

# Trait Emotional Intelligence in English Teacher Training

Junchao Zhang<sup>1, a</sup>, Lisha Deng<sup>1, b</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University Taizhou College,  
Taizhou, 225300, China

<sup>a</sup>junchao.zhang@nnutc.edu.cn, <sup>b</sup>05180623@nnut.edu.cn

## Abstract

**While the traditional research in language learning and teaching mainly focuses on individuals' cognitive ability, the psychological factors have been paid increasing attention in recent years. With this unique psychological turn, this paper aims to understand the role that Trait Emotional Intelligence (Trait EI) played in English teacher training. By using both quantitative and qualitative method, it is found that Trait EI plays an important role in pre-service English teacher training. Individuals with a high Trait EI level are likely to have a better Professional Teaching Competence (PTC).**

## Keywords

**Trait Emotional Intelligence; Pre-service English Teacher; English Teaching.**

## 1. Introduction

Despite its importance and ubiquity in everyday life, emotions have attracted little attention in language learning and teaching research for a long time. The traditional research of second language acquisition (SLA) regarded language as a particular ability of human beings and thus focused more on the cognitive aspects of individuals, trying to figure out how language is acquired, stored, and transformed in people's minds [1]. Nevertheless, as no mankind can be utterly rational, both language learners and teachers would be affected by their psychological and emotional status. Therefore, an increasing number of scholars have now adopted a new psychological perspective in SLA research, trying to understand how emotion is related to foreign language learning and teaching. With a great amount of empirical evidence, it is believed that individuals' Trait Emotional Intelligence (EI) serves as a vital factor that can significantly affect the results of foreign language learning and teaching. On the one hand, Trait EI correlates students' level of enjoyment, anxiety and burnout, which will eventually influence English achievement [2]. On the other hand, teachers with a high level of Trait EI may be more self-motivated and have a positive attitude towards their students [3].

Thus, inspired by the unique "emotion turn" as well as the former study on Trait EI, this essay aims to further explore the interplay between emotion and SLA but will shift its focus on pre-service teachers who has a dual identity and may encounter various emotion challenges both as a learner and a teacher. By conducting both quantitative and qualitative methods, it is expected that the present study could shed light on the role of Trait EI in English teacher training and provide implications for the training of Chinese pre-service English teachers from another angle.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Pre-service English Teaching Training in China

Since the Reform and Opening-up Policy in 1978, the number of English learners in China has increased dramatically to around 400 million [4]. As a compulsory subject in school education

and College Entrance Exam (Gaokao), the position of English in school education is particularly emphasized. Therefore, the demand for English teachers is also urgent. Under such circumstances, many normal universities, colleges, and schools have emerged in order to fit the market needs. Nevertheless, the journey for those pre-service teachers is long and tough, especially with a large number of them graduating from college. The competitiveness in the English teaching industry has become rather severe. It takes not only time but enough patience and resilience for a pre-service English teacher to finally become a qualified teacher in the public school. In an international study conducted by both American and Chinese scholars, they used a metaphor to describe such a journey as “changing from fish to dragon” [4]. Apart from the examinations internally taken in the college, students majoring in English teaching must first pass a vital test organized by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China which grants participants an official teaching qualification. If the students intended to be a teacher in the public school, they then need to take part in another test organized by the local Education Bureau. With those competitive examinations, pre-service teachers are prone to have an outburst of emotion, especially when they fail a particular test and consequently be a “loser” in some people’s minds. Under such great pressure, pre-service teachers’ psychological health, as well as their emotional status, are vital in the teaching training process.

## 2.2. Trait Emotional Intelligence

As emotional quotient (EQ) was introduced in 1988 by renowned psychiatrist Reuven Bar-on, researchers started to pay more heed to the interplay between emotions and the mind. To some extent, EQ is more significant than intelligence quotient (IQ) as it can subtly impact individuals’ thinking processes and manipulate their behaviours [5]. Nevertheless, since the definition of EQ was vague when being proposed, researchers would, based on their own understandings, design different studies to measure one’s EQ and the results of these studies could often be distinct or even contradictory (ibid). Under such circumstances, Petrides [6] further classified EQ into Trait Emotional Intelligence (Trait EI) and Ability Emotional Intelligence (Ability EI). The first one is a personal trait and can be seen as a “constellation of emotion-related dispositions and self-perceptions of one’s own emotional competence and ability” [7]. Such an ability is measured by the self-report questionnaire. By contrast, Ability EI refers to an emotion-related cognitive ability that focuses more on individuals’ emotional skills and is often evaluated by performance tasks. Obviously, the former intends to explore people’s intrinsic emotion experience, which can be regarded as one’s “typical performance”, while the latter aims to assess the EI in a particular situation that is often unstable and subjective. Therefore, given that language learning is a long-term process, most SLA researchers would employ Trait EI to investigate the function of emotions in language learning and teaching.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Sampling and Participants

