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Constructing Professional Identity: Insights from Pre-service English Teachers in Costa Rica

Construcción de la identidad profesional: Perspectivas de estudiantes de Enseñanza del Inglés en Costa Rica

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Abstract: *This article examines the construction of professional identity among pre-service English teachers at the University of Costa Rica, in the context of the long-standing socioeconomic importance of English in the country. English language proficiency is closely linked to employment opportunities, social mobility, and national development strategies; however, those who teach English often face low status and limited career recognition. While English proficiency carries broad employability value across sectors, this research focuses on teacher formation, better practice-linked preparation and transparent competences are the mechanisms most likely to translate that value into recognition for English teaching as skilled professional work. The study aims to explore how future teachers perceive the profession, what motivates them to pursue this path, and how current labour market conditions influence their outlook and identity formation. Using a qualitative, constructivist approach, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted in February and March 2025 with students enrolled in the English teaching programme. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and represented a range of academic and personal backgrounds. The data were analysed thematically, producing seven main themes related to motivation, career outlook, public perception, institutional experience, and professional ideals. Findings reveal that participants view teaching as both a meaningful vocation and a pragmatic choice, shaped by concerns over job stability, emotional exhaustion, and the undervaluing of the profession. While English is seen as a valuable skill, the act of teaching it is not equally respected. Participants expressed a preference for well-prepared local teachers over native speakers without training and identified gaps in their own preparation, especially in inclusive education and mental health awareness. The article concludes with recommendations for more holistic and context-aware teacher education policies that can enhance retention, wellbeing, and public recognition of English teachers.*

Key words: *professional training, second language instruction, identity, perception*

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Resumen: *Este artículo analiza la construcción de la identidad profesional según el estudiantado de la carrera de Enseñanza del Inglés de la Sede Rodrigo Facio de la Universidad de Costa Rica, en el contexto de la importancia socioeconómica de este idioma en el país. El dominio del inglés se asocia estrechamente con la empleabilidad, la movilidad social y las estrategias nacionales de desarrollo; sin embargo, las personas que se dedican a su enseñanza enfrentan un estatus bajo y un reconocimiento profesional limitado. Si bien el dominio del inglés conlleva un amplio valor para la empleabilidad en todos los sectores, esta investigación se centra en la formación docente; una mejor preparación vinculada a la práctica y competencias transparentes son los mecanismos con mayor probabilidad de traducir ese valor en el reconocimiento de la enseñanza del inglés como un trabajo profesional valorado. El estudio tiene como objetivo explorar cómo el estudiantado percibe la profesión, qué le motiva a seguir este camino y cómo las condiciones actuales del mercado laboral influyen en su identidad profesional. Mediante un enfoque cualitativo constructivista, durante los meses de febrero y marzo de 2025, se les realizaron diez entrevistas semiestructuradas a personas estudiantes activas del programa de Enseñanza del Inglés. Las personas participantes fueron seleccionadas a través de un muestreo intencional que representó diversos contextos académicos y personales. Los datos se analizaron por tema, y se identificaron siete categorías relacionadas con la motivación, la proyección profesional, la percepción social, la experiencia institucional y los ideales docentes. Los resultados muestran que el estudiantado percibe la docencia como una vocación significativa, pero también como una elección pragmática, condicionada por la inestabilidad laboral, el agotamiento emocional y la falta de valoración social. Si bien el inglés es considerado como una herramienta valiosa, su enseñanza no goza del mismo prestigio. Las personas entrevistadas expresaron su preferencia por docentes nacionales con formación pedagógica y señalaron vacíos en su propia preparación, especialmente en educación inclusiva y salud mental. El artículo concluye con recomendaciones para fortalecer la formación docente mediante políticas más integrales y contextualizadas que favorezcan la permanencia, el bienestar y el reconocimiento social del profesorado de inglés.*

Palabras clave*: formación profesional, enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, identidad, percepción*

1. Introduction

English has established itself as the global lingua franca, serving as a critical tool for international communication, commerce, and cultural exchange (Crystal, 2013). As globalization intensifies, the ability to communicate in English is increasingly recognized as a key driver of economic development and social mobility, especially in non-English-speaking countries (Graddol, 2008).

Costa Rica's current context further amplifies the relevance of English language education. The country maintains deep economic and political ties with the United States, its principal trade partner, accounting for nearly half of Costa Rican exports and a substantial share of foreign direct investment (U.S. Department of State, 2024). English proficiency serves as a bridge to employment in high-value sectors, and language skills are encouraged to be strengthened from a young age (OECD, 2023). Various stakeholders, including students, teachers, and employers, recognize English proficiency as essential, with most agreeing that an advanced level is required for economic engagement. However, despite recent curricular advancements, parents and employers express concerns about the effectiveness of current approaches (Brand Fonseca and Segura Arias, 2022), and the holistic approach to education is challenged.

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Thus, teaching English in Costa Rica is a profession of growing significance. English teachers are central to national efforts to enhance linguistic competence and, by extension, economic competitiveness. The rise in demand for qualified English teachers reflects not only educational policy priorities but also the broader socioeconomic context of the country (Solano Campos, 2012).

The research aims to examine identity-in-formation among pre-service English teachers rather than fully consolidated professional identities. Following language-teacher-identity scholarship, this study defines professional identity as a dynamic, socially situated, and relational construct that is discursively negotiated across personal aspirations, institutional norms, and wider sociopolitical valuations. In this cohort, identity is prospective and performed in talk, through motivations, status attributions, perceived affordances and constraints, rather than is viewed as a finished professional self.

This article's objective is to situate English teaching within the current landscape of Costa Rica, acknowledging the responsibilities and societal expectations often associated with the profession, and at the same time to see how they coexist with the current capacity of the educational system. This research aims to explore the professional identity of pre-service English teachers in Costa Rica by examining how the teaching profession is perceived within society, what motivates students to pursue this career path, and how current labour market conditions shape their expectations and experiences. By focusing on the perspectives of students enrolled in an English teaching programme, the study seeks to shed light on how they navigate the intersection of personal aspiration, social perception, and institutional realities. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence professional identity formation among future educators in the field of English language teaching. In particular, the study contributes in three ways: first, it centers identity-in-formation among pre-service English teachers in Costa Rica - an under-examined population in the national context; second, it shows how work and status considerations become part of students' identity narratives; and third, it identifies areas of professional preparation that participants themselves describe as consequential for their emerging professional selves. These contributions are developed in the findings and discussion.

To emphasize from the beginning, this research examines identity-in-formation among pre-service English teachers rather than fully consolidated professional identities. Consistent with language-teacher-identity scholarship, it defines professional identity as a dynamic,

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socially situated, and relational construct negotiated through personal aspirations, institutional norms, and wider sociopolitical valuations (Barkhuizen, 2017; Varghese et al., 2005).

The following sections describe the literature review including brief history of English teaching in Costa Rica, current socio-economic context and demands of the labour market for this profession (section 2), chosen methodological framework for this study and its implementation with subsequent data collection process (section 3), data analysis according to seven emerged themes and discussion (section 4), conclusions (section 5), and limitations of the study (section 6).

