



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Researcher Identity Construction By Vietnamese University Lecturers In English As A Foreign Language: A Self-Determination Perspective

Nga Huynh Hong Ngo<sup>1\*</sup>, Lap Quoc Trinh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Vietnam

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**\*Corresponding Author:**

nhhnga@ctu.edu.vn

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**ABSTRACT**

While studies on teacher research is increasingly widespread in English language teaching (ELT), there remains a gap in understanding how university lecturers shape their researcher identities. Through a narrative approach, this study explored how the professional identities of three lecturers in English as a foreign language (EFL) were constructed through their research engagement within the context of tertiary education reforms in Vietnam. Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT), the findings from this study shows that the process of researcher identity construction among EFL lecturers was highly individualised but shaped by different contextual factors such as institutional policies and family issues. This study adds to the expanding body of empirical studies that highlight the value of narrative approach in exploring the construction of researcher identities among university EFL lecturers in Vietnam and could provide valuable insights relevant to other global contexts.

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**INTRODUCTION**

In recent decades, teacher research as a field has been investigated by many researchers throughout the world (Dikilitas, 2019; Heng et al., 2020; Pinninti, 2022). Through the literature, different terms have been used interchangeably to describe teacher research engagement including action research, practitioner research, reflective practice, exploratory practice, collaborative inquiry, and teacher research (Consoli & Dikilitas, 2021; Leuverink & Aarts, 2018). In this study, the term *teacher research* was employed because it had received widespread acknowledgement (Pham, A.H.V. et al. 2024, Pinninti 2022).

Barkhuizen (2018) defined teacher research as “a professional development activity which teachers do through systematic inquiry into their own work in order to enhance teaching and learning” (p. 19). In the field of English language teaching (ELT), (Borg, 2018) explained that teacher research is an activity that language teachers are conducting to develop the understanding of their work. Teachers can also undertake research for academic reasons such as when pursuing a master’s degree. When the appropriate conditions are in place, engaging in teacher research can be an incredibly impactful and transformative journey for teachers. It can provide them with fresh insights into their practice, foster their enthusiasm and dedication, and boost their sense of autonomy and professional competence. Leuverink and Aarts (2018) introduced six characteristics of teacher research including teacher-as-researcher, systematic, improvement of practice, collaborative, context-specific, and dynamic setting. These characteristics provide an overall view of the principles and practices of teacher research. They are interconnected and function simultaneously throughout the teacher research process.

According to Barcelos (2017), language teacher identity (LTI) is considered as a complicated and ongoing process which is established by beliefs (or tacit theories, lay observations), emotions, and experiences (personal, work related, cultural, professional, among others). It is continuously being constructed and reconstructed by our interactions with others and our interpretations of these interactions and experiences. Barkhuizen (2022a) commented that LTI refers to “the way language teachers see themselves and understand who they are in relation to the work they do. It is also the way others, including their colleagues and students and institutions, see them” (p. 549). Varghese (2017) explained that LTI varies “according to the context and the set of power relations as well as the discourses available to individual teachers and a community or network of teachers in that particular context” (p. 46). It can be argued that teacher identity is regarded as a dynamic and multifaceted construct experiencing constant negotiation and change, so its development is an ongoing and lifelong process. Teachers often shape multiple identities depending on different contexts.

Within the Vietnamese education system, teacher research has attracted considerable interest from various stakeholders (Mai & Brundrett, 2022; Nguyen, 2020; Vu, 2020). Nonetheless, there remains a scarcity of studies, especially those employing a narrative research approach to examine how EFL lecturers develop their identities as researchers amidst higher education reforms. Consequently, this study has addressed this gap by offering insights into the researcher identity construction among Vietnamese university EFL lecturers. The research question of this study was:

How do EFL lecturers construct their identities as researchers?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical framework

The main theoretical framework guiding this study is Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT). SDT is a comprehensive framework for understanding human personality and motivation involved with how the individual interacts with and relies on their social surroundings. SDT identifies intrinsic motivation and several forms of extrinsic motivation and explains how these motivations affect situational responses in diverse contexts, as well as their effects on social and cognitive development and personality. SDT focuses on the fundamental psychological needs for *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* (Legault, 2020).

