

## Research Article

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## Constructing Research Identity among Vietnamese EFL Lecturers: A Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

**Background/purpose.** Although studies on teacher research are becoming more common in English language teaching (ELT), there is still a lack of understanding regarding how university lecturers shape their research identities. Using Ecological systems theory and Self-determination theory, this study examines the construction of research identities among Vietnamese lecturers of English as a foreign language (EFL). Particularly, this study explores how the lecturers perceived the role of research and the ecological factors that influenced their research identities.

**Materials/methods.** Data were collected from document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 18 EFL lecturers across different career stages (early, mid, and late) through a phenomenological research design.

**Results.** The findings from this study highlighted the complexities and dynamic nature of research identities among Vietnamese EFL lecturers within the context of national education reform. Research was seen as an important facet of EFL lecturers' professional development (PD) because it enhanced their teaching practices, contributed to career advancement, strengthened professional relationships, promoted autonomy, and fostered reflective teaching practices. Additionally, the study indicated that the construction of research identities among these lecturers was influenced by diverse ecological factors (e.g., national foreign language projects, lack of managerial and collegial support, lack of financial incentives, lack of research resources, time constraints, personal responsibility, and professional recognition).

**Conclusion.** This study demonstrates the importance of a phenomenological approach and contributes to the expanding body of empirical studies on the construction of EFL lecturers' research identities. It also offers insights that may be applicable in other global contexts.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, teacher research has become increasingly prominent in the field of education (Xerri & Pioquinto, 2018). University lecturers are now required to fulfill both teaching and research responsibilities (Gaikwad, 2021; Orfan et al., 2024). This has led to growing attention to how university lecturers develop their identities as researchers. According to Lapum (2008), research identity is a collection of beliefs and values defining a researcher at a specific point in time, reflecting a commitment to a particular perspective, framework, or paradigm. Research identity is dynamic, not fixed; it is influenced by time and context and can evolve with experience. Therefore, research identity continues to develop throughout teachers' careers.

Although teacher research has been acknowledged as a vital PD activity within the framework of educational reforms in Vietnam, many existing studies have mainly focused on teachers' engagement in research activities (Mai & Brundrett, 2022; Nguyen, 2020; Vu, 2020) without thoroughly examining how university lecturers develop their identities as researchers. There is a gap in understanding the ways in which EFL lecturers shape and negotiate their roles as researchers.

Integrating Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) with Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this phenomenological study examined how EFL lecturers perceived and developed their roles as researchers within their professional contexts. By focusing on lecturers at different career stages (early-career, mid-career, and late-career), the study provides more detailed insights into how lecturers' research identities evolved and were influenced by different ecological factors. This research not only sheds light on the complexities involved in constructing research identities but also highlights the importance of cultivating supportive academic environments that encourage lecturers' research engagement and PD. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of literature on research identities in higher education and provides valuable insights into the professional journeys of EFL lecturers within the Vietnamese educational context.

The research questions of this study were:

1. How do Vietnamese EFL lecturers perceive the role of research in their professional identity construction?
2. What ecological factors influence the construction of research identities among Vietnamese EFL lecturers?

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Teacher research in the field of ELT*

In the field of English language teaching (ELT), there has been growing recognition of the significance of teacher research (Pinninti, 2022). Barkhuizen (2018) defined teacher research as "a professional development activity through which teachers engage in systematic inquiry into their own work to enhance teaching and learning" (p. 19). Borg (2018) explained that teacher research is an activity in which language teachers engage to deepen their understanding of their work. Teachers may also undertake research for academic purposes, 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 educators. It can offer new perspectives on their practice, encourage enthusiasm and commitment, and strengthen their sense of autonomy and professional competence. According to Leuverink and Aarts (2018), teacher research has six characteristics: teacher-as-researcher, systematic, improvement of practice, collaborative, context-specific, and dynamic. These characteristics demonstrate that teacher research is not only an intellectual activity but also a collaborative and context-dependent practice that arises from the needs and values of

particular teaching environments. Within the Vietnamese EFL context, these characteristics may appear differently, shaped by national, institutional, and individual factors.