2. Literature review

This section reviews existing research on the professional identity and social perception of teachers, with a focus on English language teaching in Costa Rica. It examines key themes such as teacher motivation, the status of teaching as a career, the role of English as a tool for socioeconomic mobility and known challenges in teacher education. The review also situates the study within broader discussions about pedagogical training, public attitudes, and the influence of global language ideologies, providing a conceptual foundation for the research.

2.1 English teaching in Costa Rica: brief historical perspective

English education in Costa Rica has evolved alongside the country's economic and political transformations, adapting to shifting national priorities and global influences. English instruction was institutionalized as early as 1825, reflecting Costa Rica's early trade relationships with English-speaking nations. By the late 19th century, English was formally integrated into the secondary education curricula, initially delivered by foreign instructors. The first formal English teacher training program was established at the University of Costa Rica (UCR) in 1954, followed by a structured teaching program in 1957 to further professionalize language instruction (Solano Campos, 2012).

The 1990s marked a turning point for English education in Costa Rica due to the expansion of multinational companies and the tourism industry. Mendoza (2014) notes that during this period, the Costa Rican government actively promoted learning English as part of its economic strategy to attract foreign direct investment. The growing demand for bilingual professionals, particularly in technology and service sectors, shaped curriculum reforms in both public and private universities. While these economic developments reinforced the role of English teachers as key actors in workforce preparation, they also influenced societal attitudes

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toward the profession. Specifically, English teachers came to be seen less as educators contributing to a holistic educational system and more as facilitators of economic mobility, raising concerns about whether their value was primarily tied to labor market needs rather than broader pedagogical contributions. This has partly shaped the dominant preference for native English-speaking teachers from abroad, leading to feelings of inadequacy among non-native English-speaking educators and impacting their professional identity (Vega Quesada, 2022).

By 2010, the government officially declared English learning a national priority, reinforcing its role in Costa Rica's socio-economic development (Solano Campos, 2012). This policy shift aimed to expand English accessibility nationwide, particularly in public schools. Later, the 'Educating for a New Citizenship' initiative, launched in 2016, marked another significant shift towards competency-based learning. This curriculum reform, led by the Ministerio de Educación Pública (MEP) (2016), emphasized not only linguistic proficiency but also global and digital citizenship skills, aiming to equip students for multilingual and technologically interconnected environments while maintaining a strong local cultural identity. In 2017, the Ministry of Public Education introduced the Action-Oriented Approach (AOA) in the English curriculum, focusing on practical language use in real-life contexts to enhance communicative competence (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2017). Additionally, the Alliance for Bilingualism (ABi) was established in 2018 to further promote English proficiency among the population (CINDE, 2018).

As a result of these efforts, Costa Rica has consistently ranked among the top Latin American countries in English proficiency. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EPI) 2024, Costa Rica is trailing only Argentina, Honduras and Uruguay (EF, 2024). However, despite this relatively high ranking, Costa Rica remains within the 'moderate proficiency' category, indicating persistent gaps in national English education and areas for further development.

2.2 Current position of English teachers in Costa Rica

In Costa Rica, English language proficiency is strongly associated with economic mobility, particularly in sectors such as tourism, customer service, and corporate work. Students majoring in English are mostly considering career pathways related to education, communications and hospitality (Sánchez and López, 2022). Motivation to learn English in Costa Rica relates to the fact that it would be useful and meaningful for the current environment and relevant stakeholders (e.g. employers, parents, and eventually learners themselves)

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(Brand Fonseca and Segura Arias, 2022). This growing demand for English proficiency raises a critical question: where does it place English teachers within this dynamic?

Literature identifies a few strong trends when it comes to the English teaching profession. Firstly, the Costa Rican context might be following a worldwide trend of prioritizing native speakers teachers over non-native teachers in the hiring processes, since they are believed to possess greater knowledge and have better teaching and learning approaches (Vargas Zúñiga and Barrantes León, 2021). Secondly, a common pattern in Costa Rica is to place all responsibility for students' poor language acquisition on teachers' lack of preparation and insufficient pedagogical skills (Morales, 2017). While this approach disregards the variety of factors affecting the learners' success, it is still popular due to word of mouth and other types of informal communication.

Thirdly, an event that had a massive influence on the image of teachers (not only limited to English teachers) is the longest public-sector strike in Costa Rica in 2018. Lasting 93 days from September 10 to December 11 and initiated by major education unions, including the National Association of Educators (ANDE), the Costa Rican Education Workers Union (SEC), and the Association of Secondary School Teachers (APSE), the strike opposed the government's proposed fiscal reform, which aimed to introduce a value-added tax and limit public-sector benefits. The protest significantly disrupted public services, notably closing schools nationwide and affecting over a million students. The Ministry of Education reported 93% of teachers' participation in the strike at the beginning: a figure that later dropped to 70% in October and ended with 51.8%, which still kept most schools closed (Lobo, 2018). The process was followed by legal challenges, with the court initially declaring the strike illegal; however, an appeals court later annulled this ruling, citing insufficient evidence on the fact that the protests were not peaceful. Despite widespread public support, the strike concluded without achieving its goals, yet created heated discussions in public spaces and on social media regarding workers' rights, particularly in the educational sector, that are still echoing today (Zúñiga, 2018).

Although English language educators play a crucial role in the country's economic and educational landscape, research indicates that their public perception is rather controversial and is shaped by multiple variables, including teachers' right to strike, linguistic hierarchies, educational policies, and labor market long-standing patterns (Vargas Zúñiga and Barrantes León, 2021).

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2.2.1 Labour market in Costa Rica

Studies on the labour market in Costa Rica after the Covid-19 pandemic consider its consequences and display a rather pessimistic actuality. The situation seems to be rather difficult for practically everyone who is seeking employment (Murillo, 2020).

While job opportunities are relatively accessible for English teachers, with an average job placement time of seven months, they face a complex labor market. With 71.2% employed in the private sector, and only 28.8% in public institutions, most English teachers work outside the stability of government-funded positions (CONARE, 2022). The profession is largely dominated by women (73%), and the vast majority (84.2%) are salaried employees rather than independent workers. Salaries average ₡657,293.68 (approximately 1000 USD according to 2022 average conversion rate) per month, though disparities likely exist between sectors (CONARE, 2022).