Ryan and Deci (2020) explained that *autonomy* refers to a sense of initiative and ownership over one's actions. It thrives when individuals engage in activities they find interesting and valuable, but it diminishes when they feel controlled by external factors like rewards or punishments. *Competence* involves the feeling of mastery, a sense that one can succeed and develop. The need for competence is best met within well-structured environments that afford optimal challenges, constructive feedback, and opportunities for growth. *Relatedness* refers to a sense of belonging and connection. It is nurtured through expressions of respect and care. Fulfilling these fundamental needs plays a crucial role in identity construction through internalization, which is also link to autonomous motivation, high-quality engagement, social adaptation, overall wellbeing, and health.

As Ryan and Deci's framework explains how individuals naturally and actively pursue growth and self-organization (Legault, 2020), it provides detailed insights into how social and cultural forces shape the construction of researcher identities through research engagement. Grounding this study in SDT allows for the examination of the researcher identity construction among university EFL lecturers to help policymakers, PD planners, and academic managers design and implement effective research programmes for EFL lecturers within the context of Vietnamese higher education reforms.

### Empirical studies on researcher identity construction

Reviewing the recent literature in the scope of teacher identity, there is an increasing interest in research regarding the teacher-as-researcher identity construction. Several empirical studies conducted in different countries were found. In China, Nana and Jing (2017) investigated university EFL teachers' researcher identities and the significant factors that influenced researcher identity construction. The study highlighted diverse trajectories in the construction of researcher identities among Chinese university EFL teachers across three stages of research experiences (beginning,

stagnation/development, and struggle). Main individual factors impacting their researcher identity included motivation, publications, academic qualifications, and networking with researchers.

In America, Achirri (2020) examined the interplay of teacher and researcher identity across different contexts and spaces by analysing the professional journey of one teacher (Tom) from teaching to conducting research. Through the findings, the participant revealed perception of his professional identity as a teacher in terms of duty. The findings also indicated that individual identities were influenced by their specific context and subsequently transformed by that context. In Columbia, Barkhuizen (2021) used short story analytical methods to explore aspects of the research experiences and developing researcher identity of one language teacher educator as she shifts through the early stages of her doctoral program at a university. The findings revealed several characters in the professional life of the participant which involved her work as a teacher, teacher educator, PhD candidate and (action) researcher.

In China, Wang and He (2022) project explored how three EFL teachers developed their research identity and what factors affected the construction of their identities within the University–School activity system from the dual perspectives of the school and university teachers. The findings showed that the internal factors influenced the construction of EFL teachers' identities including the research experience and the stage of career and the external factors including the curriculum reform context and the communication in the community.

In summary, although EFL teacher research has attracted considerable interest from scholars worldwide, this review highlights the dearth of previous studies exploring how EFL lecturers shape their identities as researchers by employing a narrative research design. Consequently, this investigation aimed to fill gaps in our understanding of the researcher identity construction among Vietnamese university EFL lecturers.

### **National policies on teacher research in Vietnam**

In the context of Vietnamese higher education, lecturers are regulated by the government to balance their teaching duties with professional responsibilities including conducting research. According to Article 55 of the Law on Higher Education, lecturers are required to undertake research projects and facilitate the transfer of applied science and technology (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2012). The amendment to this law further stipulates that lecturers must also participate in practical activities to promote the quality of education and scientific research (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2018). According to Circular No.47/2014, university lecturers are required to work 40 hours per week. Annually, they must complete 1,760 hours to fulfil their teaching, research, and PD duties (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2014). Particularly, the document specifies that lecturers must dedicate at least one-third of their annual working hours to research activities. Failure to meet this research requirement impacts their commendations and compensations at the end of the academic year (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2014). These regulations highlight the Vietnamese government's emphasis on integrating research with other professional responsibilities for lecturers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Narrative approach**

