



# A retrospective narrative inquiry into ecological influences on a high school EFL teacher's teacher-researcher identity negotiation

Phan Nhat Hao <sup>1\*</sup> , Tran Quoc Hung <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Can Tho University, Ninh Kieu District, Can Tho City, VIETNAM

\* Correspondence: [phannhathao85@gmail.com](mailto:phannhathao85@gmail.com)

**CITATION:** Phan, N. H., & Tran, Q. H. (2025). A retrospective narrative inquiry into ecological influences on a high school EFL teacher's teacher-researcher identity negotiation. *Educational Point*, 2(2), e124. <https://doi.org/10.71176/edup/16728>

## ARTICLE INFO

Received: 27 June 2025

Accepted: 15 July 2025

## OPEN ACCESS

## ABSTRACT

Teachers are ubiquitously theorized as agents of change capable of both facilitating learning and serving as educational teacher-researchers. The negotiation of teacher-researcher identity has garnered substantial scholarly attention in international discourse. In Vietnam, the majority of existing inquiries have primarily concentrated on tertiary-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lecturers, leaving an empirical gap concerning how contextual variables affect this identity reconstruction among other teacher populations. This retrospective narrative inquiry, endeavoring to bridge this gap, explored contextual influences on a Vietnamese high school EFL female teacher's identity negotiation through her Master's thesis-conducting experiences. The study adapted Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development as its theoretical framework. Data source included a two-round semi-structured narrative-framed interview with the primary participant, triangulated by an outsider-nominated interview. The data analysis followed Clandinin and Connelly's (1990, 2022) three-phase narrative analysis of broadening, burrowing, and storying/restorying. Findings unveiled how a four-layered ecological system, including individual, academic, institutional, and socio-cultural factors, aligning with micro-, meso-, exo-, and marco-sytem, respectively, affected such negotiation. The findings further showcased how thesis conducting acted as a catalyst for nurturing epistemological belief transformation, occupational enhancements, and multifaceted identity development as a language teacher. Implications and methodological recommendations were proposed to advise stakeholders to pedagogize their practices and inform future inquiries to expand this study's findings.

**Keywords:** contextual influences, graduate studies, thesis-conducting experiences, teacher-researcher identity, Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development

# INTRODUCTION

Across the modernized landscapes of 21<sup>st</sup>-century education, the occupational roles of teachers have grown increasingly multidimensional (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Barduhn & Johnson, 2009; Hermans, 2008). As Abednia (2012) affirmed, no longer positioned exclusively as providers and transmitters of knowledge, the new generation of teachers are professionally expected to be reflective practitioners, transformative agents of change, and, more pressingly, generators of knowledge. Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, this transformation has rendered the construction of a teacher-researcher identity a crucial yet complex endeavor (Barkhuizen, 2016). As research becomes intrinsically instilled into continuing professional development (CPD) models (Brazill, 2021), understanding how teachers negotiate such an identity becomes much-needed, especially in contexts undergoing a systemic reform and unpredictable internationalization (Bulloch, 2021; Çakmak & Çelik, 2024; Clark et al., 2022). Shedding light on this negotiation process is more likely to provide critical implications, both theoretically and pedagogically, for teacher training programs.

As a developing country in the Global South, Vietnam, with its educational potentials, provides a particularly compelling site for such inquiry (Le & Chen, 2018). Influenced by enduring Confucian-heritage values and undergoing substantial educational reforms, the country has continuously witnessed increasing expectations for teachers to engage in research-informed teaching practices (Nguyen & Vu, 2020). National directives, particularly the broader goals of the National Foreign Language Project (NFLP) 2020, have efficiently established an infrastructure wherein teachers are invited and even required, to conduct research as a component of their professional repertoire (Nguyen et al., 2020). Despite these growing imperatives, most empirical research continues to privilege the lived experiences of tertiary lecturers and experienced academics, unprecedentedly exploring how school-level EFL teachers, particularly those situated in socio-economically disadvantaged and culturally specific settings, navigate the demands of research within their professional realities. The voice of classroom practitioners in the peripheries remains under-represented, leaving a significant knowledge gap in understanding how contextual forces intertwine in shaping their emerging identities as teacher-researchers. This study, resultantly, sought to voice that silence. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development, this biographical narrative inquiry explored how contextual factors affected a high school EFL female teacher's teacher-researcher identity negotiation in pursuit of her graduate program including her writing a Master's thesis in English Language Teaching (ELT). Situated in the Mekong Delta region, her stories to live by embodied the tensions and triumphs of reconciling research aspirations with teaching responsibilities, cultural duties, and professional ideals. Ultimately, on nesting her experiences into an ecological framework, the study revealed the dynamic interplay of individual motivations, academic engagements, institutional conditions, and broader sociocultural ideologies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Teacher-Researcher Identity Negotiation

As Holland et al. (1998) conceptualized, the concept of "identity" concerns how individuals respond to the question of who they really are. Expanding upon this perspective, Hermans (2003) assumed that the concept entails what professional roles each person carries with their social status and stature. Accordingly, across different occupational domains, how identity is conceptualized strictly depends on specific roles (Hermans, 2008), responsibilities (Hsieh, 2010), cultural expectations (Kaasila et al., 2021), and values intrinsically associated with that profession (Lu, 2024), ultimately enacting unique professional identities (Wu, 2023). Critically, Lu and Yoon (2024) mentioned that such identity reflects a fluid, multidimensional construct which are formed, reformed, or even dissolved through teachers' engagements with pedagogical practices,

professional learning institutional cultures, and broader societal expectations. Within the educational sphere, this identity is expressed through the manners teachers perceive themselves in relation to their occupational roles, accountability, and the meanings they attach to their profession (Mai & Brundrett, 2024; Medina, 2020). Within the classification of teachers' professional identities, teacher-researcher identity has gained increasing prominence. Particularly, such identity is believed to be as an essential component of educational transformation and curriculum reforms (Ngo & Trinh, 2025).

Teachers who partake in research carry with them the belief that research itself serves as a tool for pedagogical refinement and professional empowerment (Craig, 2007). Through critical processes (e.g., formulating research questions, synthesizing literature review, designing methodologies, collecting and analyzing data, writing reports, sharing insights with stakeholders, and scientific publications), teachers deepen their understanding of teaching, learning, and researching (Dikilitaş & Yaylı, 2018). Within the field of ELT, teacher research functions as a space for individual agency and reflective exploration (Henry, 2019). It offers teachers opportunities to expand their influence beyond the classroom, gain recognition in academic circles, and participate meaningfully in educational conversations (Heng et al., 2020; Nana & Jing, 2017). Leuverink and Aarts (2018) identified six inter-related features which characterize teacher research. Specifically, such research 1) stems from authentic classroom practices, 2) adheres to systematic procedures, 3) concentrates on ameliorating instructions, 4) appreciates collaborative inquiries, 5) remains intrinsically-ingrained within local settings, and 6) alters continuously over time and space. Arguably, these features collectively interact in dynamic ways and substantiate the continuous development of a teacher-researcher identity as a sustained dimension of professional growth (Mason et al., 2024). Conceptualized in the current study, this identity is a central expression of how an in-service Vietnamese high school EFL female teacher experienced and interpreted her professional self during a two-year Master's program, particularly her lived experiences in thesis-conducting, which emphasized academic inquiry and reflective teaching.

The construction of teacher-researcher identity unfolds across multiple ecological layers, encompassing personal experiences, academic standards, institutional dynamics, and socio-cultural currents (Kırca, & Glover, 2021; Prabandari et al., 2024; Wu, 2023). On the individual level, teachers' experiences with research hold an essential role in shaping beliefs about knowledge, inquiry, and classroom practices (Çakmak & Çelik, 2024). Through such engagements, teachers refine their sense of purpose and deepen their emotional and intellectual connection to the work of research. Institutional structures also contribute significantly. Research expectations, academic discourses, and organizational cultures surrounding inquiry often mediate how teachers position themselves in relation to knowledge production (Dikilitaş & Yaylı, 2018). Where institutional support aligns with teachers' personal aspirations, research becomes integrated more meaningfully into their professional trajectories (Nana & Jing, 2017; Vandamme, 2018). The pedagogical environment further serves as a catalyst for identity development. Collaborative learning, supervisorship, and opportunities to engage with curriculum development create rich contexts in which teachers explore and extend their researcher roles (Beijaard et al., 2000; Kırca, & Glover, 2021; Ngo et al., 2024). These spaces foster academic confidence and critical self-awareness and research-competency amelioration. Finally, socio-cultural dynamics also exert a powerful influence on teacher-researcher identity (Lu, 2024; Wu, 2023). These broader forces possibly transform what counts as valid knowledge and the role of research in teaching. As methodology trends and national expectations alter, teachers must remain agile and reflective, re-configuring their research approaches to staying professionally relevant. Such socio-cultural alterations are more likely to reorient teachers' place within the educational ecosystem (Wang & Fang, 2025).