Professional development remains an important factor for career mobility, with 68.8% of English teachers pursuing further certifications or degrees after entering the workforce (CONARE, 2022). Licenciatura is a common practice for further professionalisation in the Latin American higher education system, even though characteristics of this degree might vary depending on the national context. For instance in Chile and Mexico, it is equivalent to a Bachelor degree programme (Berrios, 2014; Sayer, 2007) and in Colombia, it is a specific bachelor degree for teacher training (Dussán, 2025). In Brazil, licenciatura is a teacher training course (Kussuda and Nardi, 2015). In Costa Rica, the higher education system distinguishes between the *Bachillerato Universitario* and the *Licenciatura*. Students first complete a *Bachillerato*, which generally spans four years and provides a broad academic foundation. Subsequently, they may pursue a *Licenciatura*, which typically requires an additional year of study and the completion of a thesis or graduation project. This structure ensures that graduates possess both depth and specialization in their chosen fields (CONARE, 2023). At the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR), the nation's largest and most prestigious public university, the *Licenciatura* is integral to various academic disciplines. UCR offers both *Bachillerato* and *Licenciatura* programs across multiple faculties, including the Faculty of Education, which provides advanced training for future educators. The *Licenciatura* programs at UCR emphasize research competencies and pedagogical skills, preparing graduates for professional practice and further academic endeavors. Yet, after 2023 and up to the present moment of this research (first half of 2025), no Licenciatura degree opportunity for English teaching was offered for diverse reasons including lack of funding (UCR, 2021).

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However, even with academic qualifications such as the *Licenciatura*, opportunities for teachers' professional development within the Costa Rican education system remain limited. There is a lack of structured pathways for teachers to advance beyond classroom instruction, with most promotions leading to administrative rather than pedagogical roles (Maravalle and González Pandiella, 2023). Further advancement opportunities are scarce, with 72.1% of teachers working in subordinate positions, while only a small percentage (16.5%) hold mid-management roles and just 2.9% reach senior leadership positions. Hiring is largely dependent on professional networks (54.1%), highlighting the importance of connections in securing employment (CONARE, 2022). Regarding the financial aspects, many finance their university education through a mix of personal earnings (47.9%), family support (52.7%), and scholarships (83.6%) (CONARE, 2022).

Assessments by the Ministry of Public Education show that public university graduates outperform those from private institutions in English and math. However, around 70% of education graduates of the years 2014–2020 come from private universities, many of which lack teaching practice opportunities (Maravalle and González Pandiella, 2023). Requiring teaching practice for teacher eligibility or degree accreditation could encourage universities to incorporate it more widely. Costa Rica struggles to align the number of education graduates with the system's needs, leading to shortages in preschool, special education, and primary-level English (Maravalle and González Pandiella, 2023). Since teacher training is specialized by education level and subject, only graduates with the corresponding qualifications can compete for specific positions.

Despite its benefits, in-service training remains underutilized in Costa Rica (García-Castro and Arias, 2023). A 2015 survey demonstrated that only 40% of teachers received professional training in the past year, and between 2019 and 2021 80% have participated in similar training, which is below the 94% average in OECD countries. Additionally, post-training in-class support is weak, covering only 30% of trainings, and the dissemination of training benefits to other teachers is limited (Maravalle and González Pandiella, 2023). These structural limitations might limit career experience of both in-service and pre-service teachers.

2.2.2 English nativism

A long-standing issue in English language teaching is the societal preference for native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) over non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). Many students, parents, and even hiring institutions assume that a teacher's linguistic

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background is more important than their pedagogical training, despite research showing that non-native teachers often have a deeper understanding of language learning processes (Ortiz-Gómez, 2023). This bias could create challenges for Costa Rican English teachers: from the early 20th century onwards, in order to address English teacher shortages, the Costa Rican government recruited teachers from the United States - many without formal credentials - offering high salaries, first-class flights, living expenses, and reduced work schedules unavailable to local educators. In the first few decades of the 20th century, foreign teachers were the dominant majority in the English education field (Marín Arroyo, 2012). While native speakers may bring linguistic authenticity, local teachers are often better equipped to address common learner difficulties, as they have firsthand experience overcoming them. Pedagogy includes the ability to read and understand curriculum, adapt materials and facilitate, even for approaches like AOA, where language learning is not a teacher-centered process (Vargas Solís et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the assumption that native speakers are inherently better instructors could contribute to self-doubt and professional insecurity among Costa Rican teachers (Vega Quesada, 2022).

Concluding the position of English teachers in Costa Rica, it is worth noting that while they report a job satisfaction score of 4.16 out of 5 (CONARE, 2022), indicating a generally positive outlook, the profession is shaped by expectations beyond the classroom. Many educators find their roles evaluated not only by linguistic proficiency but also by broader competencies such as ethical commitment, clarity in communication and public speaking skills (CONARE, 2022). Despite these strengths, career progression remains a challenge, and long-term professional stability requires continued investment in skills and qualifications.

2.3 Theoretical lens: Language Teacher Identity (LTI)

This study is framed within Language Teacher Identity research, which conceptualizes identity as dynamic, socially negotiated, and context-embedded across interacting micro, meso, and macro levels of activity (Barkhuizen, 2017; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005). Rather than a fixed attribute, identity is treated as an ongoing accomplishment, shaped by interactional positioning in talk and practice, by institutional roles and cultures, and by wider ideological, political and economical conditions. This orientation is congruent with pre-service focus: for student teachers, identity is prospective (concerned with the ‘not-yet’ teacher) and performed in discourse as students narrate motivations, evaluate legitimacy, and imagine near-future participation in teaching communities.

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At the micro level, identity is being understood as produced through positioning and narrative: how speakers claim, attribute, accept, or resist roles and stances in situated interaction (Barkhuizen, 2017; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Gee, 2000). At the meso level, identities are mediated by participation in communities of practice and by the rules, routines, and affordances of programmes, schools, and hiring institutions (Barkhuizen, 2017; Wenger, 1998). This includes how curricula, practicum opportunities, evaluation norms, and institutional narratives enable or constrain movement toward fuller participation. At the macro level, LTI research highlights how language ideologies, status regimes, and the political economy of English shape who counts as a legitimate teacher and under what conditions (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005).

Taken together, this lens guides both what this study attends to: identity as in-the-making for pre-service teachers; identity work visible in discourse (narratives of motivation, legitimacy, aspiration); and identity structured by multi-level ecologies (interactional, institutional, societal).

2.3.1 English-teacher identity in Costa Rica

Research on English-teacher identity in Costa Rica shows how sociopolitical histories, curriculum reforms, and language ideologies shape teachers' positioning, recognition, and work conditions.

Edited work by Barrantes-Elizondo and Olivares-Garita (2023) consolidates national debates on status, legitimacy, and professional knowledge, tracing how the political economy of English produces uneven value for pedagogical work across sectors and regions. Solano-Campos (2012, 2014) addresses critical, raciolinguistic, and transnational dimensions of English education, documenting how ideologies of standardness/nativeness and global mobility discourses shape who is recognized as a legitimate teacher. Fallas-Escobar and Pentón Herrera (2022) add an explicitly raciolinguistic lens, showing how institutional practices (e.g., hiring, evaluation) can reproduce inequities in recognition and opportunity. Vega Quesada (2022) details identity tensions and negotiations among English teachers, highlighting how teachers navigate multiple accountabilities (institutional, curricular, societal) while reconciling professional ideals with labour-market constraints.