In this study, a narrative approach to qualitative study was employed to explore the construction of researcher identity among tertiary EFL lecturers as this approach seeks to comprehend the meaning teachers make of their lived and imagined experiences (Barkhuizen, 2018, p. 110). Barkhuizen (2022b) further explained that narrative research is well-suited for exploring language teacher identity because they enable both researchers and teachers to explore what professional identities are and how they are developed and constructed in educational settings, through lens of the teachers themselves. The focus of narrative research lies in the stories individuals share about their real and envisioned experiences.

In support of Barkhuizen, Vähäsantanen and Arvaja (2022, p. 374) highlighted that the narrative approach sheds light on how individuals perceive themselves and interpret their experiences, emotions, and life events. By employing a narrative approach, this study could yield detailed insights into the professional identity construction of Vietnamese tertiary EFL lecturers through their

research engagement. This current study enhances the existing knowledge base in the field of ELT by adding a new perspective.

## Participants

Data were collected in 2024 at Global University (pseudonym), a large public university in Vietnam. This study recruited participants through purposive sampling. (Robinson, 2023) explained that purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of participants who can provide insights into a particular theme, concept, or phenomenon. Three participants (Cindy, Kate, and Ben) were selected based on their diverse variations in gender, years of teaching experience, professional titles, educational qualifications, and research experiences. Table 1 presents the participants' gender, age and years of teaching experience across three main groups: *early-career* lecturers (1–7 years teaching); *mid-career* lecturers (8–23 years teaching); and *late-career* lecturers (20+ years teaching) (Day, 2013). The primary goal of recruiting these EFL lecturers with varying years of teaching experience was to explore their research experiences across different stages of their careers. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and their professional titles were not mentioned.

**Table 1. Participants' background information.**

No.	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Years of teaching experience
1	Cindy	Female	29	4
2	Kate	Female	36	14
3	Ben	Male	56	35

## Data collection

### *Narrative interviews*

In this study, narrative interviews were chosen as the principal source of data collection to assemble people's stories about their experiences. According to Gudkova (2018), a narrative interview is a special type of the qualitative interview which concentrates on the specific components of the interviewee's biography. The nature of narration allows a person to share his own story in his own way, in a way he prefers, using his own style, form, and means of expression. Erlach and Müller (2020) indicated that the role of the interviewer in a narrative interview is not to investigate facts, but to encourage their interviewees to share their personal stories. Although interviewers still ask questions, their questions only refer to experiences such as "How did this idea first come up?" and "Did you experience this directly?" (p. 89). Similarly, Vähäsantanen and Arvaja (2022) stated that during the interview, the interviewee is encouraged to frankly describe their perceptions, experiences, and thoughts related to the themes in question. Its purpose is to constitute an encouraging narrative practice for sharing about one's experiences and identities.

In this study, interview questions were built up with the aim of framing the topics connected the research objectives grounded in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and narrative research design (Barkhuizen, 2018). All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and were audio recorded. During the interviews, the interviewer took notes and then transcribed the interview files verbatim. Moreover, the interviewer read each transcript and asked the participants to review the transcripts after their interview, as a member check, to confirm that they were complete and accurate. After coding, the researchers translated significant stories into English and developed main themes. Finally, a translation check was conducted by another senior English lecturer.

### *Document analysis*

Together with narrative interviews, this study employed document analysis as an additional method to gather comprehensive information from national and institutional documents such as laws, decisions, and reports. Kutsyuruba (2023) explained that "document analysis entails a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents through finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesizing data contained within them" (p. 139). In this study, the purpose of document analysis was to gain a deeper understanding of the environments in which the participants constructed their researcher identities.