## Related Studies into Contextual Influences on EFL Teachers' Teacher-Researcher Identity Negotiation

In recent years, the relationships between contextual conditions and the reformation of teacher-researcher identities have attracted growing attention in educational research worldwide. Numerous studies have been in an agreement that this identity is intricately interwoven with institutional structures, personal histories, and sociocultural environments.

Internationally, Nana and Jing (2017) investigated the professional identity development of Chinese EFL lecturers through the lens of contextual factors. Their findings illustrated that both social and academic environments significantly informed how participants navigated their dual roles as teachers and researchers. Personal factors (e.g., internal motivation, academic achievements, and access to research networks) also influenced the trajectory of identity formation. In the Indonesian context, Prabandari et al. (2024) qualitatively examined the barriers EFL teachers encountered while conducting action research and building their research identity. Their findings revealed persistent struggles with research engagement, fundamentally caused in institutional limitations. These systemic constraints were found to mediate teachers' understandings of their research competency and led to identity renegotiation. Similarly, Çakmak and Çelik (2024) explored the perspectives of pre-service and experienced Turkish teachers regarding their engagement in research. Their study outlined three phases of teacher-researcher identity development, including exploration, engagement, and sustained growth, each impacted by a complex interplay among individual agency, institutional culture, and social interaction.

In Vietnam, although the concept of teacher-researcher identity has begun to receive scholarly attention, current research remains centered largely on university lecturers. For instance, Ngo et al. (2024) examined how contextual variables shaped Vietnamese EFL lecturers' research identities using an ecological lens. They found that identity development was conditioned by the dynamic interaction between personal agency and broader contextual constraints. Likewise, in an autoethnographic account, Le and Pham (2024) narrated the reflective journey of a male lecturer who simultaneously assumed the roles of language educator, researcher, and cultural mediator. His identity was continuously under the moments of tension, reflection, and adaptation across social, cultural, and professional domains.

While these studies have illuminated how experienced teachers, particularly those in higher education, construct their teacher-researcher identities within contextually rich environments, one notable knowledge gap remains under-explored. Empirical research focusing specifically on other teacher populations enrolling in graduate programs and how they navigate, negotiate, and reconstruct their teacher-researcher identity during the thesis-writing phase of the Master's learning journey is still scarce. Particularly, a single-case narrative inquiry is much-needed to clarify the breadth of identity negotiation experiences across diverse teachers' professional backgrounds, thereby extending current understandings beyond the higher education sphere.

## Graduate Studies in ELT in Vietnam

In the current circumstances of socio-economic transformation and internationalized integration, graduate education in Vietnam has gradually experienced greatest alterations in its philosophy and structure. Initially inheriting from Soviet academic legacies, graduate studies were once characterized by highly-centralized governance and rigid disciplinary boundaries (Kelly, 2000). However, the nation's move toward economic liberalization in the late twentieth century, particularly following the launch of the Renovation policy in 1986, signaled a departure from these traditions. Since then, Vietnam's graduate education system has sought greater alignment with global educational standards by incorporating more autonomous, flexible, and learner-centered approaches (Tran & Swierczek, 2009). These reform efforts have become especially visible in the

design of Master's programs, which now strive to bridge theoretical grounding with practical applicability. Typically spanning two academic years, such programs culminate in a substantial graduation thesis, which serves as a rite of passage and a mechanism for cultivating scholarly habits of mind. One notable turning point in negotiating graduate trajectories occurred when Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007. This milestone catalyzed national recognition of English as a strategic resource in global competitiveness, prompting systemic investment in English language education as a foundation for human capital development (Bui & Nguyen, 2016).

In response to such national imperatives, the Vietnamese Government launched the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (NFLP 2020) in 2008. This ambitious initiative sought to elevate the quality of ELT through a competency-based framework and to foster a new generation of language teachers equipped for reform-oriented classrooms. EFL teachers have since been re-conceptualized as central actors in the success of these policy directions, positioned as not only knowledge-implementers but also innovation-makers and agents of change with personal agency and insights into their professional landscapes. Among various avenues for CPD, enrollment in Master's programs has emerged as a particularly impactful pathway for in-service teachers. These programs offer more than just credentialing opportunities yet function as platforms where teachers are pedagogically trained to deepen pedagogical expertise, expand research literacy, and engage critically with the complexities of teaching in rapidly evolving educational environments (Nguyen et al., 2020).

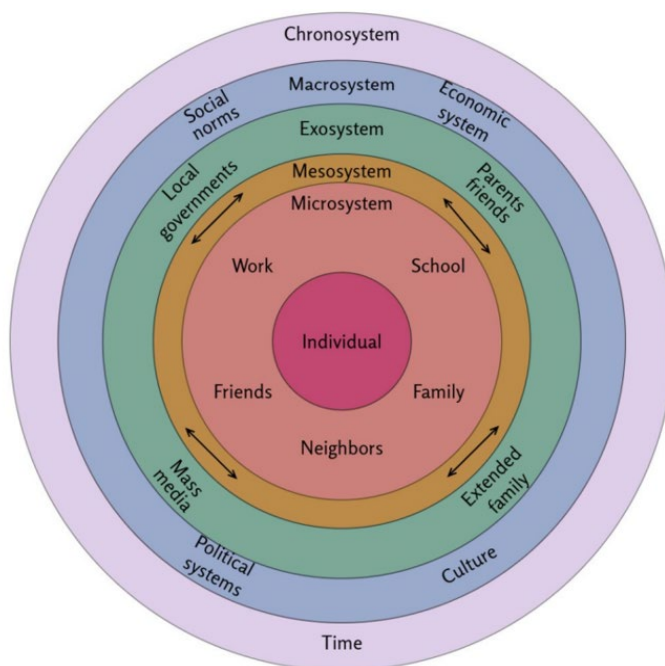
Delivered by leading universities specializing in EFL teacher education, such programs fundamentally encompass core modules in teaching language skills, curriculum-and-course development, testing and assessment, second language acquisition, and the "soul" of these programs, educational research. Notably, the cultivation of research competencies is placed at the heart of these curricula as a transformative process. This thereby empowers teachers to interrogate their classroom realities, generate locally-grounded solutions to pressing educational issues, and partake in the wider academic communities. Through research-based learning, Master's students are encouraged to problematize entrenched practices, reflect on contextual challenges, and articulate pedagogical responses ingrained in evidence and experience. As they navigate the dual roles of teacher-practitioner and emerging teacher-researcher, these teachers undergo substantial shifts in how they understand their professional selves. The graduate classrooms, thus, are perceived as a site for identity reconstruction and negotiation wherein the traditional image of the teacher as transmitter of knowledge gives way to a more complex portrait of the teacher as inquirer, collaborator, and contributor to knowledge production.

## Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

This study was theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development (ESTHD). This theory offers a multi-layered lens for understanding how individuals are embedded within and influenced by a constellation of socio-institutional contexts. Although the theory is initially developed to explain the development among children, its insights prove relevant for examining that among adults, particularly in interdependent systems, with an inclusion of the field of education.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) considered human development "the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (p. 21). Indeed, his first model conceptualizes these environmental influences as interrelated systems which are nested within one another as "a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). Each level of the model provides a unique perspective on contextual influences shaping human development. Each level of the model provides a unique perspective on contextual influences shaping human development (See [Figure 1](#)). Firstly, the microsystem encompasses

immediate environments wherein the individual is actively involved. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) described, it consists of “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (p. 22). Moving outward, the mesosystem refers to where the interconnections among multiple microsystems are examined to form a network of interrelated contexts. Next, the exosystem refers to “one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (p. 25). Taking broader dimensions into consideration, the macrosystem encompasses cultural, ideological, and structural conditions through the individual is nurtured and educated. It is regarded as “the level of the sub-culture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies” (p. 26). As the outermost layer, the chronosystem is the dimension of critical events, comprising life transitions, historical events, and developmental changes which both expectedly and unexpectedly occur over the course of the individual’s life.