## **2.2. Theoretical frameworks**

### ***Ecological systems theory***

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological systems theory is the first theoretical framework guiding this study. The theory emphasizes the interconnected relationship between individuals and the various systems they interact with. Initially developed to examine child development, it also offers valuable insights into adult learning. The theory describes the environment as a set of nested structures, similar to Russian dolls (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). Microsystem refers to "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). For higher education lecturers, this includes their family, colleagues, students, and the workplace. Mesosystem concerns the interactions between the different microsystems in an individual's life, such as the relationships between their professional environments and family life or between teaching practices and student interactions. The exosystem encompasses environments in which an individual is not directly engaged but which still influence their development, such as institutional policies like promotion rules or reward systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). The macrosystem refers to the wider cultural and societal context, including political, economic, and educational policies, along with societal values and ideologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). In higher education, this includes national and global educational policies and cultural expectations. In this study, the Ecological systems theory, which addresses the multiple layers of environments influencing an individual's development, provides a valuable lens for exploring the ecological factors shaping EFL lecturers' experiences in constructing their research identities.

### ***Self-determination theory***

The second theoretical framework guiding this study is Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-determination theory. This theory focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and it highlights how individuals' psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) shape their motivation and behavior (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. For EFL lecturers, research identity construction may be driven by the degree of autonomy they experience in selecting research topics, engaging with academic communities, or pursuing PD. Competence involves the feeling of mastery, a sense that one can succeed and develop (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This is particularly important to research identity, as lecturers need to feel competent and proficient in conducting research, publishing their work, and making contributions to their academic field. Relatedness refers to a sense of belonging and connection. It is nurtured through expressions of respect and care (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In the context of lecturer research, this could involve support from colleagues, managers, or academic communities, significantly influencing a lecturer's sense of belonging and self-efficacy as a researcher.

Using Self-determination theory, this study offers a framework for understanding how motivational factors—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—impact the development of research identities among EFL lecturers. It enables the researchers to explore both intrinsic and extrinsic influences on the evolving formation of research identities, providing valuable insights for promoting more effective research cultures in universities, particularly in the Vietnamese context.

In summary, integrating ecological systems theory with self-determination theory aligns effectively with the aims of our research, which is to explore the construction of research identities

among Vietnamese tertiary EFL lecturers. These two frameworks complement each other, as they collectively shed light on how the interplay of their environments and motivations shapes their roles as researchers over time and the ecological factors influencing EFL lecturers' research identities.

### ***2.3. Empirical research on the construction of research identities among language teachers***

A review of recent literature on teacher identity reveals a growing interest in the construction of research identities. Several empirical studies from different countries have explored this area. In China, Nana and Jing (2017) examined the researcher identities of university EFL teachers and the key factors influencing their development. The study identified distinct trajectories in the construction of researcher identities across three stages of research experience: initiation, stagnation/development, and struggle. Key individual factors affecting researcher identity included motivation, publications, academic qualifications, and networking with other researchers.

In the United States, Achirri (2020) explored the intersection of teacher and researcher identities across different contexts by analyzing the professional journey of one teacher, Tom, as he transitioned from teaching to conducting research. The findings revealed that Tom perceived his professional identity as a teacher primarily in terms of duty. The study also indicated that individual identities were shaped by specific contexts and, in turn, transformed through those contexts. In Colombia, Barkhuizen (2021) employed short story analysis to examine the research experiences and the evolving researcher identity of a language teacher educator as she navigated the initial stages of her doctoral program. The findings highlighted multiple roles in the participant's professional life, including her work as a teacher, teacher educator, PhD candidate, and researcher.

In China, Wang and He (2022) explored how three EFL teachers developed their research identities and the factors that influenced this process within the University–School activity system, considering both the perspectives of school and university teachers. The findings revealed that internal factors, such as research experience and career stage, played a significant role in shaping the construction of EFL teachers' identities. External factors, including the context of curriculum reform and communication within the professional community, were also identified as influential.