## Data analysis

In this study, data from narrative interviews were analysed using a five-step narrative data analysis proposed by Cresswell (2018, p. 199). The steps included: (1) creating and organizing data files; (2) reading through text, making margin notes, and forming initial codes; (3) describing patterns across the set of experiences and identifying and describing stories in a chronological order; (4) locating epiphanies within stories and identifying contextual materials; and (5) restorying and interpreting the larger meaning of the story. In support of Cresswell's approach, (Sharp et al., 2018) explained that the aim of narrative analysis is to create a story that captures a participant's experience in connection with the research question(s).

To analyse data from documents, the researchers evaluated each document's relevance by considering its authority, content, timeliness, purpose, and intended audience. They then selected the most pertinent and valuable information to include in their research findings.

### Trustworthiness

This study employed five different strategies to enhance the trustworthiness. These included (1) member checking by sending interview transcripts to participants for clarification; (2) data triangulation by involving three EFL lecturers at the *early-career*, *mid-career* and *late-career* stages with diverse research backgrounds; (3) method triangulation through the use of narrative interviews and document analysis for data collection; (4) providing a rich, thick description of data by detailing the researcher identity construction experiences of EFL lecturers; and (5) using direct quotes to exemplify the points within the participants' stories.

### Ethical considerations

In this research, all procedures adhered to the Human Ethics Guidelines and Policy established by Global University. These guidelines encompassed informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. While an Ethics Committee review was not mandated at the research setting, this study complied with the institution's access policies. Before the study commenced, each participant was sent an official invitation letter along with a consent form. The information sheet thoroughly outlined the research goals, procedures, the use of audio recordings, and the participants' right to withdraw at any point. Participants were also invited to engage in the member checking process. To ensure privacy, pseudonyms were used in interview transcripts and reports to protect the identities of the university and EFL lecturers. All collected data were securely stored, with interview transcripts saved on a password-protected computer hard drive.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents three scenarios and provides an analysis of the findings obtained from the narrative interviews and document analysis.

### Scenario 1

Cindy (*early-career*) had been working as an EFL lecturer for four years. She considered herself a novice lecturer with limited professional experiences but was active, enthusiastic, and eager to learn from her colleagues.

Cindy's journey into research started with her undergraduate thesis which marked her first step into the realm of academic inquiry. This experience had laid the foundation for her subsequent academic pursuits. After completing her bachelor's degree, Cindy enrolled in a master's program in Principles and Methods in English Language Education, where she took different research-related courses such as Research Methodologies and Data Analysis. These courses significantly enhanced her understanding of research processes and techniques, as she noted, "*The success of my thesis defence and the subsequent publication of an article based on my research findings are significant milestones in my research journey*".

In Cindy's viewpoint, engaging in research was crucial for EFL lecturers' career development. She believed that through research activities, lecturers could learn new teaching methodologies to apply in their classrooms. In addition, staying updated with the latest trends in ELT through other research findings was essential. Cindy's motivation to engage in research is driven by her passion for teaching and the desire to deliver impactful lectures. Her commitment to several action research projects

aimed at enhancing instructional quality and demonstrated a proactive approach to PD. These findings have confirmed the influence of Joint Circular No.36/2014 entitled 'Regulations on codes and criteria for professional titles of lecturers at public tertiary institutions', which stipulates that lecturers should possess the skills to conduct research and coordinate research activities for students as well as implement and integrate the outcomes of scientific and technological projects into education, training, industry, and everyday life (MOET & MOHA, 2014, p. 7). The evidence from this study aligns with the findings from previous literature. Particularly, Xerri (2021) and Hood (2022) stated that research engagement was not only about knowledge creation but also about improving practical applications in educational settings.

Additionally, Cindy reported several significant benefits from her engagement in research activities. Firstly, she had been able to expand and enhance her professional and research knowledge not only in ELT but also in other disciplines. Secondly, her confidence had significantly improved due to her research experiences. She stated, "*When discussing or presenting an issue with solid evidence, I feel that my explanation is more persuasive.*" This newfound confidence has contributed to her effectiveness as a lecturer and researcher. In addition, the pressure Cindy felt from her colleagues' successes served as a motivational factor, pushing her to strive for similar achievements. This competitive yet supportive environment could foster a culture of continuous improvement and excellence in research. Based on SDT (2000), it can be explained that extrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in the researcher identity construction. Without this type of motivation, self-determination is harder to attain.