**Figure 1.** Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) five-layered nested ecological system (Guy-Evans, 2020, p. 2)

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) first model is perceived as particularly appropriate to be adapted for the current study for two compelling reasons. Firstly, it offers a well-informed lens to examine how multiple layers of context interact to influence the participant’s evolving sense of self as a teacher-researcher. Secondly, the theory supports an examination of identity negotiation as a situated and relational process, emphasizing how personal agency is continually mediated by surrounding ecological forces. Although Bronfenbrenner later expanded his model to include the chronosystem, this study did not adopt that system because it did not trace the participant’s identity development across an extended temporal span. As Christensen (2016) re-evaluated, the theory is “beneficial in proving an insight into all the factors that play a role in the growth and development of individuals. It also shows how all the factors are related to each other and impact on the development cycle” (p. 24). This model, accordingly, provided an invaluable interpretive tool for understanding how a secondary school EFL teacher in Vietnam experienced and navigated the development of a teacher-researcher identity while enrolling in a graduate program. It allows for an exploration of not only individual agency but also the intersecting institutional and societal structures that influence identity construction over time. In particular,



Vietnam's education system is characterized by a centralized control and hierarchical organization under the leadership of the Government, which also aligns well with the layered logic of Bronfenbrenner's original model.

Informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ESTHD, the current study aimed to address the following question: *How do ecological factors affect the teacher-researcher identity negotiation of a Vietnamese high school EFL teacher navigating a Master's thesis-conducting?*

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted a biographical narrative inquiry approach to exploring the contextual influences on the negotiation of a Vietnamese EFL teacher's identity as a teacher-researcher. As Holland et al. (1998) asserted that with narratives, "people tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves, and they try to act as though they are who they say they are" (p. 3). Connelly and Clandinin (2000) further evaluated that people recall their "stories as inquirers, it is experience, not narrative, that is the driving impulse [...] narrative inquiry is a way to study experience; narrative is the closest we can come to experience" (p. 188). As a result, this methodological choice allowed for a close examination of the participant's lived experiences as expressed through personal stories situated in a three-dimensional framework (i.e., temporality, sociality, and spatiality). Furthermore, the introspective aspect centered on her internal reflections, emotional responses, and meaning-making processes on past-driven experiences, especially during moments of transformation throughout conducting her Master's graduation thesis. In alignment with this view, the study treated the participant's narratives as expressions of self-understanding shaped by ecological factors within her teaching context, graduate learning environment, and wider educational system. The storytelling process, therefore, created space for deep self-reflections, allowing the participant to articulate her beliefs, trace shifts in her thinking, and highlight the significance of particular factors affecting her journey toward becoming a newly-emerging teacher-researcher.

### Research Context and Participant

The current study was conducted at Star University (Pseudonym), a public tertiary institution located in the Mekong Delta region. Furthermore, the study focused on a Master's program in ELT entitled Principles and Methods of English Language Education (translated into Vietnamese as Lý luận và phương pháp dạy học bộ môn tiếng Anh) (Phan et al., 2025). The program follows a research-based approach, aiming to nurture Master's students' competencies in critical inquiries, pedagogical reflection, and research engagement. Its curriculum encompasses 60 credits, combining lectures, practice-based sessions, and independent self-regulated learning. Among these, 27 credits are dedicated to developing research competencies, including a 15-credit graduation thesis which requires individual implementation. Another 29 credits are devoted to several critical domains within the field of ELT (e.g., second language acquisition, curriculum and course design, testing and assessment, teaching language skills, and teachers' professional development). The final 4 credits are reserved for philosophical foundations, supporting Master's students in building a strong theoretical research background in epistemology, ontology, and axiology. Upon completion of the requirements of all coursework, each student is expected to conduct an independent graduation thesis within 8 months and under the supervision of one or two academic supervisors. The thesis is evaluated through an oral defense presented to a panel of five committee members, all of whom assess the thesis based on its academic rigor, logical organization, coherence of academic expression, and the significance in its contribution to the field, using a ten-point scale.

The primary participant for the current study was pseudonymized as Hiền, a female EFL teacher with over fifteen years of teaching experience at the high school level. During the 2024 to 2025 academic year, when her information was gathered for the study, she was in her late thirties and had been working at the same public high school throughout her entire teaching career. She completed a Bachelor's degree in English Teacher Education at a regional university in 2010, after which she was officially recruited as a full-time teacher at her current school. The school is located in a rural town of the Mekong Delta, where educational practices have been affected by modest resources and the pressure of national examinations. Her students mostly originated from agriculture-based families with modest educational support. Despite being faced with such students' conditions, she was well regarded for her professional dedication and was responsible for teaching classes with higher academic demands, especially those preparing for the national exam. After several years in the profession, she sought deeper pedagogical understanding and more reflective teaching methodologies and approaches.

In 2017, she decided to enroll in the research-based Master's program at Star University. This decision marked a significant turning point in her CPD. Throughout her time in graduate studies, she showcased strong academic commitment by balancing her teaching responsibilities with all coursework and research-related activities. Her engagement in research further became particularly visible during the final stage of her program, when she completed a graduation thesis in 2019. The thesis, which explored the implementation of e-portfolios to enhance the writing performance of twelfth-grade students at her school, followed a mixed-methods approach and addressed practical concerns in her own classroom. The thesis process reflected a transformation in her approach to knowledge and teaching. Over the course of the program, she developed a clearer sense of professional identity as both a teacher-practitioner and a newly emerging teacher-researcher. Besides, she actively participated in research seminars and collaborated with colleagues, teacher educators, research professors, and thesis supervisors. All of them critically influenced her re-conceptualization of herself as part of an academic community that values inquiry and professional growth.

## Data Collection and Analysis

To examine how ecological factors influenced the negotiation of Hiền's identity as a teacher-researcher during her thesis-conducting experiences. The main source of data comprised two-round semi-structured narrative-informed interviews with her. The structure and sequencing of the interviews were informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ESTHD. In line with this theoretical lens, the first-round interview, conducted during the 2024-2025 academic year and lasting for 79 minutes, concentrated on her surrounded microsystem and mesosystem. Questions prompted her to recount daily interactions in the classroom, relationships with her family, students and colleagues, and immediate experiences within the Master's program. These accounts provided insights into the personal and academic environments where her initial orientations toward research emerged and were re-examined. Subsequently, the second-round interview, held three weeks later and lasting for 61 minutes, extended the inquiry to the exosystem and macrosystem. This session explored her engagement with institutional mandates, curriculum requirements, national policy pressures, and broader cultural narratives surrounding EFL teachers and educational research. Besides, in this interview, she was invited to reflect on how these outer layers of influence intersected with her inner world of beliefs, aspirations, and evolving understandings of her professional selves.

To enhance the trustworthiness of Hiền's stories to live by, a supplementary interview was conducted with one of Hiền's former classmates, pseudonymized as Hậu. He was recommended by Hiền due to their history of academic win-win collaboration throughout the program. His 45-minute interview mirrored the structure of Hiền's interviews, focusing first on the interpersonal and academic environments they shared, followed by his interpretations of external pressures and institutional dynamics that, in his points of view, contributed to professional identity shifts in Hiền's research engagement and professional commitments. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. The



transcripts were later translated into English by the researcher and cross-verified by two experienced bilingual interpreters to ensure conceptual equivalence and preserve the emotional and narrative texture of participants' accounts. Data analysis was carried out in alignment with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ESTHD and followed a three-phase narrative procedure comprising broadening, burrowing, and storying and restorying (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, 2022). In the first phase, the researchers reviewed transcripts repeatedly to identify key moments across ecological layers. The second phase involved coding the data thematically, attending to the content of belief transitions and the contextual conditions that triggered or sustained such transitions. The final phase focused on reconstructing her educational and professional journey into a coherent narrative arc foregrounded temporality, emotional resonance, and the interconnected systems that contributed to the ongoing negotiation of her teacher-researcher identity.

## Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

This study was deployed with a strong commitment to ethical responsibilities and qualitative rigors. All research procedures complied with institutional ethical guidelines for human subject research. Prior to participation, each interviewee received a clear explanation of the study's purposes, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their rights to withdraw at any stage without subsequent consequences. Written informed consent had been obtained before data collection. Participants were fully aware that their narratives would be interpreted within a theoretical framework and potentially presented in academic publications. To safeguard their privacy, all personal identifiers were removed, and in particular, pseudonyms were used throughout the reporting process.

The study also attended closely to the principles of trustworthiness to enhance the authenticity of the findings. Drawing on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative perspective, four dimensions were critically addressed. First and foremost, credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data and repeated interactions with the focal participant, allowing for richer storytelling and clarification of meanings. Member checking was, besides, employed at key stages of analysis, where both participants were invited to review emergent interpretations and provide feedback on the reconstructed narrative. Secondly, transferability was addressed through thick and contextualized descriptions. Detailed portrayals of the participant's background, institutional setting, and social environment were provided to enable readers to judge the relevance of the findings to other contexts with similar characteristics. Thirdly, dependability was supported by maintaining a clear and systematic research process. An audit trail documenting the research design, data collection procedures, analytic steps, and decisions made during interpretation was preserved to allow for transparency and possible external review. Last but not least, confirmability was reinforced through reflexive practices. The researchers maintained a journal to record personal biases, emotional responses, and evolving positionality throughout the inquiry. This reflexive process served to minimize interpretive distortion and foreground the participants' voice rather than the researchers' assumptions.

## FINDINGS

During eight months of thesis-conducting experiences, Hiền encountered some critical events which collectively negotiated her teacher-researcher identity in the field of ELT. These included altruistic motivation, epistemological beliefs, academic assistance, publication experiences, managerial and collegial support, national educational reform policies, and teacher professionalization in the current context of internationalization.

## Altruistic Motivation

Hiền's teacher-researcher identity developed through a deep sense of ethical responsibility toward her students. Working in a rural school where learners came from farming families, she became increasingly aware of the limitations they faced in accessing quality education. She viewed her research as an opportunity to design lessons which could ignite interest and support her students' future growth.

Reflecting on her teaching context, she shared her frustrations and her hopes,

*"My learners mostly come from farming families. To be honest, they do not see my subject as important. They just want to pass exams and be done with it. Sometimes, I feel so helpless when I see them studying just enough to get by without realizing how English could open doors for their future. I look at them and wonder, what can I do to spark some interest? What can I change in my teaching so that they might see a little more value in learning? That was why I tried to do a good job with my thesis to create lessons actually worth something to them, lessons which could maybe, just maybe, plant a seed of curiosity. That was also enough!" (Hiền, interview round-one)*

Her sense of duty guided her through difficult periods during the thesis process. Whenever exhaustion surfaced, she reminded herself of the students who needed the most encouragement. She narrated,

*"Sometimes, when I stayed up late working on my thesis, I asked myself if it was even worth it. Would anything change? Would anyone notice my effort? I sat there staring at my laptop, wondering why I was putting myself through all that. Then I thought about the shy kids who never dared to speak up in class, the ones who had already decided that English was not for them. If my project could help even one of them feel more confident, just a little bit, raise their hand once, write a sentence they are proud of, then all effort, all the long nights, and moments of doubt would be worth it." (Hiền, interview round-one)*

Her research decisions were consistently grounded in real classroom dynamics. She imagined how her students would respond to each activity and task, keeping their needs central to her process. She revealed,

*"When planning my thesis, I kept picturing my own classes. I imagined the learners' faces when they encounter a task that feels achievable instead of overwhelming. Every question I drafted, every step I designed, I asked myself, would this make a difference in their experience of learning? Would they feel more involved, more capable? Everything I did was with them in mind. I wanted my research not to stay on paper but to make sense when I return to my classroom." (Hiền, interview round-one)*

In brief, these reflections implied the essential role of altruistic motivation in reconstructing Hiền's teacher-researcher identity. Her commitment extended beyond completing a degree to fulfilling a personal mission ingrained in equity and quality. She re-conceptualized research as a practical response to the disengagement she observed in her students. Through this moral investment, she subsequently repositioned herself as a teacher-researcher whose sense of purpose was oriented by student-centered values and a desire to create a transformative impact in a rural educational context.

## Epistemological Beliefs

Concerning her value systems, Hiền's teacher-researcher identity was determined by her personal values and beliefs about knowledge and knowing. She placed strong emphasis on sincerity, consistent effort, and individual integrity. These beliefs reoriented her approach to teaching and research endeavors. She reflected on the meaning of her Master's learning journey as,

*“For me, pursuing a Master’s degree are not just about getting a degree to hang on the wall. It should be perceived as building something inside myself no one can take away. If I put real effort into understanding and creating something useful, it will pay off someday. Maybe not immediately, maybe not even in obvious ways, but the knowledge will stay with me forever.” (Hiền, interview round-one)*

She maintained this mindset throughout her thesis process. She believed that sincere learning shaped not only knowledge but also character. This belief motivated her to treat the thesis-conducting process as an opportunity to redefine her teaching and contribute to the profession.

She also gave advice to those embarking on the same journey as stating that,

*“When you study with your heart in it, it shapes the way you think, the way you live, and the way you teach, the way you influence others. I approached my thesis as an investment for my future teaching, and for the kind of person I want to become.” (Hiền, interview round-one)*

Her values instilled in her a stronger concentration in moments of comparison and self-doubt. She regarded knowledge as something that grew over time, through personal patience and consistent effort. She revealed,

*“I do not believe in quick results. If we work hard, take the time to really dive deep into what we are studying, and stay patient, outcomes will be satisfying. It might take time, even years, but good results come from sincerity, not shortcuts or last-minute cramming.” (Hiền, interview round-one)*

Hiền’s value system functioned as an anchor during the long and uncertain process of thesis conducting. Her beliefs about deep learning helped her stay calm and focused, even when others appeared to progress faster. This internal orientation encouraged her to define success through growth and reflection rather than competition or comparison. Her perspective of education resembled the image of a planted seed.

## Academic Assistance

Throughout her thesis process, Hiền received various forms of academic assistance that contributed significantly to her growth as a teacher-researcher. The support she gained from her supervisor, her peers, and the thesis committee, whose assistance served as guidance and emotional encouragement, reinforcing her belief in the value of collaboration and constructive feedback in the research process.

She expressed deep appreciation for her thesis supervisor whose detailed and consistent feedback helped impact the quality of her thesis. She recalled the supervisor’s investment in her progress as:

*“My thesis supervisor was very supportive throughout the whole process. She did not just give me general comments like “good” or “needs improvement”; she went through my writing line by line, fixing spelling mistakes, grammar errors, and showing me how to make my arguments more logical. She shared a lot of research materials, journal articles, and reliable websites to me to search for further information. She explained how to write more academically, like how to synthesize ideas better. Every time I received her feedback, even when it was full of ‘red lines’, I felt so motivated. She genuinely cared about my progress, and that made me want to try even harder to not disappoint her.” (Hiền, interview round-one)*

In addition to her supervisor, she benefited from close collaboration with a peer group. Together, they exchanged drafts, offered suggestions, and encouraged one another throughout the demanding research journey. She told,

*“I was also lucky to have a small group of friends who were doing their theses. We would send drafts to each other almost every week and give honest comments. In some cases, they caught*

*the things which I missed, like unclear ideas and weak transitions. We learned together, and we laughed a lot too. Knowing we had each other's backs made the stressful process much more bearable and even kind of fun sometimes.” (Hiền, interview round-one)*

After completing her thesis defense, she received detailed feedback from the thesis evaluation committee. Instead of feeling anxious, she appreciated this as an opportunity for refinement and took the comments seriously. She shared,

*“After my thesis defense, the committee gave me very detailed feedback. They pointed out where my arguments were strong, where my evidence was weak, and how I could reorganize some parts of my discussion to make it clearer. I revised as what they told me to do. I did not feel discouraged at all. I felt grateful because it showed they had taken my work seriously, and their suggestions really helped me improve the quality of my thesis before the final submission.” (Hiền, interview round-one)*

The combination of supervisory assistance, Master’s peer collaboration, and committee feedback provided Hiền with a robust academic support network. Each source of assistance contributed uniquely to her development. Furthermore, each also facilitated her to cultivate greater persistence, academic humility, and intellectual maturity, all of which were critical dimensions in the negotiating of her teacher-researcher identity.