In conclusion, the reviewed studies demonstrate a growing interest in understanding the construction of research identities across various cultural and educational contexts. These studies also emphasize the complex and evolving nature of research identity, which is shaped by the specific contexts in which teachers work and their individual trajectories. Despite the expanding body of literature, however, there remains a gap in research that specifically examines the construction of research identities among Vietnamese EFL lecturers, particularly through a phenomenological lens. This study seeks to address this gap, offering new insights into how research identities are shaped within the educational context of Vietnam.

### ***2.4. National directives on teacher research in Vietnam***

In Vietnamese higher education, lecturers are mandated by the government to balance their teaching duties with other professional responsibilities, including conducting research. According to Article 55 of the Law on Higher Education, lecturers are required to engage in research projects and contribute to the application of science and technology (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2012). The revised version of this law further specifies that lecturers must also participate in activities aimed at improving the quality of education and scientific research (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2018). As stated in Circular No. 47/2014, university lecturers are expected to work 40 hours a week, totaling 1,760 hours annually, to meet their teaching, research, and PD obligations (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2014). The circular also states that at least one-third of a lecturer's annual working hours be devoted to research activities. Failure to meet this research requirement can

impact their performance evaluations and compensation at the end of the academic year (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2014). These regulations highlight the Vietnamese government's focus on the integration of research with other professional duties for university lecturers.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research design***

The main objective of this study was to explore how Vietnamese EFL lecturers experienced the development of their research identities. Specifically, this study examined how the lecturers perceived the role of research and the ecological factors that influenced their research identities. To accomplish this, a phenomenological research design was employed to gain deeper insights into the lecturers' lived experiences. Creswell (2018) explained that a phenomenological study describes "the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 75). Key characteristics of phenomenological research include an emphasis on individuals' lived experiences, a thorough understanding of the phenomenon, and the exploration of participants' first-hand knowledge of events. This approach involves gathering data on unobservable aspects and may involve a purposive or unanticipated sample (Islam & Sayeed Akhter, 2022).

#### ***3.2. Participants***

In this study, data were collected in 2024 at Eagle University (a pseudonym), a large public university in the South of Vietnam. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method explained by Robinson (2023) as the intentional selection of individuals who can offer valuable insights into a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon. The selection process aimed to capture a diverse range of participants in terms of gender, teaching experience, professional titles, educational qualifications, and research involvement. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' gender and years of teaching experience, categorized into three groups: early-career lecturers (1–7 years of teaching experience), mid-career lecturers (8–23 years), and late-career lecturers (23+ years) (Day, 2013). The main objective of this diverse selection was to explore how research experiences varied across different stages of the participants' careers. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants, and their professional titles were not disclosed.

**Table 1.** Participants' background information

No	Pseudonyms	Gender	Years of teaching experience
1	Daisy	Female	1-7
2	Peter	Male	1-7
3	Kate	Female	1-7
4	Thomas	Male	1-7
5	Sue	Female	1-7
6	Laura	Female	1-7
7	Mark	Male	8-23
8	Henry	Male	8-23
9	Cherry	Female	8-23
10	Nick	Male	8-23
11	Candy	Female	8-23
12	Celia	Female	8-23
13	Carole	Female	23+
14	Bob	Male	23+
15	Mary	Female	23+
16	Ben	Male	23+
17	Alex	Male	23+
18	Amy	Female	23+

### 3.3. Data collection

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

This study selected semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to explore EFL lecturers' experiences in constructing their research identities. Following three pilot interviews with EFL lecturers who were not part of the main study, the semi-structured interviews were conducted at a public Vietnamese university. Each interview was recorded and lasted from fifty minutes to eighty minutes. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and later translated into English, with the translation being checked by the second researcher. During the interviews, notes were taken, and the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim afterward.

#### *Document analysis*

In addition to semi-structured interviews, this study utilized document analysis as a complementary method to collect comprehensive data from national and institutional documents, such as laws, decisions, and circulars. As Kutsyuruba (2023) explained, "document analysis involves a systematic process of reviewing and evaluating documents by finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesizing the data contained within them" (p. 139). The main objective of the document analysis in this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the context in which participants developed their research identities.

### 3.4. Data analysis

In this study, all interviews were coded using NVivo 12 and analyzed in English to uncover emerging themes and patterns. The data analysis followed the four steps outlined in Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach. This method is known for its systematic, detailed, and rigorous approach to examining lived experiences (Pelin & Soner, 2015).