Taken together, Costa Rican studies on teacher identity highlights a field marked by contested recognition, sectoral stratification and the persistent pull of nativeness and market logic in English education. What remains less developed in this literature is an upstream view of how these dynamics are taken up by pre-service teachers: that is, how recognition regimes and expectations of linguistic and pedagogical capital are narrated and negotiated before

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labour-market entry, within programme affordances and constraints (Bourdieu, 1986; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Norton, 2013). Addressing this gap can illuminate where early interventions (e.g., curriculum, practicum design, advising) might productively shift identity trajectories toward competence-based legitimacy rather than nativeness-based criteria, thereby complementing existing in-service accounts with a grounded picture of identity-in-formation in the Costa Rican context.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework used in the study, including the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and analytical approach. It explains how semi-structured interviews with pre-service English teachers in Costa Rica were conducted and analyzed through thematic coding. The section also describes the sampling strategy and ethical considerations that guided the research process, providing transparency and context for how the data were generated and interpreted.

3.1 Methodological framework

Research took a social constructivist stance and employed a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) design to develop an analytic account of identity-in-formation among pre-service English teachers. CGT is suitable for exploring how participants make meaning through interaction and discourse while acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role (Charmaz, 2006, 2017; Glaser and Strauss, 1999). The objective is to generate data-grounded conceptual categories rather than to test pre-specified hypotheses. This study is grounded in a constructivist research paradigm, emphasizing that knowledge is being constructed through individuals' experiences, interactions, and interpretations of their social environments (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The methodological framework as well drew on broadly shared qualitative practices discussed in reflexive thematic analysis and coding-related literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019; Miles et al., 2014), while the design and aims remained grounded-theoretical.

Social constructivism is particularly relevant for this research, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how English teachers in Costa Rica make sense of their professional identities, while surrounded by various societal perceptions of such a career path. Rather than assuming an objective reality, this approach recognizes that teachers construct their own professional meanings based on personal experiences, institutional structures, and interactions with students, colleagues, and broader societal expectations (Schwandt, 2000).

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3.1.1 Research Questions and Aims

This research aims to explore the professional identity of pre-service English teachers in Costa Rica by examining how the profession is perceived through their eyes: what drives individuals to pursue it, and how current labour market conditions shape the experiences. The study's research questions are the following:

1) How is the profession of English teaching perceived by pre-service English teachers in Costa Rica?
2) How do pre-service English teachers envision their future role and status as English teachers?
3) How do pre-service English teachers perceive the employment opportunities and challenges in the English teaching profession in Costa Rica?

By investigating these questions, the study seeks to understand the intersection of personal motivations and structural realities in the formation of teacher identity. Ultimately, it contributes to a broader understanding of how English teaching as a profession is positioned within the national context, and how pre-service teachers navigate this space in shaping their own professional trajectories.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the perceptions and experiences of English teaching students in Costa Rica.

An opportunity to participate was offered to current and former students enrolled in the English teaching programme of the University of Costa Rica. An invitation to current students was made in-person during one of their classes by researchers themselves; alumni were contacted via emails. Overall, the invitation was extended to about 40 people. The only strict criteria for sampling was studying or having studied in the English teaching programme of the University of Costa Rica. It could have been the main or only degree or one of several pursued programmes. No criteria were made for having relevant work experience or certain types of career aspirations to avoid imposing a priori assumptions or engineering a balance of viewpoints. By extending an open invitation and interviewing those who consented to participate, the study aimed to capture the naturally occurring variation in students' motivations, perceptions, and aspirations as they are lived and articulated, while acknowledging the inherent self-selection of volunteers. No remuneration for participation was offered.

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The final sample consisted of ten participants (6 female, 4 male): one interview was used for piloting, and nine for further data collection. The sample included individuals from both urban (n= 7) and rural (n= 3) backgrounds, providing a degree of diversity in socioeconomic and educational experiences. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 26 years old. English proficiency was self-assessed using programme benchmarks and ranged from B2 to C1. At the time of the interview, none of the participants were working as graduated English teachers.

Participants were recruited based on their willingness to share their academic and professional experiences, motivations for entering the teaching profession, and perceptions of societal attitudes toward English teachers - a brief description of the study was mentioned once during the recruitment process and for a second time before each interview. Everyone who was interested in contributing to the study was interviewed.

The chosen sample size was appropriate for the study's qualitative, thematic analysis design, prioritizing depth of insights. Practical constraints of the cohort limited formal theoretical sampling; analysis therefore emphasized constant comparison across available cases. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time, were fully observed during the recruitment and data collection processes. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, either in-person or online, and were scheduled at participants' convenience.

This transparent approach to sampling and reporting is consistent with the study's exploratory aims and supports the transferability of insights to similar pre-service cohorts.

3.3 Data collection and Instruments

Given its constructivist foundation, this study relies on semi-structured interviews to capture the personal and professional narratives of pre-service English teachers. This method allows for flexibility, giving participants space to share their perspectives in-depth while also allowing the researcher to adapt questions based on emerging themes (Ruslin et al., 2022).

The interview protocol included open-ended questions covering areas such as motivations for choosing English teaching, career expectations, perceptions of societal attitudes, institutional experiences, and professional identity. This flexible format allowed participants to reflect on their experiences in their own words while ensuring consistency across interviews. A full plan of semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

All interviews were conducted either in person or online, depending on participant availability and accessibility of offered methods. The main language for the interviews was

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English, yet participants were encouraged to use words in Spanish or abbreviations for certain concepts that do not have direct translation, such as Licenciatura or MEP (Ministerio de Educación Pública). With the participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any point, either during or after the interview, without needing to provide a reason. Additionally, they were informed that their identities would remain confidential, and that any identifying information would be anonymized in transcripts and published results.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained. Participants filled in an informed consent before participating in the study. The researcher also took care to ensure that the interview environment - whether virtual or physical - was respectful, non-judgmental, and conducive to open dialogue.

3.4 Data analysis

The analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with pre-service English teaching in Costa Rica revealed a complex narrative of personal motivations, career uncertainties, institutional experiences, and perceptions of societal attitudes.

Analysis followed CGT procedures: (1) initial line-by-line coding to stay close to the data; (2) focused coding to select and elaborate the most analytic codes; (3) constant comparison across interviews and within emergent categories; and (4) iterative memo-writing to trace analytic decisions and category development. Through successive rounds of comparison and memoing, categories were integrated into a provisional explanatory account of how participants negotiate professional identity amid social valuation and labour-market considerations. Because the sample size was small and the study period was limited, full theoretical sampling was not feasible. Instead, the study aimed for theoretical sufficiency: categories explained the data well, and additional interviews were unlikely to add important new features. Outlier cases were kept in the analysis to sharpen category boundaries and reduce bias.

The seven analytical categories: motivation, career, family and friends support, societal attitude, English as a skill, private/public institutions, and characteristics of an English teacher in Costa Rica provided the basis for further thematic exploration. The categories presented in Table 1 reflect the final set after focused coding, comparison, and memo integration.

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Table 1
Analytical Categories Used in Thematic Analysis.