## Publication Experiences

Beyond completing her thesis, Hiền also engaged in the process of academic publication, which further shaped her teacher-researcher identity. This phase introduced her to new dimensions of scholarly communication, including academic writing for a broader audience, navigating feedback from journal reviewers, and managing the emotional weight of sharing her work publicly.

Her first steps into publication involved adapting her thesis into a manuscript. She described the shift in mindset required when writing for an academic journal,

*“Writing the thesis and writing for a journal felt very different. With the thesis, I focused on completing the requirements and telling my story. For the article, I needed to tighten my argument, make it clearer to others who do not know my context, and follow strict formatting. I read a lot of sample articles and spent many days revising just one paragraph. It felt harder, but I enjoyed the challenge. It made me think more sharply.” (Hiền, interview round-one)*

She recalled the emotional experience of receiving reviewers’ comments. They were detailed and sometimes demanding, yet she viewed them as a valuable learning opportunity that helped her grow as a writer and researcher. She told,

*“When I received the reviewers’ comments, I felt a mix of emotions. Some parts made me proud because they saw the value in my topic. Other comments pointed out where I needed to be clearer, more critical, or more precise. I spent a week reading them over and over. Each time, I felt more motivated to improve. I told myself, if they took time to give this much feedback, then my work deserved to be better. That thought gave me energy.” (Hiền, interview round-one)*

After her paper was accepted, she shared a deep sense of fulfillment. For her, the acceptance reflected her personal transformation and the value of perseverance. She happily exposed,

*“When I saw the acceptance email, I paused and just stared at the screen. I thought about all the late nights, the doubts, the revisions. Seeing my name in print, with the name of my school, felt unreal. It showed me that someone like me could do research, could write, and could contribute. I shared the article with my colleagues and students.” (Hiền, interview round-one)*

These publication experiences played a powerful role in reinforcing Hiền's emerging identity as a teacher-researcher. The process taught her that academic writing could become a tool for agency, voice, and impact. She learned to treat feedback as collaboration, to write with audience awareness, and to value the long, reflective nature of scholarly contribution. Most importantly, she discovered that her voice has been heard in the wider academic conversation.

## Managerial and Collegial Support

Her research journey unfolded within a supportive institutional environment wherein managerial flexibility and collegial collaboration played a significant role. The encouragement she received from school leaders and fellow teachers sustained her motivation, particularly during times of exhaustion and uncertainty. These forms of support served as both emotional reassurance and practical assistance, enabling her to maintain momentum and purposes throughout the thesis process.

She described how her school administrators accommodated her needs during critical periods of research as follows,

*"During the time I worked on my thesis, the school allowed me to adjust my teaching schedule when I needed. My principal often asked how my research was going. I wowed. They cared about my thesis progress. That kind of support were meaningful beyond just earning a degree. It motivated me to keep pushing through even when balancing everything became tiring." (Hiền, interview round-two)*

Her colleagues in the English department contributed to her progress by offering academic input and emotional presence. They engaged in her research as supporters and collaborators. Acknowledging their engagement, she narrated,

*"Teachers in my English department were my second family. As I needed participants, they were ready to help. They even sat down with me to brainstorm better ways to conduct certain tasks when I felt stuck. They reminded me that research could be collaborative, and that I was not alone." (Hiền, interview round-two)*

In more informal settings, Hiền found comfort and strength in everyday conversations with her peers. These exchanges helped her process feelings of doubt and renewed her energy. Her energy was also recognized by Hậu who shared,

*"Sometimes she felt stuck or unsure how to move forward. I just sat down with her after my classes for a quick chatchit. We listened, shared our own struggles with "sáng kiến kinh nghiệm", and reminded ourselves, it was normal to feel overwhelmed." (Hậu, outsider-nominated interview)*

Collectively, these experiences revealed how managerial and collegial supports functioned as a vital ecosystem around Hiền's teacher-researcher development. Such assistance affirmed her efforts and provided her with the emotional resilience needed to carry her research forward.

## Educational Reform Policies

Educational reform policies served as a powerful contextual force that influenced Hiền's identity construction as a teacher-researcher. These reforms, particularly those that emphasized the importance of integrating research into ELT, broadened her conception of what it meant to be an educator. Policy-driven encouragement gave her the institutional legitimacy and moral motivation to engage with inquiry-based teaching practices.

She shared her appreciation for the educational reforms that supported innovation and research engagement among schoolteachers. She exposed,

*“I appreciate the recent educational reforms that encourage teachers to innovate and integrate research into their practices in our foreign language teaching. I think, these policies create more room for teachers to experiment, to reflect, and to find better ways to support their learners. My thesis was a small contribution to improving how we teach English in high school classrooms.”*  
(Hiền, interview round-two)

This recognition illustrated how she linked policy discourse with classroom realities. She gradually changed her mind that research could serve as a catalyst for change at every level. Her belief in research as a shared professional responsibility reflected this evolving view as she told,

*“As I early mentioned, before studying for my Master’s degree, I used to think that doing research was something only university professors needed to worry about. But now, after experiencing the process myself, I believe that teachers at any level should engage in research, whether in primary school, secondary schools, high schools, or even kindergarten schools. It helps us understand our learners better, improve our methods, and stay motivated to keep growing professionally.”*  
(Hiền, interview round-two)

Her reflection signaled a profound transformation in how she positioned herself within the educational landscape. From this conviction, she offered advice and encouragement to others as follows,

*“Through my thesis journey, I must acknowledge to you that research is about solving real problems, answering real questions, and making our teaching more meaningful. I would prefer to advise teachers to experience this process. It is challenging, yes, but it makes you more capable and fulfilled in your work.”* (Hiền, interview round-two)

These perspectives illustrated her growing advocacy for research-informed teaching. She embraced the idea that research enriched classroom practices, enhanced teacher autonomy, and built stronger connections between pedagogical theory and daily instruction. As a result, she transformed herself more confident in her research competencies and emerged as a vocal proponent for a culture of teacher-led inquiry.

## Teacher Professionalism

Interestingly, Hiền’s thesis journey aligned closely with her evolving sense of professional identity. She regarded the research process as more than a graduation requirement; it became a transformative pathway toward teacher professionalization. Each phase of thesis writing deepened her understanding of what it meant to be a responsible, capable, and future-oriented educator.

Rather than simply delivering content knowledge, she aimed to engage learners through her informed, responsive pedagogy. She told,

*“When planning my thesis, I kept picturing my own classes. I imagined the learners’ faces when they encounter a task that feels achievable instead of overwhelming. Every question I drafted, every step I designed, I asked myself, would this make a difference in their experience of learning? Everything I did was with them in mind.”* (Hiền, interview round-two)

Her commitment to improving student learning guided her throughout the thesis. She further emphasized the role of research in strengthening her long-term teaching trajectory, and she recalled,

*“I approached my thesis as an investment for my future teaching, and for the kind of person I want to become. I think when teachers grow, learners grow too. I want to keep learning, keep improving,*



*so I can create better learning environments where students feel encouraged and understood.”*  
(Hiền, interview round-two)