However, Cindy's research journey was not without its drawbacks. She pointed out the difficulty in balancing her time between teaching and research. "*The heavy teaching load at my school requires me to teach many hours each week and this has led to little time for research*", she explained. This time constraint is a common issue for many lecturers who strive to excel in both teaching and research. Cindy also mentioned that family issues and psychological instability diminished her motivation to pursue research activities. These personal challenges further complicated her academic duties. According to Phan and Locke (2016), under the influence of Confucianism, which delineates distinct social roles for men and women, Vietnamese women are traditionally expected to embody the four feminine virtues: "*Công, dung, ngôn, hạnh*" (fulfilling family responsibilities, maintaining a pleasing appearance, speaking appropriately, and exhibiting proper conduct) (pp. 111-112). The study has demonstrated that in Vietnam, female EFL lecturers juggle significant responsibilities of motherhood and household management alongside their professional duties leading to greater time constraints for participating in research activities compared to their male colleagues. This finding is consistent with Pham et al.'s (2023) project revealing that balancing work and family responsibilities posed a significant challenge for female language teachers and led to difficulties in fulfilling their research and family commitments. This study highlights the critical influence of gender roles on lecturers' career development in the Vietnamese context.

Despite the obstacles, Cindy revealed that she recently received a university-supported grant of 25 million VND to conduct a year-long research project. This grant was a valuable opportunity for her to enhance her research abilities and skills, and to bolster her CV. This *early-career* lecturer was optimistic about this chance to advance her academic career. At the time of data collection, Cindy was preparing a research proposal to apply for a doctoral scholarship at an international university. This step highlighted her ambition to further her education and research on a global scale. In addition, Cindy highlighted her personal attributes, stating, "*I am very diligent and persistent. These characteristics help sustain my drive to pursue research*". Her dedication and perseverance were key factors that keep her motivated despite the hurdles she faced. Grounded in SDT (Ryan and Deci(2000), it can be argued that Cindy believed she possessed the necessary skills to achieve her objectives and interacted effectively within her environment. This sense of competence gave her a feeling of control and mastery over the environment.

Cindy's journey in the academic setting was a blend of gratitude, determination, and challenges. She expressed her appreciation for being part of an environment where many colleagues were alumni of prestigious international universities and possessed significant research expertise. Cindy noted, "*Whenever I encounter challenges in my research, I always receive their wholehearted assistance*". This supportive network had been instrumental in her research endeavours. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) helps to explain that because lecturers always need interrelation, they seek to connect with and

support others and desire a sense of community and belonging. The findings of this current study align with international literature which emphasises the significance of collegial support in teacher research (Shen & Bai, 2019). Thus, it is crucial to foster a collaborative research environment that includes policymakers, PD planners, academic administrators, and lecturers in both the planning and execution of research initiatives.

In summary, Cindy's story highlights the importance of research engagement for *early-career* EFL lecturers. Her journey illustrates how enthusiasm, autonomy and a passion for research could lead to significant professional growth. By continuously engaging in research activities, lecturers can enhance their teaching practices, stay updated with current trends, and contribute meaningfully to their academic fields. Cindy's story serves as an inspiration for other novice lecturers who aspire to balance teaching and research in their careers. These findings highlight the need for the institution to promote research engagement among EFL lecturers to enhance both their teaching practices and their contributions to the academic community.

## Scenario 2

Kate (*mid-career*) had been teaching English for 14 years. She earned her doctoral degree from a European university two years before. Her research journey began with her master's thesis in 2014, and her passion for research had grown ever since. She shared that, aiming for a doctoral scholarship, she consistently engaged in research to enhance her CV. Recognizing her initial lack of research skills, she collaborated with colleagues who had doctoral degrees to learn from their expertise. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that cultivating a sense of belongingness and social connection is crucial for enhancing this lecturer's intrinsic motivation to engage in research activities.