Prior to the participation, ethical approval for the study was obtained by the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures in N College. All the participants including instructors who evaluated students’ teaching performance were informed that the data was collected for research only and they were entitled to refuse to take part in the study at any given time.

By conducting a random sampling during May 2021, participants’ Trait EI scores were first collected by the author in N college. The author forwarded the online questionnaire to the students via Wenjuanxing, a frequently used platform for online survey and data collection in China. A total of 33 students constituted the final sample with 3 males (9.1%) and 30 females (90.9%). The mean age of the sample was 20.12 (SD = 0.415). Participants in the study were all third-year students majoring in English (Teaching) who has received professional teacher

training for a year. It should be noted that although the gender imbalance is evident in this study, it reflects a basic reality in Chinese society that female teacher is still in the dominant position in the language teaching industry. Meanwhile, the total of 33 participants may not be a large sample but given that the evaluation process is extremely time-consuming, the current sample size is still appropriate under such circumstances.

### **3.2. Research Instruments**

Three major instruments were used in the study. An online questionnaire was first distributed to gather participants' Trait EI level. At the same time, a verbal exam was organized to evaluate participants' Professional Teaching Competence (PTC). With the quantitative data collected, the study uses SPSS 26.0 to identify the correlations between participants' Trait EI level and PTC score. Ultimately, the semi-structured interviews will be conducted to unveil the complex role that Trait EI played in pre-service teaching training and how it influences their PTC presentation.

#### **3.2.1. Trait EI Questionnaire – Short Form**

Developed by Petrides in 2009, the Trait EI Questionnaire-Short Form (TEIQue-SF) was a simplified version of the original questionnaire invented in 2004. While the original one was more comprehensive and detailed, it contained 153 items, making the whole process time-consuming and tiresome. By contrast, the short version only consisted of 30 items but was still capable of assessing individuals' overall Trait EI level (Global Trait EI) and its four sub-items, namely Well-Being, Self-Control, Emotionality and Sociability. The Cronbach's alpha of the TEIQue-SF in many contexts was above .70, showing good reliability [7]. With regard to the present study, all items were illustrated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "1- completely disagree" to "7- completely agree". The reliability was satisfied with Cronbach's alpha = .797, N=33.

#### **3.2.2. Professional Teaching Competence Evaluation**

As mentioned in 2.1, all the pre-service English teachers have to pass the national teaching certificate exam (known as NTCE) which consists of written and verbal examinations. The written test assesses participants' general knowledge of educational theory and the English language while the verbal one evaluates participants' Professional Teaching Competence (PTC). Relevant teaching materials are first given to the test-takers after which they have to teach English in a pseudo teaching environment. Such an evaluation process is widely used not only in NTCE but in the English teacher enrolment tests. Therefore, the present study will also adopt this method and an evaluation committee will be established to holistically assess participants' PTC. Like the NTCE, the teaching material will be excerpted from the textbook and participants are required to demonstrate a 10-minute English class after 30-minute preparation. Marks will be given based on their delivery, the teaching design, teaching skills and the overall teaching performance.

#### **3.2.3. Semi-structured Interviews**

The semi-structured interview is the most common method in qualitative research since such a method allows researchers to probe into the issues more comprehensively and thoroughly [8]. Unlike informal interviews, the semi-structured interview is more organized and targeted. The researcher will first list a few questions but may change them during the interview based on interviewees' reactions. The rationale behind the interview is that the statistical analysis in the first step may indicate some correlations but cannot reflect the causal relationship between different variables.