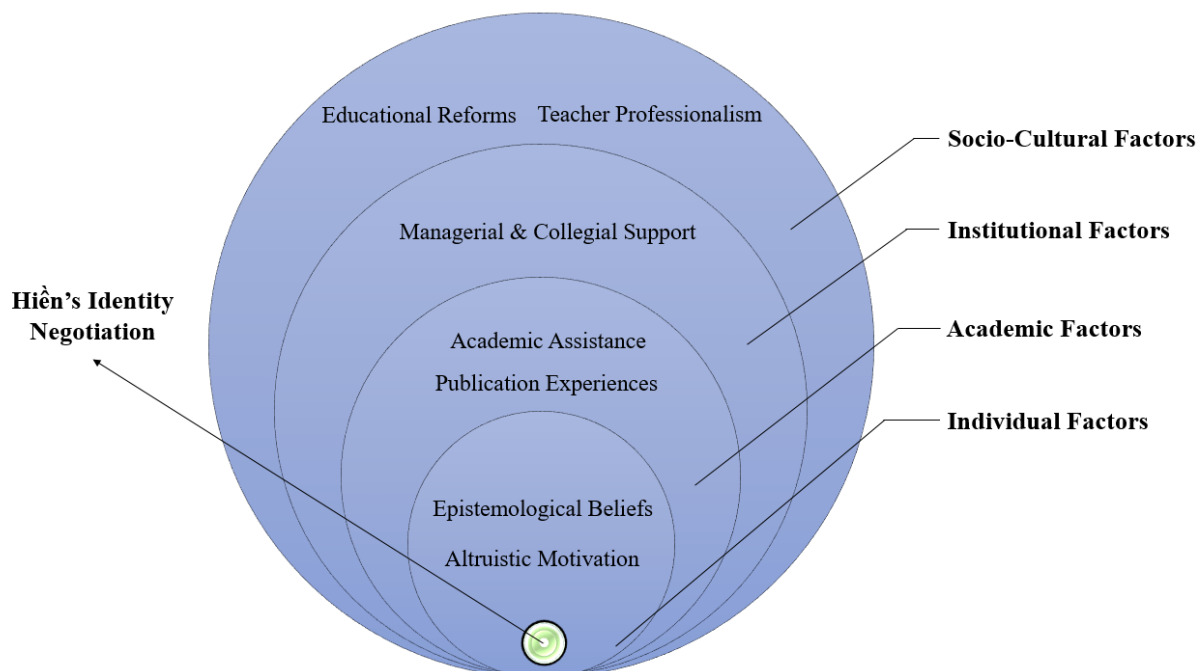
Her research journey offered both structure and reflection, reinforcing her internal motivation to uphold high standards. She later shared how this process shaped her career goals and personal growth. She continued telling,

*“Before this experience, I saw myself mostly as a subject teacher. Now, I think I am building something bigger. Doing research helped me think beyond the textbook. It gave me a broader view of education and reminded me that teachers have power to influence not just inside the classroom but also through their ideas, their innovations, and their voices.”* (Hiền, interview round-two)

This alteration marked a significant turning point. She no longer perceived teaching as task-based work but a professional endeavor driven by purpose, evidence, and personal ethics. Her capability to situate herself within a wider educational mission reflected a higher level of professional maturity. Critically, her commitment to continuous growth, grounded in ethical foundations, shaped her identity as a teacher-researcher who strived to teach well and contribute meaningfully to the evolving field of education.

## DISCUSSION

After conducting her Master’s graduation thesis, Hiền acknowledged that her teacher-researcher identity was dramatically negotiated under the critical influences of a web of nested contextual contributors (See [Figure 2](#)). These influences aligned well with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ESTHD, comprising micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-system. Arguably, each held a distinct yet inter-connected function in ameliorating her personal, academic, professional, and social growth, respectively.



**Figure 2.** Contextual influences on Hiền’s teacher-researcher identity negotiation

At the micro level, Hiền's teacher-researcher identity was fundamentally negotiated under the influences of altruistic motivations and epistemological beliefs embedded in her socio-cultural upbringing. Her journey started with a profound sense of altruism directed toward her high school students, many of whom came from disadvantaged rural backgrounds. She consistently expressed a desire to create learning environments that could unlock their confidence and ignite their curiosity in learning English. This sense of moral responsibility extended beyond the classroom. It was also directed toward her broader community, where quality English education remained a scarce resource. Her motivation, therefore, stemmed from a heartfelt commitment to serving others through pedagogical transformation. These inner motivations were intricately linked to the Vietnamese cultural ethos grounded in Confucian values. The traditional values of "Tu thân dưỡng tính" (Self-cultivation), "Học để làm người" (Learn to be human), and "Trách nhiệm xã hội" (Social responsibility) served as moral cornerstones in Hiền's self-perception and philosophies of life. As noted by Ngo et al. (2024) and Nguyen and Hall (2017), in Eastern societies, education is highly revered as a noble pathway to individual advancement and communal contribution. Hiền's reflections echoed this worldview because she described her academic journey with a sense of solemnity and local pride. Enacted in her professional selves, completing the thesis was an offering to her family, colleagues, students, and ancestral roots. Significantly, her spirit of learning reflected four pillars of learning introduced by UNESCO, "Học để biết, học để làm, học để tự khẳng định chính mình, học để cùng chung sống" (Learn to know, learn to do, learn to be, and learn to live together). Such spirit nurtured Hiền's inner ambition to support those in need.

At the mesosystemic level, Hiền's teacher-researcher identity was significantly nurtured through academic assistance and publication experiences. One of the most powerful influences originated from her supervisor, whose supervisorship went beyond conventional academic instruction. This relationship embodied the Confucian ethos of respect for teachers as life mentors. The proverb "Không thầy đố mày làm nên" (Without teachers, one cannot succeed) was well consistent with Hiền's experiences. Through thesis-conducting endeavors, she re-conceptualized each piece of feedback as a gift of affection. Furthermore, the supervisor's return from doctoral training abroad to serve Vietnamese teacher education symbolized a model of academic integrity and patriotism, inspiring Hiền to adopt a similarly purposeful stance in her own teaching and research. Alongside vertical supervisorship, Master's peer collaboration formed a horizontal support system which carried Hiền through the academic demands of thesis writing. This collective effort implied the Vietnamese communal value of "Học cùng tiến bộ cùng" (Learning together, progressing together), a principle embedded in the cultural fabric of the Mekong Delta. Hiền's experience exemplified how academic work could become a relational endeavor. Moreover, Hiền's interactions with thesis committee members offered another layer of mesosystemic reinforcement. Their detailed evaluations and constructive critiques were perceived as affirmations of the value of her work. Crucially, Hiền's first experiences with research publication marked a turning point in her academic self-concept. With support from her supervisor and peers, she authored a paper accepted in a peer-reviewed journal. This success solidified her self-efficacy, validating her research voice in a broader academic discourse. Compared to previous empirical studies, this finding is consistent with that of international studies (Çakmak & Çelik, 2024; Prabandari et al., 2024) and a Vietnamese study (Ngo et al., 2024). These authors were in agreement that the academia environment possibly affects EFL teachers' reconceptualization of research.

Moving outward, Hiền's teacher-researcher identity was substantially bolstered by the institutional context in which she operated. Situated within the exosystem, two crucial layers emerged encompassing the accommodating leadership of her school and the collective spirit of her professional community. At the institutional level, her school administrators granted adaptive scheduling, allowed flexibility in workload distribution, and routinely inquired about her research progress. These actions, subtle in form but significant in impact, sent a powerful message that her scholarly efforts were recognized and valued. Such facilitation provided logistical relief and emotional assurance. Beyond formal structures, the collegial community surrounding Hiền served as an indispensable source of strength. Her fellow teachers did more than offer occasional encouragement; they collaborated closely, discussed challenges openly, and even contributed

ideas for refining her classroom-based research. This profound sense of camaraderie reflected the Vietnamese cultural principle of “Tinh đồng nghiệp” (Workplace camaraderie), which embodies an ethic of mutual respect, reciprocity, and professional loyalty. More broadly, this dynamic was underpinned by the long-standing national value of “tinh thần tương thân tương ái” (Mutual care and solidarity). Intrinsically embedded in Vietnamese social fabric, this value emphasizes helping one another through shared burdens. Within Hiền’s experience, this took form in peers staying after school to review her research tools, listening without judgment when she voiced self-doubt, and offering concrete strategies from their own classroom realities. Of interest, this finding aligns well with that of Ngo et al. (2024) and Le and Pham (2024) in the same research context.