Kate emphasised the reciprocal relationship between teaching and research. She stated, "*Many of the research projects I undertook stemmed from real issues encountered in my teaching*". This integration not only enhanced the quality of teaching but also ensured that research remained relevant and impactful. The evidence of this study is aligned with Joseph-Richard et al.'s (2021) work, which confirmed that research-informed teaching positively affected all aspects of teaching practice. Hood (2022) also stated that effective research engagement occurs when it prompts teachers to reflect on and decide how to apply research findings, while addressing their specific needs and individually relevant topics. This study highlights that the dual role of university lecturers as both educators and researchers is important for fostering a dynamic academic environment where theory and practice inform each other.

Moreover, the role of support systems in Kate's journey could not be overstated. Kate reported, "*My husband's understanding and encouragement, given his own background as an EFL teacher, provides a crucial emotional and motivational boost*". This finding highlights the influence of Term 19 of the Vietnamese Marriage and Family Law, which regulates husband and wife are responsible for loving, being faithful to, respecting, supporting, caring for, and assisting each other, as well as sharing household duties (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2019). Based on SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), this study emphasises the broader societal and cultural importance of supportive relationships in achieving personal and professional goals. When partners actively support each other, it not only strengthens their bond but also enhances their individual capacities to handle life's challenges. Kate's experience illustrates that having a supportive partner could be a crucial factor in successfully balancing demanding roles, thereby contributing to overall well-being and job fulfilment.

Nevertheless, Kate did not require assistance from her academic managers and colleagues to conduct research. She narrated, "*I have to independently organise and manage my time to engage in research activities*". It could be explained that Kate's ability to conduct research independently, without assistance from her academic managers or colleagues, demonstrated her high level of competence and autonomy. Her doctoral degree and extensive research experience equipped her with the necessary skills to manage her research activities independently. However, this independence also reflected a lack of institutional support which could be detrimental to less experienced researchers who might not possess the same level of expertise. Drawing on SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), this study confirms that autonomy, competence, and relatedness support are crucial promoters for the researcher identity construction among EFL lecturers.

Additionally, Kate commented that “*My manager is indifferent to the well-being of EFL lecturers in our department. She focuses solely on our teaching responsibilities rather than research activities*”. This finding reveals a significant gap in institutional culture. This gap suggests that the institution prioritised teaching over research which could lead to dissatisfaction among lecturers who were enthusiastic about research. The findings from the document analysis undertaken in this study support Kate’s views that, while the university had set specific annual teaching and research hour requirements for lecturers, it merely encouraged rather than mandated their engagement in research activities (Global University, 2020). The evidence from this study is consistent with Phuong and McLean’s (2016) project which indicated that Vietnamese lecturers expressed dissatisfaction with some institutional policies such as inflexible administration and ineffective human resource management. These issues were seen as significant barriers to their professional growth. However, this finding does not correspond with Farsani and Babaii’s (2019) project, which found that almost 89% of participants indicated that their managers anticipated their involvement in research duties.

Moreover, Kate revealed that she dedicated 80% of her time to teaching-related tasks and only 20% to research. This disproportionate allocation of time left her feeling unsatisfied and disappointed, indicating a need for a more balanced approach to workload distribution. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) helps to explain that EFL lecturers are constantly engaged in dynamic interactions with the social world. This ongoing interplay between person and environment leads them to become either engaged, curious, connected, and whole, or demotivated, ineffective, and detached. The evidence from this study is consistent with those from international research (Heng et al., 2020; Kyaw, 2021). Particularly, Alhassan and Ali (2020) revealed that EFL teachers in Oman identified their workload due to many teaching hours as a prominent obstacle to their research engagement.