First, the first author carefully read and re-read the interview transcripts to identify significant statements that provided detailed insights into participants' experiences of the phenomenon. These significant statements were then grouped into themes, which were informed by Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and formed the basis for interpretation. Next, the first author created a composite textural description, detailing "what" the participants experienced, using these significant statements and themes. This step also included developing a composite structural description that outlined the context or setting influencing "how" the participants experienced the phenomenon. Finally, combining the composite textural and structural descriptions, a textural-structural synthesis was developed. This synthesis highlights the essence of the phenomenon, focusing on the common experiences of the participants.

To analyze the document data, researchers evaluated the authority, content, currency, purpose, and intended audience of each document to assess its relevance. They then selected the most pertinent and valuable information for inclusion in their research findings.

### ***3.5. Trustworthiness and Credibility***

This study employed five strategies to enhance its trustworthiness. These strategies included: (1) member checking, where interview transcripts were sent to participants for clarification; (2) data triangulation, involving participants at various stages of their careers (early-career, mid-career, and late-career) with diverse research backgrounds; (3) method triangulation, utilizing both semi-structured interviews and document analysis for data collection; (4) providing a rich, thick description by detailing the research identity construction experiences of EFL lecturers; and (5) using direct quotes to illustrate key points within the participants' stories.

### ***3.6. Ethical considerations***

This study followed the Human Ethics Guidelines and Policy established by Eagle University, which covered informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Although an Ethics Committee review was not required at the research setting, the study adhered to the institution's access policies. Prior to the study's commencement, each participant received an official invitation letter along with a consent form. The information sheet provided a detailed explanation of the research goals, procedures, the use of audio recordings, and participants' right to withdraw at any time. Participants were also invited to participate in the member-checking process. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in both the interview transcripts and reports to protect the identities of the university and the EFL lecturers. All collected data were securely stored, with interview transcripts saved on a password-protected computer hard drive.

## **4. Results**

### ***4.1. The role of research in shaping EFL lecturers' professional identities***

The first research question explored the role of research in shaping EFL lecturers' professional identities. From the interviews, four key themes emerged: enhancing teaching practices, contributing to career advancement, promoting professional relationships, fostering professional autonomy, and stimulating reflective teaching practices.

#### ***Enhancing teaching practices***

In the interviews, 16 of the 18 participants viewed research as an important tool for enhancing their teaching practices. For example, Peter (beginning) explained, "Engaging in research has significantly broadened my professional knowledge. Since teaching and research are intricately linked, I can adapt my lectures accordingly, which ultimately improves my teaching practice" [Interview 2]. Mark (mid-career) stated, "After completing two research projects, I feel more

confident in my teaching and can provide my students with updated knowledge. Without engaging in any research, I would not be able to offer this level of expertise” [Interview 7].

### ***Contributing to career advancement***

Fourteen of the 18 participants revealed that they considered research crucial for advancing their careers. Celia (mid-career) shared, “Driven by a passion for research, I have collaborated with my colleagues on several research projects at the institutional level and co-wrote articles for publication. Thanks to these research contributions, I was awarded a doctoral scholarship by an international university” [Interview 12]. Alex (late-career) explained, “Engaging in research can enhance a teacher’s status within the academic community, promoting their professional prestige. As a result of my extensive publications, I was promoted to associate professor three years ago” [Interview 17].

### ***Promoting professional relationships***

Twelve of the 13 participants recognized that their engagement in research played a key role in fostering positive professional relationships. Sue (beginning) explained, “Research helps me connect with colleagues both within and outside my institution, providing opportunities for mutual learning and knowledge exchange, and fostering a sense of professional community” [Interview 5]. Carole (late-career) stated, “Through collaborative research projects with my colleagues, I can develop a collective professional identity, where I can share ideas, receive support, and work together to solve teaching challenges” [Interview 13].