At the macrosystem level, Hiền’s newly-emerging teacher-researcher identity was intertwined with socio-cultural expectations and national educational reforms and teacher professionalization. Vietnam’s ongoing reform initiatives, particularly those under the NFLP, emphasized the integration of research into professional practice, aiming to elevate the quality of EFL across all educational levels. Despite originally being targeted at university instructors and public-school teachers, such policy discourses reverberated through the broader educational community, reaching teachers including Hiền in the Mekong Delta. She interpreted her thesis as an active contribution to the national reform agenda. Guided by the Confucian tenet “Tôn sư trọng đạo” (Reverence for teachers and their knowledge), Hiền regarded research as a responsibility inseparable from teaching excellence. By devoting herself fully to her thesis, she sought to embody the professional values envisioned by national directives such as Circular No. 20/2018/TT-BGDĐT and Circular No. 02/2020/TT-BGDĐT, which articulate standards of competence, ethics, and reflective inquiry for modern Vietnamese educators. This finding is in a close relation to that of Nana and Jing (2017) and Ngo et al. (2024) in the Asian context, emphasizing national educational reforms central to teachers’ CPD. Culturally, Hiền’s dedication echoed the enduring Vietnamese philosophy captured by President Hồ Chí Minh’s philosophy, “Vì lợi ích mười năm trồng cây, vì lợi ích trăm năm trồng người” (For benefits of ten years, plant trees; for benefits of one hundred years, cultivate people). Research was thus an investment in future generations, both morally and pedagogically, in her newly-defined selves. Interestingly, Hiền’s journey also resonated with traditional feminine virtues in Vietnamese culture, commonly referred to as “Công, dung, ngôn, hạnh” (Diligence, grace, eloquence, and virtue). Within the modernized educational context, she reinterpreted these values through a research-based lens. “Công” (Diligence) was conceived in meticulous planning and data collection; “Dung” (Grace) was expressed in “Vẻ đẹp tri thức” (Beauty of knowledge pursuit) with her intellectual openness and adaptability to new knowledge; “Ngôn” (Eloquence) appeared in her ability to articulate ideas clearly through academic writing and presentations; and “Hạnh” (Virtue) was embodied in her ethical conduct and commitment to serving learners and colleagues alike. These reconceptualized virtues signified Hiền’s capacity to bridge traditional expectations with modern educational demands, transforming cultural ideals into academic agency.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has examined how contextual factors affected the teacher-researcher identity negotiation of a Vietnamese high school EFL teacher during her process of conducting a Master’s thesis. Adapting Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ESTHD, the study has illuminated the interplay of individual, academic, institutional, and socio-cultural factors corresponding with the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-levels of influences. Through this multifaceted lens, the thesis emerged as a transformative journey through which she enhanced her professional confidence, critical insight, and scholarly agency.

The findings offer practical implications across multiple dimensions of teacher education programs, school managements, and policy designs. Firstly, within teacher education programs, the thesis should be reframed as a formative opportunity for deep pedagogical inquiry. Graduate programs should create academic spaces where research is positioned as a process of personal growth, practical relevance, and disciplinary

contribution. This requires a curriculum design that encourages teachers to ask meaningful questions grounded in their own classrooms and communities. Secondly, at the school level, the role of institutional support remains central. School leaders can facilitate teacher research through operational flexibility, resource provision, and recognition of scholarly efforts. Professional learning communities within schools should also foster peer exchange and shared reflection, creating a culture wherein research is understood as collaborative work. Collegial engagement encourages accountability, sustains motivation, and allows the research process to be situated in real teaching experiences. Thirdly, for education policymakers, these findings suggest the need for systemic alignment between national reform initiatives and teacher research engagement. CPD-related policies should actively include research components that are relevant to teachers at various stages of their careers. Fourthly, implications extend to the broader teaching community. Practicing teachers can approach research as a formal academic task and a powerful method for instructional improvement and educational innovation. Even small-scale projects anchored in day-to-day teaching realities contribute to professional renewal. Finally, for the research community, this study advocates for the continued use of ecological perspectives in exploring teacher identity. Teacher-researcher identity should be studied as a dynamic construct that reflects interactions across personal and contextual domains.

## Limitations and Recommendations

This study was conducted to explore contextual influences on the teacher-researcher identity negotiation of a Vietnamese high school EFL teacher within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ESTHD. While it has illuminated valuable dimensions of identity negotiation through thesis engagement, several limitations inevitably frame the interpretation and transferability of the findings. To begin with, the research was situated within a particular geographical and institutional setting. Although this setting enabled a deep contextual understanding of how individuals navigated research amid cultural and professional expectations, its regional specificity may circumscribe broader applicability. Future inquiries may benefit from comparative designs that include diverse geographic regions, educational sectors, and institutional types, which can reveal nuanced variations or resonances across contexts. In addition, the study adopted a retrospective narrative approach, drawing on biographical interviews and participant reflections. While this method facilitated authentic storytelling and personal meaning-making, it also relied on memory reconstruction, which can be influenced by temporal distance and emotional filters. To complement this, prospective longitudinal research could document identity formation in real-time, capturing turning points, dilemmas, and epistemic shifts as they occur throughout the thesis process and beyond. Moreover, the exclusive focus on a high school teacher limits the exploration of how teacher-researcher identities may manifest at other educational levels. Primary teachers, university lecturers, and in-service teacher trainers may encounter different affordances and constraints in their research journeys. Expanding participant demographics would offer a more comprehensive view of research engagement as a cross-sectoral professional practice. Furthermore, the ecological model served as a productive lens to map multi-layered influences on identity construction. However, identity work is also inherently ideological and emotional, shaped by deeper affective, gendered, and political undercurrents that this framework alone may not fully capture. Future studies could integrate critical or post-structuralist perspectives to interrogate how power relations, resistance, and positionalities intersect with teachers' research agency. Finally, although the present study focused on the thesis as a formative experience, it did not trace the longer-term consequences of research engagement in participants' professional trajectories. Future research could investigate how thesis-informed identities influence classroom innovation, curriculum development, school leadership, or contributions to broader educational discourses. Follow-up studies could also explore whether teacher-researcher identities are sustained, reconfigured, or diminished over time.

## Ethical Considerations Statement

This study complied with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent had been obtained from both participants prior to data collection. They were fully aware of the study's purposes, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. All identifiable information has been anonymized.

## Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive and personal nature of the biographical data, the full dataset is not publicly available. Anonymized excerpts may be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author for academic purposes only.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

## Generative Artificial Intelligence Usage Statement

This manuscript was solely prepared by the authors without the assistance of any generative artificial intelligence tools. All ideas, interpretations, and written expressions are entirely original and the result of the authors' independent academic efforts.

## REFERENCES

- Abednia, A. (2012). Teachers' professional identity: Contributions of a critical EFL teacher education course in Iran. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28(5), 706–717. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.02.005>
- Akkerman, S. F., & Meijer, P. C. (2011). A dialogical approach to conceptualizing teacher identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(2), 308–319. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.08.013>
- Barduhn, S., & Johnson, J. (2009). Certification and professional qualifications. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *Cambridge guide to second language teacher education* (pp. 59–65). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139042710.010>
- Barkhuizen, G. (2016). Narrative approaches to exploring language, identity and power in language teacher education. *RELC Journal*, 47(1), 25–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688216631222>
- Beijaard, D., Verloop, N., & Vermunt, J. D. (2000). Teachers' perceptions of professional identity: An exploratory study from a personal knowledge perspective. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16(7), 749–764. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(00\)00023-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(00)00023-8)
- Brazill, S. (2021). Narrative inquiry into Chinese international doctoral students' journey: A strength-based perspective. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 16, 395–428. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4785>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674028845>
- Bui, T. N. T., & Nguyen, T. M. H. (2016). Standardizing English for educational and socio-economic betterment: A critical analysis of English language policy reforms in Vietnam. In R. Kirkpatrick (Ed.), *English language education policy in Asia* (1st ed., pp. 363–388). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22464-0>
- Bulloch, H. C. (2021). Intergenerational aspirations across the life course in Asia. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 22(5), 363–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2021.1974079>
- Çakmak, M., & Çelik, Ö. C. (2024). A case study on researcher identity development of novice and experienced teacher educators: A different or similar research journey? *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 10, 101–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101005>
- Christensen, J. (2016). A critical reflection of Bronfenbrenner's development ecology model. *Problems of Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 69(1), 22–28. <https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/16.69.22>

- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1990). Narrative, experience and the study of curriculum. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 20(3), 241–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764900200304>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2022). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Clark, T., Dodson, S., Guivarra, N., & Hunt, Y. W. (2022). “I want to create change; I want to create impact”: Personal-activism narratives of Indigenous Australian women working in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 48(1), Article 102135. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102135>
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2000). Teacher education: A question of teacher knowledge. In A. Scott (Ed.), *Tomorrow's teachers: International and critical perspectives on teacher education* (pp. 89–105). Canterbury University Press.
- Craig, C. J. (2007). Story constellations: A narrative approach to contextualizing teachers' knowledge of school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23(2), 173–188. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.04.014>
- Dikilitaş, K., & Yaylı, D. (2018). Teachers' professional identity development through action research. *ELT Journal*, 72(4), 415–424. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccy027>
- Guy-Evans, O. (2020). *Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory*. Simply Psychology.
- Heng, K., Hamid, M., & Khan, A. (2020). Factors influencing academics' research engagement and productivity: A developing countries perspective. *Issues in Educational Research*, 30(3), 965–987.
- Henry, A. (2019). A drama of selves: Investigating teacher identity development from dialogical and complexity perspectives. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 9(2), 263–285. <https://doi.org/10.14746/sslt.2019.9.2.2>
- Hermans, H. J. M. (2003). The construction and reconstruction of a dialogical self. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 16(2), 89–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720530390117902>
- Hermans, H. J. M. (2008). How to perform research on the basis of dialogical self theory? Introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 21(3), 185–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720530802070684>
- Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Sharpe, S., & Thomson, R. (1998). *The male in the head: Young people, heterosexuality and power*. Tufnell Press.
- Hsieh, B. Y. C. (2010). *Exploring the complexity of teacher professional identity* [Doctoral dissertation, University of California].
- Kaasila, R., Lutovac, S., Komulainen, J., & Maikkola, M. (2021). From fragmented toward relational academic teacher identity: The role of research-teaching nexus. *Higher Education*, 82(3), 583–598. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00670-8>
- Kelly, K. (2000). The higher education system in Vietnam. *World Education News and Reviews*, 13(3), 5–16.
- Kırca, H. S., & Glover, P. (2021). We are what we read: Reading identity of university students of English language teaching. *RumeliDE Dil Ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (24), 1182–1194. <https://doi.org/10.29000/rumelide.997589>
- Le, T. T., & Chen, S. (2018). Globalisation and Vietnamese foreign language education. In J. Albright (Ed.), *English tertiary education in Vietnam* (1st ed., pp. 16–27). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315212098>
- Le, T. T., & Pham, T. T. (2024). Navigating cultural and pedagogical challenges: An autoethnographic study of a Vietnamese EFL lecturer-researcher's experiences in the Mekong Delta. *Methodological Innovations*, 17(3), 121–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20597991241264836>
- Leuverink, K. R., & Aarts, A. M. L. (2018). A quality assessment of teacher research. *Educational Action Research*, 27(5), 758–777. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1535445>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry* (1st ed.). Sage Publications.
- Lu, H. (2024). “My Shawshank Redemption”: A self-narrative inquiry of an EFL academic's emotions and identities on research journey. *Sage Open*, 14(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241253350>
- Lu, H., & Yoon, S. J. (2024). Chinese EFL academics' experiences of aligning researcher identity (re)-construction with university policy practices of a national research policy. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language (TESL-EJ)*, 28(1). <https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.28109s5>
- Mai, D. T., & Brundrett, M. (2024). The importance of developing teachers as researchers in the new general education curriculum of Vietnam. *Management in Education*, 38(4), 172–179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08920206221093001>



- Mason, S., Chik, A., & Roger, P. (2024). Language teacher wellbeing, mindfulness, and the development of a researcher identity. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, 46, 280–296. <https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2024.46.18>
- Medina, N. E. C. (2020). EFL pre-service & in-service teachers as agents of change: Enhancing social justice practices in a Colombian public university. *Journal of Higher Education Theory & Practice*, 20(11), 137–149. <https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v20i11.3770>
- Nana, L., & Jing, H. (2017). Exploring researcher identity construction of university EFL teachers in China. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 40(4), 371–391. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2017-0022>
- Ngo, N. H. H., & Trinh, L. Q. (2025). Researcher identity construction by Vietnamese university lecturers in English as a foreign language: A self-determination perspective. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 23(1), 2706–2718. <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2025-23.1.00213>
- Ngo, N. H. H., Le, T. C., & Trinh, L. Q. (2024). Các yếu tố tác động đến quá trình hình thành bản sắc nghiên cứu khoa học của giảng viên tiếng Anh tại trường đại học Cần Thơ [Factors affecting the formation of scientific research identity of English lecturers at Can Tho University.]. *Tạp Chí Giáo dục*, 24(17), 48–53.
- Nguyen, T. M. H., & Hall, C. (2017). Changing views of teachers and teaching in Vietnam. *Teaching Education*, 28(3), 244–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2016.1252742>
- Nguyen, T. M. H., Phan, D. Q., & Le, D. M. (2020). Teachers' professional learning in the context of language education reforms. In V. C. Le, T. M. H. Nguyen, T. T. M. Nguyen, & R. Barnard (Eds.), *Building teacher capacity in English language teaching in Vietnam: Research, policy and practice* (1st ed., pp. 80–98). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429457371>
- Nguyen, T. P. L., & Vu, Q. (2020). Alignment of curriculum, outcomes, and standards in Vietnamese English language teacher education. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal*, 11(2), 3443–3449. <https://doi.org/10.20533/licej.2040.2589.2020.0453>
- Phan, N. H., Trinh, Q. L., & Le, C. T. (2025). Factors hindering EFL Master's students' motivation in research engagement: A self-determination perspective. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 23(1), 1782–1795. <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2025-23.1.00138>
- Prabandari, C. S., Badiozaman, I. F. A., & Turner, K. (2024). Exploring challenges of Indonesian EFL teachers in adopting teacher-researcher identity through classroom action research. *LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching*, 27(1), 419–433. <https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v27i1.8529>
- Tran, Q. T., & Swierczek, F. W. (2009). Skills development in higher education in Vietnam. *Asia Pacific Business Review*, 15(4), 565–586. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602380802364175>
- Vandamme, R. (2017). Teacher identity as a dialogical construction. In F. Meijers & H. Hermans (Eds.), *The dialogical self theory in education: A multicultural perspective* (pp. 111–127). Cham: Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62861-5\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62861-5_8)
- Wang, X., & Fang, F. (2025). Identity development in transition: A duoethnography of language teachers becoming teacher educators from an ecological perspective. *TESOL Journal*, 16(1), Article e70003. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.70003>
- Wu, X. (2023). A longitudinal study of EFL teacher agency and sustainable identity development: A positioning theory perspective. *Sustainability*, 15(1), Article 48. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010048>

# APPENDIX A

## Interview Protocols

### *First-round Interview with the Primary Participant*

1. How did your personal factors influence your experiences in conducting the thesis? (e.g., self-motivation, time management, emotional resilience, stress management, ability to balance work/study, and research competence)
2. How did your Master's coursework and classroom experiences prepare you for conducting the thesis?
3. How did your daily interactions with Master's peers, family members, students, and colleagues affect your engagement in thesis conducting?
4. How you describe how your relationships with your thesis supervisor or lecturers influenced your thesis conducting journey?
5. What types of informal discussions with classmates contributed to your research process?

### *Second-round Interview with the Primary Participant*

1. How did institutional factors shape your experiences in conducting the thesis? (e.g., university policies, research resources, funding, thesis guidelines, and administrative support)
2. What role did the Master's program's expectations and requirements play in shaping your research identity or practices?
3. How did socio-cultural factors influence your lived experiences as a teacher-researcher? (e.g., family/workplace expectations, social roles, norms in Vietnamese education, job market demands, attitudes toward EFL research)
4. How do you perceive the current research culture within the Vietnamese EFL context?
5. In what ways did broader societal norms affect your sense of being a teacher who conducts research?

### *Third-round Interview with an Outsider*

1. From your perspective, how has Hiền changed (personally or professionally), from starting her Master's program to conducting her graduation thesis?
2. From your perspective, what personal strengths or struggles did Hiền experience during her thesis journey?
3. From your perspective, how did Hiền manage to balance her studies with other aspects of her life (e.g., family, work, teaching commitments)?
4. From your perspective, how did challenges she encountered in doing research shape her teacher-researcher identity? How did she deal with them?
5. How do you view Hiền's current identity as a teacher and/or researcher in the field of English language teaching? Has your perception of her changed?