Despite these challenges, Kate remained actively engaged in research, as evidenced by her ongoing work on two manuscripts and her supervision of a student research project at the time of data collection. Additionally, her plans to collaborate on an institutional research project and attend international conferences and workshops the following year demonstrated her commitment to fostering her research career. However, her statement that “*I do not see myself as a researcher due to the limited time I can dedicate to research activities*” highlights the need for institutional changes to better support research endeavors. Kate also suggested that the university should create more favourable conditions and opportunities to support lecturers who had high motivation in doing research:

The University should provide EFL lecturers with more financial support when they have publications in high-ranking international journals. The school should organise some research groups and allocate suitable time in order to support lecturers who would like to take part in research activities.

Kate’s suggestions for improving support for research-active lecturers are particularly noteworthy. These measures could foster a more supportive research environment and help balance the demands of teaching and research. The findings from this study are consistent with Watkins and Donnelly’s (2022) project, which suggested that to develop policy that promotes collaborative research, it is essential to clearly understand the interrelationships among practice, research, and policy.

In conclusion, Kate’s (*mid-career*) journey demonstrates the importance of continuous PD, the challenges of balancing personal and professional life, and the critical role of support systems. Her narrative sheds light on the challenges faced by EFL lecturers who are passionate about research but are constrained by heavy teaching responsibilities and a lack of institutional support. It is important for the institution to address these issues through targeted support measures (e.g., financial incentives and structured research time) to enhance the research output and overall job satisfaction of lecturers. The institution should recognise the dual demands placed on lecturers and provide resources to support both teaching and research activities. Moreover, promoting a culture that values work-life balance can help diminish the personal sacrifices often associated with academic careers.

### Scenario 3

Ben (*late-career*), an English lecturer with over 35 years of experience, had dedicated a significant portion of his career to research. With a doctoral degree from an international university and a



promotion to associate professor five years before, Ben's journey in academia was marked by his deep involvement in research activities spanning more than two decades. His research interests included action research, curriculum design, teacher change, teacher beliefs, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

Ben's motivation and passion for research emerged as central to his professional identity. This participant narrated that *"My passion drives my research, and I recognize its significance for professional growth. Despite the limited financial support from the university, my motivation remains unaffected"*. This statement reflected a deep-seated belief in the value of research for individual and professional development. This intrinsic motivation was a critical factor in his sustained productivity despite the lack of institutional support. Grounded in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), it can be explained that Ben possessed innate psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness. When these needs were met, this *late-career* lecturer experienced a heightened sense of intrinsic motivation. Consequently, intrinsic motivation was an important condition for constructing his researcher identity. This finding aligns with existing literature that emphasises the role of motivation as a precondition for the EFL teachers to position themselves as researchers (Heng et al., 2020; Li & Xu, 2024; Nana & Jing, 2017). However, the evidence from this study raises questions about the adequacy of institutional support for researchers, particularly in terms of financial support. This finding is supported by Mai and Brundrett (2022) who found that Vietnamese teachers required support and encouragement, especially financial and other incentives, to engage in research activities. It is notable that addressing this challenge could further enhance the research productivity and professional satisfaction of EFL lecturers.

Ben also reported that his primary career motivation was conducting research, and he planned to pursue this PD path until he retires:

Engaging in research profoundly impacts my teaching. By participating in different research activities, I have significantly enhanced my professional expertise and skills. Research allows lecturers to explore their interests, passions, and identities. I believe that lecturers at all career stages should regularly engage in diverse research activities to stay updated with the latest trends in English language teaching.

It can be explained that engaging in research had significantly enhanced Ben's teaching skills and professional expertise. By staying engaged with current trends and developments in ELT through research, Ben not only improved his own knowledge but also enriched the learning experiences of his students. This dual benefit highlights the importance of integrating research activities into the professional routines of EFL lecturers at all career stages. Within the Vietnamese context, Vu's (2020) project found that together with the teaching duties, research is considered as mission impossible. Therefore, conducting research is a responsibility that academic institution expects lecturers to fulfil. (Hood, 2022) stated that continuing involvement with research can positively affect a teacher's sense of identity and their attitude toward their teaching practice.