## 4. Statistic Result

The descriptive results for Trait EI and PTC are shown in Table 1. As indicated by Table 1, the participants generally had a good performance on the verbal exams with an average PTC score of 80.56 (SD=3.83). In terms of Trait EI, most participants regarded themselves as a medium level of Trait EI (M=4.68, SD=.59).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for variables

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PTC Score	72.4	88.6	80.56	3.83
Global Trait EI	3.67	6.13	4.68	.59
Well-Being	2.67	6.83	4.68	1.05
Self-Control	3.00	6.67	4.64	.72
Emotionality	3.50	6.63	5.06	.73
Sociability	1.83	6.17	4.14	.94

The relationship between pre-service teachers' PTC and Trait EI was explored by the Pearson Correlation Analysis (two-tailed). It can be seen from the Table 2 that the participants' Global Trait EI level was significantly correlated with PTC score ( $P < .05$ ). At the same time, among the four sub-items, Well-Being and Self-Control were also significantly correlated with PTC score ( $P < .05$ ) while no significant correlation was found in Emotionality and Sociability ( $P > .05$ ).

**Table 2.** Correlation between variables

	Global Trait EI	Well-Being	Self-Control	Emotionality	Sociability
PTC Score	.517*	.458*	.476*	.212	.197

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## 5. Discussion

The statistic results shown in the fourth part implies a straightforward fact that pre-service teachers' Trait EI level has a strong connection with their PTC. Individuals with a high Trait EI level, good well-being and self-control can perform better in the teaching practice. The reason for such correlation may be twofold due to the dual identity pre-service teachers possess. On the one hand, the would-be English teachers can first encounter emotional challenges like anxiety over the course of learning the language. Such challenges may emerge when linguistic issues arise. One of the participants, Alice (pseudonym), who had the lowest Global Trait EI (3.67) and the lowest PTC score (72.4), confirmed it in the interviews. She described a scenario in which she failed to tackle the anxiety when practising her oral English ability.

"My oral English is not very good, but I am aware that if I want to be an English teacher in the future, I must have good delivery and pronunciation. Therefore, I practiced it very hard, but the reality was cruel as I made almost no progress in the training. Consequently, I became extremely anxious as well as depressed, and didn't know how to deal with such feelings."

It can be inferred from Alice's statement that due to her low level of Trait EI, she found it difficult to improve her spoken ability and were more prone to have negative emotions. By contrast, another participant Lily (pseudonym) who had a high Global Trait EI (6.13) and PTC score (88.2) showed great capability in dealing with the complex emotional challenges in language learning. "I also feel depressed and anxious from time to time when learning English as such a process is relatively long and arduous. Nevertheless, every time I confront some linguistic issues, I would

turn for teachers' help and pour out my troubles and worries. Meanwhile, I always encourage myself when facing problems and have a strong faith that I will overcome the difficulties eventually. Under these circumstances, I gained a sense of achievement in learning English which may contribute to my good language competence and presentation performance."

In addition to the impact on language learning, the Trait EI, on the other hand, may help pre-service English teachers to tackle the stressful situations that emerged in their own teaching practice. In a qualitative study conducted by Gregersen et al [9], Trait EI was found to assist the participants in "understanding and integrating their experiences inside and outside the classroom" during the pseudo-teaching process. Likewise, in the present study, the participants with high Trait EI all stated in the interviews that they find it easier to transfer their positive emotions and thinking into the pseudo teaching process. Lily mentioned: "I really enjoy the moments of teaching and learning new teaching skills. I am passionate about the teaching even if sometimes I would be criticized for not doing good enough. Such strong passion allows me to make the class atmosphere more interactive and lively." It is obvious that the high Trait EI group often employ their emotional strategies to create a better teaching environment and thus, resulting in a high mark in PTC examinations.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, as a special personal quality, Trait EI influences individuals' behaviours in a more subtle and unconscious way. In the field of language learning and teaching, such a unique quality can also affect the effectiveness of learning and teaching.

Through quantitative analysis, it was found in this study that pre-service English teachers' Trait EI level significantly correlated with their professional teaching competence. Moreover, the semi-structured interviews showed that the reason for such correlation was that Trait EI can determine the way in which individuals tackle the challenges that occurred in the learning process. The high Trait EI level helps pre-service English teachers to maintain a positive emotion which ultimately can build their "long term resiliency and hardiness". It is suggested that pre-service teacher training programmes should pay more attention to individuals' emotional experience and conceive a more comprehensive training system that not only promotes students' professional teaching competence but also their Trait EI level.

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