Category	Description
Motivation	Participants' personal, academic, or economic reasons for entering the English teaching programme, including how these motivations were articulated and prioritized.
Career	Participants' expectations, opinions, and strategies regarding their professional trajectory, including perceptions of job stability, advancement, and work conditions.
Family/Friends Support	The influence of close social networks - family, friends, mentors - on participants' decision to become teachers, including support, resistance, or ambivalence.
Societal Attitudes	Participants' perceptions of how English teachers are viewed by broader society, including assumptions about status, prestige, and desirability of the profession.
English as a Skill	Framing English not only as a subject to be taught but as a form of linguistic capital, examining how its perceived utility and symbolic value shape career outlooks.
Private/Public Institutions	Participants' conceptualization of differences between teaching in private versus public institutions, including assumptions about resources, freedom, and job quality.
Characteristics of an English Teacher	Participants' ideals about what makes a competent English teacher, inside and outside of the classroom

Source: Own elaboration with participants' data (10 interviews), 2025.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents a detailed interpretation of each theme with illustrative quotes to anchor the analysis in the participants' own words. The section ends with a general discussion.

4.1 Motivation

Participants mentioned various motivations for entering the field of English teaching. For most of the respondents, the decision was rooted in a deep-seated desire to help others and share knowledge. As one person reflected, "I always wanted to become a teacher. I like sharing my knowledge with others and helping others". This intrinsic motivation was often reinforced by positive educational experiences, such as mentoring from former teachers or enjoyment of the English language as a subject.

In contrast, several participants described entering teaching as a fallback after failing to gain admission to other programs. "It was my only option; English was the easiest one for me," one student explained. Another recounted how after several attempts to be admitted for engineering major, they started looking for something else: "So I started seeing what I could study because I did not want to spend another year in my house doing nothing".

Generally, it was possible to observe a dominant pattern of participants studying English

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teaching as their second or even third major, or combining several majors at the same time. For some, studying English teaching was a way of securing their future, since they did not regard their main majors as something that can ensure financial stability. For instance, as one participant shared, “And I entered to Philosophy and I was like, damn, I need a second career” or another one emphasised “I always said to myself that if I want to become a musician, I should study something else just to have something to back me up in time of need”.

These pragmatic entries into teaching showcase the influence of systemic constraints and the positioning of teaching as an accessible yet undervalued career path; however, for many, teaching is a calling they followed *(*“I'll always be a teacher at heart, even if I'm no longer practicing. In 20 years, 30 years, maybe I will no longer be in the classrooms, but I will have something to do with teaching, even from the administrative part”), even if it took some time to understand that. One participant shared that it was difficult to understand whether they like teaching, since the first years of the programme were organized remotely due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions.

4.2. Career

Career-related reflections were marked by recognition of teaching as a challenging and often precarious professional path. Across interviews, participants repeatedly articulated a sense of uncertainty about their long-term career trajectory, especially in relation to the viability of teaching as a lifelong profession. Many participants did not envision themselves teaching forever, and even those who clearly enjoyed teaching, framed their engagement as temporary or transitional.

One participant, when asked about their plans for the upcoming 5 years, said *“*Well, professionally, I have no idea... I just hope to have a job, and somewhere where I can live alone, by myself. I don't know if teaching will give me that”. This reflects a wider theme of career survival rather than advancement, where the goal is not necessarily upward mobility, but simply to secure stable employment in a difficult economic environment. It is worth noting down that many of the respondents are working alongside their studies. A few are working as English tutors, and some - in other fields unrelated to teaching, however, most of them indicated that such a choice is generally driven by financial necessity: “I need the money because I need to survive” or “I have a scholarship, but that sometimes is not enough, sadly. So I have to work”. Participants indicated they find it difficult to combine studies and work, and often opt for job opportunities that are part-time, remote or occur on the weekends or during school holidays; a

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few confessed that such total workload has been negatively affecting their mental health. One participant mentioned how in their workplace they started feeling as if “My teaching stresses me out... It gives me so much anxiety.” It points to the emotional cost of working while studying.

Those respondents who are teaching while studying (for instance, online, in private institutions, in public libraries) regard it as an opportunity to gain more experience in the profession, however the rest hesitate to start any kind of teaching jobs without finishing the degree first. In several cases, students viewed teaching as a step toward other goals, such as postgraduate education or alternative employment. One explained, “I have been thinking about looking for a job that only requires English for a while to pay for a licenciatura, because we don't have a licenciatura [at UCR]. And I would like to maybe start working, then pay and get my licenciatura at a private university”. This logic illustrates how students use teaching as a way to access further academic or professional development, despite the constraints they face within the system itself.

Despite these struggles, some participants displayed a cautious optimism about future teaching roles. A few students spoke positively about teaching practicum experiences, describing moments when they felt connected to their students or proud of a successful lesson. Many mentioned the Ministry of Public Education when talking about further career plans. Several identified MEP as the most desirable employer in terms of benefits, job security, and prestige. However, they also acknowledged the competitive and bureaucratic nature of gaining access to public sector positions.

In sum, the career theme revealed how participants are navigating a career path that is emotionally demanding, socially undervalued, and economically unstable - yet many continue to move forward, motivated by a sense of purpose.

4.3. Family and Friends support

Participants’ experiences with support from family and friends revealed a mix of pride, doubt, and evolving recognition. For many, family support was rooted less in the specific choice to pursue English teaching and more in the broader achievement of attending university - especially for first-generation students or those from rural backgrounds. One student shared, “My family was really happy [that I was admitted to university]... regardless of what I would study”. This response reflects how access to higher education itself can carry symbolic weight and familial pride, regardless of the specific career path chosen.

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However, for others, the choice to become a teacher sparked initial skepticism or concern, often framed around the profession's perceived lack of prestige or economic security. One participant recalled, "My family thought it was the craziest thing ever", when he switched from a more traditionally prestigious field to teaching. Similar reactions were often received from friends' circles, yet they were less radical and tended to fade away quicker. These reactions often mirror broader societal discourses that position teaching as a fallback or less ambitious option that people may internalize even as they support their family members or friends emotionally.

In some cases, teachers themselves played a formative role, serving as sources of early encouragement. A participant mentioned, "One of my best friends in high school was the English teacher… She encouraged me to study". At the same time, there were examples when those of teaching background tried to convince future students to choose a different path. One participant mentioned how members of the family who are teachers themselves reacted by fighting with him and saying "You are going to go crazy, you are going to hate it, you are going to hate your life". Another described an interaction with the aunt, the special education teacher who "was a little bit more on the confrontative side of the reactions, because she told me that teaching is definitely not a cakewalk".

Over time, many participants observed a shift in attitudes. Initial doubts from friends or family often gave way to acceptance, especially as students progressed in their programs or began working: "They [family] made their peace with my decision' or 'They accepted that if I am happy, they are happy too".

To sum up, support from family and friends was not uniform or guaranteed. It frequently depended on the broader social framing of teaching - a profession seen by some as noble and by others as unnecessarily burdensome. Even among teachers themselves, narratives of burnout and regret served to both inform and complicate participants' decisions.