### ***Fostering professional autonomy***

Nine out of 18 participants reported that engagement in research fostered their professional autonomy. Candy (mid-career) shared, “When I participate in research, I tend to take control of my professional development. Rather than relying on top-down professional development programs, I direct my own learning journey, choosing the topics I wish to explore and develop” [Interview 11]. Ben (late-career) stated, “Through research, lecturers develop a professional identity that is connected to their individual experiences and passions. This research identity serves as a foundation for making decisions that reflect their values and goals as educators” [Interview 16].

### ***Stimulating reflective teaching practices***

Through the interviews, eight out of 18 participants identified research as a key factor in promoting their reflective teaching. Henry (mid-career) explained, “Research enables lecturers to reflect on their pedagogical approaches, adapt to student needs, and engage in evidence-based practices. This process of reflection is essential for their professional and identity development” [Interview 8]. Daisy (early-career) stated, “Engaging in research allows me to evaluate my own teaching practices, identify areas for improvement, and try new teaching methodologies” [Interview 1].

## ***4.2. Ecological factors shaping the research identities of EFL lecturers***

The second research question investigated how ecological factors influenced the research identities of EFL lecturers. From the interview data, three main themes emerged: national factors, institutional factors, and individual factors.



### *National factors*

Twelve of the 18 participants reflected that national education reform policies, such as the National Foreign Language Project (NFLP), played a vital role in shaping their research identities. Specifically, Amy (late-career) mentioned, “Thanks to the NFLP, our school’s lecturers have gained numerous opportunities to participate in different professional development activities and pursue master’s and doctoral studies. These opportunities have enhanced their research competence” [Interview 18]. Celia (mid-career) said, “As a result of national reform policies, changes aimed at encouraging teacher research and improving the quality of higher education in Vietnam can foster a more research-driven academic environment and impact lecturers’ research identities” [Interview 12].

### *Institutional factors*

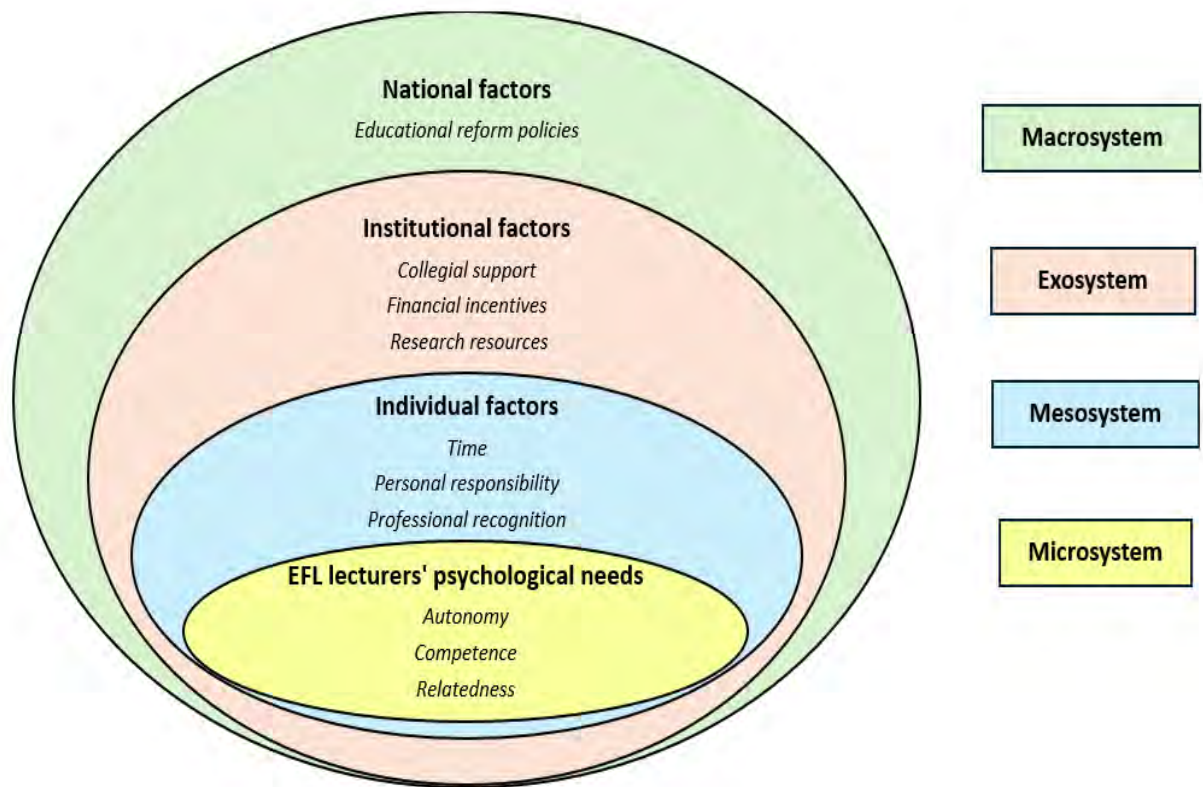
Through the interviews, 14 of the 18 participants reported that institutional factors (e.g., lack of managerial and collegial support, lack of financial incentives, and lack of research resources) played a critical role in the construction of their research identities. Alex (late-career) reported, “Three years ago, my school formed some research groups following lecturers’ interests. However, until now, those groups have not conducted any studies because of a shortage of lecturers’ engagement and collaboration” [Interview 17]. Mark (mid-career) said, “If a lecturer has a paper published in a high-ranking journal, the university does not offer significant financial incentives. As a result, I have not dedicated much time to writing for publication” [Interview 7]. Kate (beginning) remarked, “The university library has not supplied lecturers with sufficient and updated reference materials in the field of English language teaching. As a result, I have lacked the necessary materials to carry out my research projects” [Interview 3].