Furthermore, professional and personal benefits derived from research activities are evident in Ben's career. He reported, *"I have published seven textbooks on teaching English and over 50 articles in both international and domestic journals"*. His extensive publication record and the professional recognition he had received were clear indicators of the professional benefits. Additionally, the personal satisfaction and growth he experienced through research contributed to his overall well-being and job satisfaction. This dual benefit framework supports the argument for encouraging lecturers to engage in research as a means of achieving holistic PD (Leuverink & Aarts, 2022).

The role of mentorship and supervision in enhancing research skills was also highlighted in Ben's story. He explained, *"To effectively guide my students, I need to read many books and journal articles. As a result, my research skills have significantly enhanced"*. By supervising doctoral and master's theses, Ben not only contributed to the academic growth of his students but also gained valuable insights and enhanced his own research skills. This reciprocal learning process benefited both the mentor and the mentees, fostering a collaborative academic environment.

Finally, the challenges and support systems in academic research are touched upon. Ben mentioned, *"I can conduct research autonomously, so I require minimal support from my manager and colleagues"*. It is evident that his ability to conduct research independently suggests a high level of autonomy and

self-efficacy. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) helps to explain that as Ben believed he possessed the skills, knowledge, and resources to succeed, he conducted research on his own. A sense of competence could play an essential part in autonomous behaviour.

Overall, Ben's (*late-career*) trajectory and experiences offer valuable insights into the symbiotic relationship between teaching and research in academia. His experiences highlight the benefits of sustained research engagement, the importance of intrinsic motivation, and the positive impact of research on teaching and PD. These findings suggest that the institution should foster an environment that supports and encourages research activities providing adequate resources and recognition to enhance the professional growth of lecturers at all career stages.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing on Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT, it is notable that the construction of researcher identities among Vietnamese university EFL lecturers is driven by three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings from this study show that the evolving nature of research interests and the ability to adapt to new challenges among EFL lecturers are important for sustained academic success. Additionally, the transformation from novice to experienced researcher involves an integration of formal education, practical experience, and strategic networking. Moreover, the role of mentorship and collaboration is crucial across all career stages of EFL lecturers facilitating skill development and knowledge exchange. These findings suggest that tailored support mechanisms, including mentorship programs, PD courses, and collaborative research opportunities are essential to foster and sustain the research trajectories of EFL lecturers at different career stages. By recognizing and addressing the specific needs of *early-career*, *mid-career*, and *late-career* researchers, the institution can promote a dynamic and productive research culture.

Through a narrative approach, the comparative analysis from the stories of Cindy (*early-career*), Kate (*mid-career*), and Ben (*late-career*) indicate that the process of the researcher identity construction by EFL lecturers is highly individualised but shaped by different contextual factors (e.g., institutional policies and family issues). Particularly, the Vietnamese cultural value such as "*Công, dung, ngôn, hạnh*" (fulfilling family responsibilities, maintaining a pleasing appearance, speaking appropriately, and exhibiting proper conduct) is a significant influence on lecturers' motivation for their engagement in research activities. Through addressing the challenges and supporting research engagement, the institution can foster a more dynamic, informed, and satisfied teaching workforce. It is also important for the institution to implement policies that support lecturers' research engagement at all career stages. This could include providing dedicated time for research, offering PD opportunities, and fostering a supportive research culture. Furthermore, recognizing and rewarding research contributions can motivate lecturers to pursue research activities alongside their teaching responsibilities. By addressing these issues, the institution can enhance job satisfaction, promote professional growth, and improve the quality of education provided.

In conclusion, the evidence from this study has provided a deeper understanding of the researcher identities among Vietnamese university EFL lecturers from a more comprehensive perspective. This study has filled a gap in the field of ELT in Vietnam and can be applied internationally. It adds to the expanding body of empirical studies that highlight the value of narrative research approach in exploring the construction of researcher identities among tertiary EFL lecturers.

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