4.4. Societal Attitudes

Participants' reflections revealed that societal perceptions of teaching in Costa Rica are often subtly discouraging, rather than overtly hostile. While few reported direct verbal attacks on their career choice, many described an atmosphere in which teaching is treated as a low-reward profession, accompanied by emotional pressure, financial warnings, or cultural expectations of doing 'better'.

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One participant explained, “Anytime you mention teaching, it's like ‘oh, right, okay...” referencing the dismissive tone others used. Another described having to justify her choice constantly: “It became a little bit annoying to be constantly told that going into education was a waste of time and intelligence”. These interactions signal a widely shared assumption that teaching is not a desirable or high-status profession, especially when other academic or professional options are available to a prospective student. Some students also identified the emotional toll of this public perception. One shared, “I did feel discouraged because I was like, do I really want to take on the burden?” Such narratives suggest that discouragement is not merely social but deeply internalized, particularly when reinforced by close networks.

Several participants mentioned that there is still a very strong memory of the 2018 strike, that people reference while talking about teachers: “For some reason, people don't really recognize the importance of teaching. I always heard how every time there's a strike, when teachers are in disagreement with the government regarding certain topics, it's always the communities who go to say, oh, the teachers are so lazy”. One participant shared that “It was so sad to see that the media, news, and social media were depicting the teachers as evil, selfish people that did not want to work and preferred to be in the streets, not in the classes. And a lot of people don't get or don't understand that teaching is not something that you do from 7:00 to 4:00”. Even students who were committed to teaching acknowledged how expectations around success and financial security weighed heavily on their decisions. One participant felt pressure to prove her decision valid: “It was hard because I wanted to convince my family that I wanted to study this, even though they didn’t want me to”.

Still, students demonstrated resilience and redefinition of what ‘success’ means. As one explained, “Even if you don’t get a lot of money, you have a job you enjoy. So I would say that’s kind of a win”. This ability to claim intrinsic motivation in the face of external doubt highlights how many are actively resisting societal narratives while still feeling their effects.

4.5. English as a Skill

For participants in this study, English is not just a subject: it is a resource, an identity marker, and a safety net. The ability to speak English is widely regarded as a valuable asset, both inside and outside the classroom. Participants repeatedly emphasized that knowing English opens doors, and many framed their language proficiency as a way to ensure employment, even in the absence of a stable teaching position. “If I don’t find a job in teaching, at least I have a call center”, more than one student said, illustrating a common theme: English

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is not limited to education, it allows entry to a broader labor market. Another respondent added, "So if I'm not going to work as a teacher, I still have my English and I still have opportunities… just from knowing the language". This reflects a pragmatic view of English as economic insurance in an unpredictable professional field.

Participants also saw English as culturally and socially valuable, offering access to global opportunities. One interviewee observed, "English teachers have a bit of an advantage because we have the language", and another pointed out, "It's considered like you will get a job no matter what because you're studying English". These statements suggest that language capital plays a central role in shaping students' sense of employability and agency.

Interestingly, some students recognized that this value is instrumental rather than symbolic: society may not respect teachers, but it respects people who can speak English. One participant stated that "People see English as a tool. It opens a lot of opportunities". Yet, this also reinforced the division between the prestige of English itself and the lower status of teaching it - a tension that many students navigate.

Students frequently mentioned tourism and customer service as backup options, with English seen as the common denominator. "Here in San José, I can always try to work... like customer support", said one participant. Others referenced call centers almost jokingly but with sincerity: "We're always joking that we can go work at a call center, but we know it's true".

In sum, English is not only a field of study but a strategic asset. It serves as a buffer against professional uncertainty, a gateway to better-paying jobs, and a justification for choosing a path that may otherwise lack social prestige.

4.6. Private and Public institutions

Several participants described noticeable differences between private and public education settings in Costa Rica. Public schools were often associated with rigid planning and outdated methods, while private institutions were seen as more flexible and modern. Ministry imposed lesson structures can feel unnatural or limiting for both teachers and students. Respondents pointed out that teachers in public schools have little freedom to adapt lessons, because of the strict curriculum and administrative requirements.

In contrast, private schools were mentioned as spaces where creativity and more progressive teaching methods are encouraged. Although not all participants had direct experience in both settings, several said they would prefer to work in a private school if they wanted more flexibility.

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Despite the criticisms, students expressed a commitment to improving public education, often because they themselves had come from that system: "That huge difference [between English education in private and public highschool] is what led me to ultimately choose the English teaching major". For some, working in public institutions was not just a career path but a way to give back: "Because of giving back to the community, I think I would like to be in a public institution and also a public institution in a rural area".

4.7. Characteristics of an English teacher

When reflecting on what makes a good English teacher in Costa Rica, participants emphasized practical teaching skills, cultural awareness, and adaptability over native-like pronunciation or international experience. Their responses revealed a vision of professionalism grounded in preparation, empathy, and classroom effectiveness, not in linguistic idealism.

The most frequently mentioned quality was having strong pedagogical training. Participants valued teachers who could plan well, engage students, and adjust their methods to different contexts. One participant said, "They [trained Costa Rican teachers] know how to make a proper class because they know our potential". All respondents indicated they would prefer to have a Costa Rican teacher with pedagogical skills over a native speaker with no teaching skills. This points to a belief that local teachers, with proper preparation, are more attuned to students' realities and can push them further in meaningful ways. Some participants criticized situations where native speakers were hired without teaching qualifications. One student remarked, "Some native speakers don't even ask for students' names". Students also acknowledged that English teachers are often expected to have a 'good' accent, but they pushed back on the idea that native-like pronunciation was essential. One explained, "I don't mind an accent… what matters is if the person is trained to teach." Others even saw accents as adding cultural awareness and diversity: "Accents will make classes more interesting and culturally rich".

While not considered essential, having international experience or cultural exposure was seen as a bonus. Participants felt that teachers who had traveled or lived abroad could bring real-world insights into the classroom: "I wouldn't say that they [teachers with international experience] are more professional, but they could have different perspectives about the world, the language, and also some cultural perspectives that we might not have, since we are not really exposed to the language in a real context".

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Finally, participants stressed the importance of being able to teach students with different backgrounds and needs. Some felt unprepared to work with students with disabilities, saying they lacked training in inclusive education. This points to a gap in teacher preparation programs and an important area for development. Still, the fact that students recognized this issue shows their desire to be adaptable, responsive teachers.

4.8 Overall Discussion

This study explored how English teaching students in Costa Rica perceive their career, professional identity, and the societal context in which they are preparing to work. Besides supporting prior studies on status issues (Vargas Zúñiga and Barrantes León, 2021), findings show how pre-service teachers are actively forming their professional identities as they try to match their calling with the realities of the job market. The findings suggest that while students enter the field with a range of motivations - from personal passion to pragmatic decisions - they share a common experience of navigating a profession that is emotionally demanding and is being undermined socially, yet still seen as meaningful and full of potential. It was reassuring that despite spending most of the time discussing the professional challenges, participants still were committed to continue their professional growth as English teachers.