### *Individual factors*

Individual motivation (e.g., time constraints, personal responsibility, and professional recognition) was identified by 15 interviewees as a key factor in the construction of their research identities. For example, Amy (late-career) reported, “I find it challenging to balance time between teaching and research, as female lecturers often face greater pressure than their male colleagues due to the need to manage both work and family responsibilities” [Interview 18]. Laura (beginning) stated, “Lecturers should be responsible for their research engagement. For instance, they should frequently read books or articles concerning their teaching courses or engage in some action research projects to develop their career” [Interview 6]. Bob (late-career) said, “I have collaborated with some colleagues on several research projects and believe that the success of these projects will enhance my professional prestige” [Interview 14]. Mark (mid-career) commented, “I frequently engage in research projects to update my academic curriculum vitae. My goal is to be promoted to associate professor and gain the admiration of others” [Interview 7].

## **5. Discussion**

In order to highlight the complexity of lecturers’ research, an integrated framework for the construction of research identities in EFL lecturers is presented for discussion (Figure 1). The framework demonstrates how the three main aspects of Self-determination theory—autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000)—are embedded within the different ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This illustrates the dynamic interaction between individual psychological needs and ecological factors in shaping EFL lecturers’ research identity construction.



**Figure 1.** Integrated framework of EFL lecturers' research identity construction

At the microsystem level, the findings of this study highlight the vital role that research plays in shaping the professional identities of Vietnamese EFL lecturers. First, research was widely seen as a key tool for enhancing teaching practices, as it helped lecturers stay informed, adapt their teaching methods, and build confidence in the classroom. A significant majority of participants (16 out of 18) recognized the direct benefits of research in enhancing their teaching. This finding supports existing literature that emphasizes the link between teaching and research in higher education. Xerri (2021) and Hood (2022) argued that research involvement not only contributes to knowledge creation but also improves practical applications in educational contexts. Drawing on Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), it is evident that engaging in research helps lecturers develop their expertise, which in turn promotes their intrinsic motivation to continue both teaching and conducting research. This finding highlights the importance of cultivating a strong research-oriented culture within educational institutions, as research not only enriches the academic community but also enhances the quality of education for students.

In addition, 14 out of the 18 participants acknowledged that engaging in research is essential for their career advancement. This theme of research-driven career progression is evident across different career stages, from early-career lecturers to more advanced positions, highlighting the widespread recognition of research as a key factor in academic success and recognition. The link between research productivity and career advancement is well-documented in academic contexts (Goel & Göktepe-Hultén, 2020), where publications and research contributions are often associated with promotions and professional recognition. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) helps to explain that research not only enhances an individual's skills but also acts as a concrete measure of competence within the academic community. This fulfillment of competence through research engagement motivates further pursuit of scholarly activities, fostering a cycle of academic and professional growth. The findings indicate that institutions ought to support and promote research

activities among educators, as this not only advances their individual careers but also enhances the academic community and improves the overall quality of education.

