that high school English teachers do not have a high degree of professional identity. Xiu Li (2017) conducted a survey on the professional identity of more than 60 English teachers in three high schools in Yan'an, and the results showed that "High school English teachers showed relatively high professional identity" [18]. Xiaoying Chang (2019) investigated the professional identity status of 113 English teachers in five county high schools in Ulanqab. "The results showed that county high school English teachers have a higher level of professional identity. In the dimensions of professional identity, personal identity and major identity, the order of mean values is: personal identity > professional identity > major identity > situated identity" [19]. Meanwhile, some scholars have come to different conclusions. For example, the research of Yanmei Xie and Aijie Zhou (2016) on 86 high school English teachers in 32 schools showed that "On the whole, high school English teachers have an average degree of professional identity" [20].

4) *Research achievements in college:* Relatively speaking, there are very few researches on the professional identity of college English teachers. Yanhua Yang (2011) believed college English teachers have a higher level of professional identity, but the researches of Huiping Shi (2016) and Xiaohua Zhang (2016) showed that college English teachers' professional identity is only at an above medium level. Yanhua Yang (2011) investigated the professional identity of 74 beginning English teachers in 12

universities in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and the results suggested that "At the entry period, most of the beginning English teachers in Guangxi possess high level of professional identity"[21]. A case study of 37 English teachers' professional identity in a university in Jiangsu province was conducted by Huiping Shi (2016), and the results suggested that "On the whole, the professional identity of college English teachers in this university is at an above medium level. Teachers have a high recognition degree of educational reform and professional behavior tendency; meanwhile, they have the lowest recognition degree of professional environment" [22]. "The overall sense of college English teachers' professional identity is above the medium level. Among the four dimensions, the sense of teachers' professional identity from high to low is: teaching reform, professional behavior, input for research and working conditions" [23].

From what has been discussed above, generally speaking, due to the differences in research tools, research methods, research objectives and research contents, the academic circles in China failed to form a general research conclusion on the current status of English teachers' professional identity. However, it is undeniable that to some extent scholars have revealed the general situation of English teachers' professional identity in China.

B. Research on the Influencing Factors of English Teachers' Professional Identity

The research on the factors influencing the professional identity of English teachers has been the focus of academic circles at home and abroad for a long time. Scholars put forward a variety of research hypotheses from different research perspectives. Although most scholars believed that many factors, such as gender, age, income, personality, working environment, educational background, teaching concept, professional title and social recognition, they all influence the level of English teachers' professional identity, a few scholars have different research conclusions.

Firstly, Shuoshuo Hu (2012) pointed out that "Gender, age, years of teaching, educational background, position, and income are all the factors affecting high school English teachers' professional identity" [24]. Both Juanjuan Chen (2014) and Lili Wang (2016) pointed out economic treatment, heavy teaching tasks and professional titles evaluations are all the influence factors. Juanjuan Chen (2014) pointed out the relevant factors that affect high school English teachers' professional identity from five aspects. "The economic treatment of Chinese English teachers in high school is not very good. There are heavy teaching tasks and much working pressure. It is hard to carry out the normal English teaching & research activities. The professional titles evaluation is relatively difficult. The evaluation from the society and the parents is not objective for Chinese high school English teachers". [25] In 2016, Lili Wang pointed out "The main factors that affect the professional identity of English teachers' in middle school are the economic treatment, heavy workload and teaching pressure, professional titles evaluation"[26]. Jie Jin (2017) focused on

the main reasons that affected rural primary school English teachers' professional identity level, and the results suggested that the main influencing factors are as follows from three aspects: "Social aspects: social environment in rural areas is special, low economic status of rural teachers and the subject status of English in rural primary school is lower. School: remote location and simple teaching environment. Personal: low professional quality and limited personal development". [27] Yuqun Zhou (2017) pointed out "According to the correlation analysis, we can see that the three factors have a positive correlation with teachers' professional identity. The sequence according to the effect of the professional identity is as follows: biography > social environment > teaching context" [28].

Secondly, some scholars have come to different conclusions about the influence factors. On the factor of professional titles, Shuoshuo Hu (2012) got a different research conclusion. "On the contrary, high school English teachers' professional identity on different professional titles has no significant differences". [29] That means for high school English teachers, professional titles is not a relevant factor affecting their professional identity. Xiu Li's research conclusions differ slightly from those of other researchers. "For professional identity, there is no significant difference in gender, age and school level, but there is significant difference in educational background and professional title" [30]. Qingshan Ma (2017) also got a different conclusion, from the research, he pointed out "Difference in teaching age, educational background, monthly income, teaching areas and the job nature does not usually lead to difference in the identification of professional value, professional emotion, professional ability, professional will, professional behavior tendency and professional social status"[31]. "There is no significant difference in professional identity among teachers with different gender, years of teaching, education background and monthly income level in county high schools. On the basis of the results of the questionnaire and interviews, the eight influencing factors are teaching objects, teacher-student relationship, parental cooperation, school environment, material security, professional level, teachers' ethics and social status" [32].