The findings speak directly to the three research questions. Regarding the first research question (i.e. How is the profession of English teaching perceived by pre-service English teachers in Costa Rica), participants depict English teaching as socially useful yet unevenly respected: while English is widely valued as labour-market capital, this value does not straightforwardly accrue to teachers themselves, and students anticipate status tensions and emotional strain alongside motivation to enter the field. In relation to the second research question (i.e. How do pre-service English teachers envision their future role and status as English teachers?), students articulate a context-anchored image of effective English teaching that prioritises pedagogical competence, local knowledge, and genuine connection with learners over native-like pronunciation or prestige markers; their narratives balance vocation with pragmatism as they imagine roles across sectors and consider how public valuation may shape their standing. Addressing the third research question (i.e. How do pre-service English teachers perceive the employment opportunities and challenges in the English teaching profession in Costa Rica?) students identify concrete opportunities and constraints within their preparation, most notably the timing and quality of practicum, uneven support for inclusive

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classroom practice, and the need to build classroom confidence and emotional readiness, which together shape perceived pathways into the profession.

A central theme across interviews was the contradiction between symbolic and practical value. Although teaching is often praised as essential to the country's development, participants described how it is perceived socially as a fallback career, one chosen by those who could not access more prestigious paths (Brand Fonseca and Segura Arias, 2022; Sánchez and López, 2022). This tension was especially visible in the way participants recounted discouragement from family, friends, and even teachers themselves, who passed on internalized narratives of burnout and regret. While some students rejected these views, others internalized them, expressing anxiety and uncertainty about long-term commitment to the profession. Lack of career prospects and prestige of the profession could negatively affect teachers' wellbeing and desire to stay engaged in the profession.

Despite this, many participants held a strong sense of purpose, especially those who entered teaching because of positive educational experiences or a desire to support others. Yet these intrinsic motivations often clashed with the structural realities of teacher education and employment in Costa Rica: low wages, lack of recognition, and mental strain.

The findings also reinforce that English holds a special status within education particularly English learning due to its a strong socio-political dimension in Costa Rica (Abarca and Ramírez, 2017; Araya and Córdoba González, 2008). Teaching English as a main language of economic domain and social mobility affects teaching practices, approaches, values and attitudes. Participants described their language skills as a safety net, a way to find work even outside education, such as in call centers or tourism. Eventually, a bigger question is one about the state of holistic education in Costa Rica, as the country has been facing challenges in quality of learning outcomes. Constant lack of investment in teachers' development and school infrastructure has slowed down the overall progress in educating the nation, compared to Costa Rica's success on this some decades ago (Artavia et al., 2024).

One of the clearest messages from participants was the importance of pedagogical preparation. Across interviews, students emphasized that being a good English teacher is not about nativeness or accent but about training, clarity, empathy, and adaptability. They expressed a strong preference for Costa Rican teachers who understand the local context and can manage a classroom well, over native speakers without formal preparation. In fact, many respondents doubted the practice of inviting native speakers with no pedagogical training to be English teachers in Costa Rica. This view pushes back against global ideologies that privilege

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nativeness and supports calls for context-sensitive professionalism in English language teaching (Vega Quesada, 2022; Vargas Zúñiga and Barrantes León, 2021).

Participants also pointed out several gaps in their current professional preparation. Many expressed concerns about facing classrooms without enough tools or experience to manage diverse student needs. In particular, they identified the lack of training in inclusive education, for instance, working with students with disabilities, as a major limitation. Others described feeling unprepared for emotional challenges, especially around confidence, anxiety, and classroom presence. These concerns highlight that future teachers are aware of their own learning needs and are asking for more than just technical training. They are seeking support in developing professional identity, emotional resilience, and inclusive practices (García-Castro and Arias, 2023; Maravalle and González Pandiella, 2023; Vargas Solís et al., 2023). These new findings add to existing literature as not only in-service English teachers need professional development on teaching and digital tools (García-Castro and Arias, 2023) but also pre-service teachers. Additionally, to the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies highlighting the demand of mental health support and stress management for pre and in-service teachers in Costa Rica.

The emerged categories converge with Costa Rican studies showing persistent status tensions, ideologies of nativeness, and uneven institutional conditions in shaping teacher recognition (Barrantes-Elizondo and Olivares-Garita, 2023; Solano-Campos, 2012, 2014; Fallas-Escobar and Pentón Herrera, 2022). A pre-service perspective is added by showing these dynamics earlier in the pipeline: students articulate recognition concerns and employability logics while prioritising pedagogical competence over nativeness in their imagined ‘good teacher’ profiles. This extends Vega Quesada (2022) on identity tensions by locating such negotiations in identity-in-formation, where imagined futures and programme affordances are still being consolidated. Reading through Costa Rica’s political economy of English, findings resonate with factors of why nativist assumptions, status hierarchies, and market logics surface so strongly in pre-service identity talk. As Barrantes Montero (2023) argues, English functions as mobility capital in national and regional imaginaries, while pedagogical work is unevenly valued across sectors and locales, shaping who is recognised as a ‘legitimate teacher and under what hiring signals. Situating the seven categories within such a perspective clarifies why students both prioritise practice-linked competence and simultaneously anticipate employability constraints and public valuation dilemmas that precede full entry to the profession.

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Authors of this paper express hope that these findings would be highly relevant to multiple stakeholders. For teacher-education programmes in Costa Rica, the findings point to the value of making practice-linked competencevisible earlier in the curriculum so that recognition is tied to demonstrable pedagogical expertise rather than to factors such as nativeness. Concretely, this means incorporating scaffolded micro-teaching, mentored practicum with structured observation and feedback, and explicit development of assessment literacy and inclusive pedagogy, so that students can articulate and evidence 'what good teaching looks like' before graduation (Barrantes-Elizondo and Olivares-Garita, 2023; Solano-Campos, 2014). Parallel to this, integrating critical language awareness and raciolinguistic perspectives within methods courses can help student-teachers name and counter ideologies that undermine legitimacy and opportunity, aligning pedagogical preparation with the sociolinguistic realities they will encounter (Fallas-Escobar and Pentón Herrera, 2022).

At the policy and accreditation level, the results suggest the need to codify transparent competence frameworks for EFL appointments that travel across sectors (public/private) and regions. Establishing common signals such as teaching portfolios curated from supervised practicum, rubric-based observations, and evidence of inclusive practice can de-emphasise nativeness as a hiring shortcut and foreground professional expertise as the basis for recognition (Barrantes-Elizondo and Olivares-Garita, 2023). Public-facing communication by ministries, universities, and employers that depicts English teaching as skilled professional work - curriculum design, assessment, and student support - could further address status narratives that pre-service teachers already perceive (Solano-Campos, 2012; Vega Quesada, 2022).