Together with individual benefits, the findings showed that research promoted professional relationships, with 12 participants emphasizing its importance in establishing connections within and beyond their institutions. This finding is consistent with Shen and Bai's (2019) study, which indicated that research offers opportunities for intellectual collaboration and community-building, thus strengthening the sense of belonging and support within the academic environment. The findings of this study are in line with Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which recognizes relatedness as one of the key psychological needs that drive motivation and well-being. In the context of research, engaging in collaborative projects satisfies the need for relatedness by allowing EFL lecturers to build meaningful relationships with their colleagues. This study suggests that institutions should encourage and facilitate collaborative research efforts, as they not only enhance individual growth but also foster a more supportive academic community.

Furthermore, nine participants identified another aspect of research as its contribution to professional autonomy. When lecturers had the freedom to explore research topics that aligned with their interests and career goals, they tended to feel a greater sense of control over their PD, which in turn increased their motivation, satisfaction, and engagement. This finding is consistent with international literature on the interrelation between teachers' research and autonomy (DiLucchio & Leaman, 2022). Research allows lecturers to direct their own PD and helps them establish a research identity that reflects their personal values and career goals. These findings support the Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which highlights autonomy as a key psychological need that drives motivation. Consequently, institutions should encourage research opportunities that enable lecturers to take ownership of their professional growth, as this is likely to enhance their motivation, job satisfaction, and overall PD.

Finally, eight participants highlighted that research promoted reflective teaching practices. Engaging in research encouraged lecturers to refine their pedagogical techniques, critically assess their teaching methods, and experiment with new strategies. This finding aligns with Chudasama's (2021) argument that reflection and reflexivity are essential components of a teacher-researcher's identity. Drawing on Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), it can be explained that research provides lecturers with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment and reflection, thereby strengthening their sense of competence.

At the mesosystem level, most participants identified factors such as time constraints, personal responsibility, and professional recognition as influencing EFL lecturers' research identities. For instance, Amy, a late-career lecturer, highlighted the challenge of balancing teaching and research, particularly for female lecturers who often bear additional family responsibilities. This study demonstrates the critical impact of gender roles on lecturers' career development in the Vietnamese context. This finding aligns with the project by Pham et al. (2023), which highlighted that female language teachers faced considerable challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities, making it difficult for them to meet both their research and family obligations. Thus, while institutional support is crucial, it must also consider the unique challenges experienced by different groups of lecturers. Addressing these challenges could further improve the research productivity and professional satisfaction of EFL lecturers.

Through the interviews, the participants reported that, together with their teaching duties, they considered research to be one of their most important professional responsibilities. This perspective motivated them to take an active role in participating in different research activities throughout various stages of their careers. The results of this study emphasize the significance of lecturers' personal responsibility in advancing EFL lecturers' careers. According to national policies, such as the

Law on Higher Education (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2012) and its amendment (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2018), lecturers are required to regularly engage in research to fulfill the professional expectations established by the government. Hood (2022) emphasized that ongoing engagement in research can enhance a teacher's sense of identity and improve their perspective on their teaching practice.

In addition to personal responsibility, professional recognition was identified as another important factor influencing the construction of EFL lecturers' research identities. The participants revealed that they highly valued the admiration and respect they received from others in Vietnamese society, which motivated them to enhance their professional and research skills to maintain this recognition. This can be understood in the context of Confucianism, where teachers, as conveyors of knowledge, have traditionally been held in high esteem, as reflected in well-known Vietnamese sayings: "Tôn sư, trọng đạo" (Respect teachers, respect morality) and "Muốn sang thì bắc cầu kiều. Muốn con hay chữ phải yêu kính thầy" (If one wants to cross to the other shore, they must first build a bridge. If one wants their children to be well-educated, they must first respect the teacher). These cultural values emphasize the high regard for lecturers in Vietnamese society, which leads them to prioritize maintaining their professional prestige.