Finally, some scholars also put forward relevant factors affecting the professional identity of English teachers from a macro perspective. The research of Yanmei Xie and Aijie Zhou (2016) suggested that "The factors that have the greatest impact on teachers' career development are teachers' learning and development outlook, followed by career outlook, teaching ability and foreign language teaching outlook"[33]. Huiping Shi (2016) pointed out the positive and negative factors that affect the professional identity of English teachers. "The positive factors include the influence of key figures, harmonious and mutual colleague relations and working atmosphere, and good teacher-student relations; negative factors include unsatisfactory wage treatment, scientific research requirements and professional title evaluation standards with 'One size fits all'"[34]. Yan Jia (2018) recognized "The major elements that affect expert and novice English teachers' professional identity in high school roughly can be divided into three types: individual

characteristic factors, individual biographical factors, and teaching environmental factors" [35].

C. Research on Strategies to Improve English Teachers' Professional Identity

The research on the strategies of promoting professional identity of English teachers has received wide attention in academic circles. Generally speaking, scholars have put forward specific solutions from the perspectives of teachers, schools and society. Yi Jiang (2015) pointed out "The government should take more positive financial policy and build fair educational atmosphere, and township middle schools should build harmony working atmosphere and strengthen school construction." [36]. "We will improve the economic treatment of rural English teachers, and improve the status of primary school English. So schools should attach importance to supporting the work of English teachers, improve the school environment and teaching resources, strengthen English teacher education and do a good job in teacher training. For English teachers, not only improve one's own professional quality, but also learn to adjust oneself" [37]. Qingshan Ma (2017) put forward some suggestions on improving the professional identity of English teachers in primary schools. "Consolidate the professional status of English in primary school, improve the financial condition of primary school English teachers, pay attention to teachers' training and strengthen the teaching research" [38].

IV. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND RESEARCH PROSPECT

A. Research Limitations

Although some achievements have been made in the field of professional identity of Chinese English teachers, there are still some problems in the research. On the one hand, the vast majority of studies are limited by research conditions, and a large-scale survey has not been carried out. So, due to the small sample size, the universality of research conclusions remains to be studied. On the second hand, there are many factors that affect the professional identity of English teachers. So the scientific nature of the conclusions obtained from a single investigation of one or several influencing factors remains to be verified. Thirdly, relatively speaking, studies on the professional identity of high school English teachers, college English teachers and ethnic English teachers have been neglected. At last, most studies are limited to the analysis of questionnaire survey results, and then draw a variety of research conclusions, which did not consult the research objectives, therefore, we can say most of the research conclusions only partly revealed the current situation of Chinese English teachers' professional identity, and the research conclusions are not very accurate.

B. Research Prospect

Firstly, in view of the problems existing in the current research, such as too small sample size and too single research on influencing factors, it is necessary to consider a large-scale and large-sample investigation research in the future, and comprehensively examine a variety of influencing factors. Secondly, generally speaking, most of the research methods used by current researchers are

questionnaire survey. Although this research method has certain research advantages, it also has certain disadvantages, and cannot obtain relevant information in a deeper level. Therefore, the future research should be as comprehensive as possible to use a variety of research methods, and pay attention to making the research objectives fully involved in the research. Thirdly, at present, most of the researches on the professional identity of English teachers are about English teachers in primary and middle schools, there is little research on high school English teachers, college English teachers and minority English teachers. So the research on the professional identity of high school English teachers, college English teachers and ethnic minority English teachers needs to be strengthened. Finally, in view of the deficiencies in the current researches on dimensions construction of English teachers' professional identity, the structure of English teachers' professional identity is in urgent need of being further studied, aiming to construct a scientific English teachers' professional identity structure system with rich contents and a complete structure.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper made a comprehensive review of a series of research achievements in the research field of English teachers' professional identity in China from three aspects: research status, influencing factors and promotion strategies. Then, it also pointed out the research limitations in this research field from three aspects, such as research objectives, research contents and research methods, and finally made a simple prediction of the future research direction in this field, which can provide useful references for the relevant research on the professional identity of Chinese English teachers.

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