Finally, the study underlines the necessity to track how identity-in-formation translates into on-the-job legitimacy, retention, and wellbeing. Partnerships with schools to pilot competence-based hiring signals (e.g., portfolio review in shortlisting) and to evaluate whether these practices shift perceptions away from nativeness toward pedagogical competence would provide actionable evidence for system-level change. Together, these steps link curricular design, accreditation, and labour-market practices in a mutually reinforcing way, addressing the recognition tensions surfaced here while strengthening pathways into the profession.

Although situated in Costa Rica, patterns like marketized valuations of English, nativist preferences, and constrained early-career trajectories appear in many Latin American and Global South EFL contexts with similar labor markets and policy histories. The authors therefore expect analytic transferability of the reported identity tensions, especially for pre-

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service teachers navigating status hierarchies and precarious employment. Rather than claiming statistical generalization, this article foregrounds contextual resonance for settings where English proficiency carries economic capital while teaching retains comparatively low occupational prestige.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the experiences and perceptions of English-teaching students in Costa Rica, highlighting the complex realities they face as they prepare to enter the profession. Through constructivist grounded theory analysis of ten in-depth interviews, the research shows how participants navigate a field shaped by contradictions.

Participants entered English teaching programs with a mix of motivations: some driven by passion, others by limited alternatives. While their academic commitment was strong, many expressed doubts about long-term career prospects, citing emotional exhaustion, low societal respect, and a desire for more flexible or better-paid opportunities. English, as a discipline, was widely seen as an asset with broader value in the labor market, but this did not translate into increased recognition for English teachers themselves.

Students articulated a clear, grounded understanding of what makes an effective English teacher in Costa Rica. They prioritized pedagogical competence, local cultural understanding, and student connection over native-like pronunciation or international prestige. In doing so, they challenged common assumptions about language teaching and offered a more inclusive, context-sensitive definition of professionalism. At the same time, participants identified several gaps in their preparation, especially in areas such as inclusive education, classroom confidence, and emotional readiness. Their reflections point to a need for teacher education programs to go beyond academic coursework and offer richer, more holistic forms of professional development.

The results indicate value in bringing practice-linked competence into view earlier (e.g., structured early practicum with mentored observation and feedback), embedding inclusive education and student-support competencies in core coursework, and creating space to build classroom confidence and emotional readiness before graduation. These implications reflect the opportunities and gaps students themselves described; more speculative measures (e.g., international exchanges, extensive technology initiatives) fall outside the evidentiary scope of the researched dataset and therefore are not advanced here as findings.

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In sum, the findings of this study conclude that teacher identity is not shaped solely by individual choice but by a wider web of societal narratives, institutional structures, and emotional labor. Supporting future English teachers in Costa Rica will require not only better policies and resources but also a shift in how the profession is perceived, valued, and sustained: even though young people still choose to become teachers, there is a risk of this professional identity becoming rather scary and less appealing for next generations.

6. Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the professional identity and experiences of English teaching students in Costa Rica, three main limitations should be acknowledged.

First, this research is based on a sample of ten English teaching students from the University of Costa Rica, which limits the generalisability of the findings. While the aim was depth rather than breadth, perspectives from students in other institutions, particularly private universities or regional campuses, are not represented. Future studies should take such populations into account. Second, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, relying on participants' self-reporting. As with any qualitative approach, there is a possibility of bias in how experiences were recalled or narrated, especially in a context where teaching is socially charged. The presence of the researcher and the format of the interview could have influenced how openly participants shared potentially sensitive or critical views. It is important to note that the first author, a researcher in higher education and a near-peer in age to several participants (particularly older students and alumni), conducted the interviews. This proximity, as well as the fact that English was not a first language for both parties, likely facilitated trust and comfort, but could also encourage more informal framings of experience; to mitigate this, the interviewer followed a standardized protocol and used neutral prompts.

Finally, interviews were conducted in English, which, while relevant to the subject matter, may not have allowed all participants to express themselves as freely as they would in their native language, particularly when discussing emotional or complex topics. Some meaning may have been lost or simplified in translation, especially when participants resorted to code-switching or used culturally specific expressions. For future research on this topic it would be beneficial to provide the opportunity to interviewees to participate in the interview in their native language.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a grounded, timely snapshot of how future English teachers in Costa Rica perceive their roles, challenges, and opportunities. Future

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research with a broader participant base, longer-term observation, or comparative institutional focus could expand on these findings.

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Appendix 1

Semi-structured interview plan

1. Introduction

- Welcome words, introduction of the researcher and the research.
- Clarification of the confidentiality terms, data storage and processing. Obtaining permission to record the interview.

2. Background & motivation for becoming an English teacher

- Please tell me about your current studies (programme, year in, major/specialisation if applicable) and what motivated you to study English teaching?
- How do your family and peers perceive your decision to become an English teacher?
  → What is the highest educational level attained by your parents?
- Have you ever felt encouraged or discouraged by societal attitudes towards this profession?
  → Have you ever encountered negative or positive remarks about English teachers or you personally? How did you react?

3. General perception of English teachers in Costa Rica

- 'A nation of more teachers than soldiers'[3]. What do you think about this quote? How do you think society views teachers in Costa Rica?
- Do you think these perceptions differ from those of teachers of English and other subjects? Why or why not?
- In your opinion, does the level of English proficiency of a teacher influence how they are perceived?
  → Who would you prefer as your teacher: Native speaker with no pedagogical degree or non-native (Costa Rican) teacher with pedagogical degree?
  → In your eyes, does it add more professionalism to an English teacher, if they have lived/studied/been abroad? → Would you like to have this kind of experience? Why/why not?

[3] A common saying in Costa Rica, as cited in Muñoz-Solano, N. (2024). Homecoming and Public Education: The Cancel Culture (of class time) in Costa Rica. *ReVista (Cambridge)*, *23*(3), 1-9.

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- Are there societal expectations that English teachers should embody a certain cultural or linguistic model (e.g., speaking like a native English speaker)?
  → Do you feel like sometimes you wish you would have the UK/US accent?

4. Influence of English on status & career prospects

- Are you currently employed? If yes, what is your position and what was your main motivation to start working during your studies?
- What are your career aspirations?
  → Where do you imagine yourself in 5 years, in terms of employment? What you are describing, is it rather a realistic or ideal scenario?
  → Does knowledge of English give teachers more career opportunities beyond teaching? If you would want to change the profession, how easy would that be?
- Do you think English teaching is considered an attractive career in Costa Rica? Why or why not?
- How do you & fellow students perceive English teachers in terms of job stability and career growth?
- Do you think English teachers are valued more in private institutions than in public ones?

6. Challenges & Opportunities in the Profession

- What are the biggest challenges you anticipate as a future English teacher in Costa Rica?
- Imagine: you graduate and become employed as an English teacher. What, in your opinion, would help you further in the career path? What kind of professional development opportunities would you like to have?
  → Are you considering getting another degree one day? For what reasons?

7. Closing remarks

- Anything else you would like to add?
- Do you have any questions regarding the research?
- Concluding and providing contact details for any additional questions, clarifications or withdrawal from the study initiated by the participant.

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