At the exosystem level, the findings from this study emphasized the prominent influence of institutional factors on the construction of EFL lecturers' research identities. The majority of participants reported that insufficient financial incentives and limited access to research resources hindered their research involvement and professional growth. These findings are consistent with existing literature (Alemu, 2023; Heng et al., 2020), which identified the significant impact of institutional policies on academic participation and career development. The findings from this study suggest that academic institutions should foster a more supportive research environment by addressing concerns such as providing appropriate financial rewards and improving access to necessary research resources. These strategies can strengthen the research-driven academic community and improve the quality of education. Furthermore, more than half of the participants indicated that the lack of collegial and managerial support hinders their research efforts. The evidence from this study is consistent with earlier works from international literature which focused on the importance of collegial support in teachers' research (Li & Xu, 2024). The findings from this study highlight that improving the research culture by promoting a collaborative environment can contribute to the PD of EFL lecturers. Consequently, it is important to create a collaborative research culture that engages policymakers, PD planners, academic managers, and lecturers in planning and implementing research activities.

At the macrosystem level, two-thirds of the participants identified the considerable influence of national education reform policies, particularly NFLP, on their professional growth and research identities. Comments from both Amy and Celia indicated that these national policies have led to systemic changes, enhancing individual lecturers' career paths, and contributing to a broader shift toward a more research-oriented environment. This finding is consistent with Nguyen et al.'s (2019) argument that the NFLP has positively impacted teachers' motivation to partake in PD and research activities. This finding is supported by document analysis demonstrating that in recent years, the Vietnamese government has placed greater attention on promoting lecturer research through different national initiatives (MOET & MOHA, 2014). The evidence from this study suggests that prioritizing continuous PD and fostering teacher research are crucial for promoting the overall quality of higher education in Vietnam.

In summary, the findings from this study highlight the key role that research plays in shaping the research identities of Vietnamese EFL lecturers. The diverse benefits (e.g., enhanced teaching practices, career advancement, stronger professional relationships, increased autonomy, and stimulated reflection) show that research is integral to both lecturers' individual and professional

growth. These results affirm that research is not just a means of expanding knowledge but also a crucial element in shaping lecturers' identities as educators and scholars. In addition, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological systems theory illustrates how, at the macrosystem level, national directives interact dynamically with institutional policies and individual lecturers. This study emphasizes the need to contextualize national and institutional policies to the specific individual context, ensuring that these policies both align with national reform goals and address the research needs of EFL lecturers.

## 6. Conclusion

Drawing on Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), it is evident that the construction of research identities among Vietnamese university EFL lecturers is influenced by three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This study highlights that research plays a crucial and multifaceted role in shaping the professional identities of Vietnamese EFL lecturers. Research not only improves teaching practices and supports career advancement but also fosters professional relationships, autonomy, and reflective teaching. By enhancing a research-driven culture within educational institutions, lecturers can promote job satisfaction, strengthen their professional identities, and contribute to a more collaborative and supportive academic community.

Grounded in Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner's, 1979), the findings of this study revealed that the construction of research identities among Vietnamese EFL lecturers is shaped by a combination of national, institutional, and individual factors. National education reforms, particularly the NFLP, are essential in offering PD and research opportunities, which enhance research skills and influence lecturers' research identities. Institutional factors, such as support from colleagues, financial incentives, and access to research resources, are also key to creating a research-oriented academic environment. On an individual level, factors like time constraints, personal responsibility, and professional recognition significantly influence lecturers' engagement in research. These factors highlight the complicated and interconnected nature of how research identities are constructed among EFL lecturers.

In conclusion, the evidence from this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of EFL lecturers' research identities within the Vietnamese education reform setting. This research contributes to the growing body of empirical studies that demonstrates the importance of phenomenological approach in exploring the construction of research identities among tertiary EFL lecturers. It fills a gap in the field of ELT in Vietnam and has international relevance. The study also contributes to the development and future implementation of research policy in Vietnam.

## Declarations

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**Ethical Approval.** This study adhered to the research guidelines of Eagle University Human Ethics Committee [Decision No. 3493-2024] in Vietnam.

**Data Availability Statement.** The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author, N., upon reasonable request.

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