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A Multiple-Case Study of English Language Teacher Identity in Vietnamese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the ways in which English lecturers in Vietnamese higher education negotiate their professional identities within the context of personal agency, institutional frameworks, and sociocultural expectations. Using a qualitative multiple-case approach, the study explored the identity narratives of three university lecturers at various stages of their careers, employing semi-structured interviews with thematic analysis. Three significantly different identity orientations emerged in the analyses: values-driven mentor, reflective practitioner, and strategic conformity. The results show that individual identities develop through internal factors such as intrinsic motivation, pedagogical orientation, and emotional labor, and external factors that include top-down policy mandates, native-speaker ideologies, structural hierarchy, and symbolic capital connected to qualifications, internationalization, or institutional visibility. While some lecturers enact agency by way of pedagogical care, or adaptive autonomy and quiet resistance to institutional norms and policies, others act within structural constraints to meet management expectations or to gain some legitimacy through institutional hegemony. The study offers new insight into how institutional identities can construct or constrict a teacher's pedagogical and identity development, suggesting a more responsive model for professional development that acknowledges and embraces teacher voice, legitimate recognition and esteem, and reflective practice across all cumulative professional pathways. By situating local identity narratives within broader theoretical frameworks—including agency theory, the study contributes a localized, nuanced understanding of language teacher identity in non-Western higher education. It extends existing frameworks by identifying a third identity category beyond the conventional "transformative" vs. "managerial" binary: the strategic conformist—lecturers who craft identity through alignment with institutional optics rather than pedagogical substance.

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 27 June 2025 | Revised: 18 July 2025 | Accepted: 31 July 2025 | Published Online: 18 September 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i9.10773

CITATION

Mai, T.H., 2025. A Multiple-Case Study of English Language Teacher Identity in Vietnamese Higher Education. Forum for Linguistic Studies. 7(9): 1129–1141. DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i9.10773

Keywords: Teacher Identity; English Lecturers; Qualitative Research; Teacher Agency; Professional Development; Case Study; Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

In recent years, teacher identity has emerged as a central focus in educational research, particularly within the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). In higher education settings, university English lecturers are increasingly expected to go beyond content delivery to become reflective professionals who continuously construct and negotiate their identities. These expectations are shaped by global pedagogical shifts toward learner-centered approaches, accountability measures, and international benchmarks [1].

In non-Western contexts such as Vietnam, the process of identity construction is further complicated by a confluence of factors: teachers' educational and sociocultural backgrounds, institutional structures, emotional experiences, and broader societal expectations [2]. English language lecturers must operate at the intersection of national development agendas, local cultural norms, and shifting educational policies. In Vietnam in particular, English is positioned as a strategic tool for modernization and global integration. Yet, university language teachers often contend with systemic challenges such as excessive workloads, overcrowded classrooms, limited professional autonomy, and insufficient institutional support [3].

Hu et al. [4] pointed that despite growing scholarly interest in teacher identity, the voices of English lecturers in Southeast Asia—especially within university settings—remain underrepresented. Much of the existing literature has been produced in Western or Anglophone contexts, where structural conditions, professional expectations, and sociocultural influences differ significantly from those in Vietnam. While it is well established that teacher identity is socially constructed and shaped through interaction with broader contexts, relatively little is known about how these dynamics play out in rapidly developing, post-reform education systems in the Global South, where English language education is expanding under both global pressures and local imperatives.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how Vietnamese university English lecturers make sense of their professional roles and identities within these complex institutional and sociocultural environments. Drawing on a theoretical framework that views teacher identity as dynamic, situated, and relational, the study examines how individual lecturers navigate personal aspirations, institutional demands, and societal expectations in shaping their professional selves.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What do Vietnamese university English lecturers see as their professional roles?
2. What keeps them motivated to stay in the profession?
3. How do they manage institutional demands and wider sociocultural pressures?

This study offers more than an account of individual experiences; it provides insight into the broader structures and contradictions that shape what it means to be an English lecturer in Vietnam today. Through narrative inquiry and thematic analysis, it explores how lecturers' professional trajectories, teaching philosophies, and everyday practices reflect the interplay between internal agency and external constraints. Rather than proposing a fixed model of identity development, the study highlights both common patterns and personal variations in how teachers construct meaning within their work.

Situated in the context of a non-Western, post-reform education system, this research contributes a grounded and contextually rich perspective to ongoing discussions in ELT on teacher identity. It offers practical implications for how institutions in Vietnam—and in similarly positioned systems—might better train, support, and retain English language lecturers amid complex and evolving professional landscapes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Factors Shaping the Dynamic Construction of Teacher Identity

Beijaard et al. [5], Vanderlinde et al. [6], and Garner and Kaplan [7] emphasized that teacher identity is increasingly viewed not as a fixed set of characteristics, but as something fluid—shaped over time by a mix of personal experience and the broader social and institutional environments in which

teachers work. Rather than viewing identity as static or inherent, researchers now emphasize its construction through lived experiences, reflective practices, interactions with students and colleagues, and responses to professional challenges inside and outside the classroom. This perspective has been reinforced by Beijaard and Meijer[8], Graham and Phelps[9], Yazan[10], and Vanderlinde et al.[6]. Yona[11] and Waelen[12] highlighted that the social acknowledgment or misrecognition of one's roles and contributions, significantly impacts identity formation and agency.

Teacher identity is widely recognized as relational and fluid, constantly negotiated through personal beliefs, emotional experiences, and institutional dynamics, as discussed by Evison et al.[13], Rushton et al.[14], and Lap et al.[15]. Agency refers to individuals' capacity to act intentionally within structural conditions, as noted by van den Berg and Amasyalı[16], enabling educators to negotiate and enact their professional identities. Fernández et al.[17] argue that motivation involves the internal and external drivers that energize goal-oriented actions, influencing how teachers engage in identity work and exercise agency. Ngo and Trinh[18] argue that in Vietnam, these processes are shaped by post-reform policies, limited autonomy, and sociocultural expectations. At the same time, Evison et al.[13] despite the global rise in ELT identity research, Southeast Asian voices remain underrepresented.

2.1.1. Sociocultural and Institutional Dimensions of Language Teacher Identity

McKinney and Norton[19] reminds us that teacher identity does not develop in isolation—it is always shaped by the larger social, cultural, and political environment in which teaching takes place. Holliday[20] argues that in contexts like Vietnam, where English is taught as a foreign language and native-speaker norms still hold significant influence, educators often find themselves balancing between global expectations in ELT and the realities of their local teaching contexts.

Beyond classroom instruction, a range of contextual and sociocultural factors deeply influence how English lecturers see themselves and their work. Nazari[21] and Sögüt[22] argue that institutional rules and top-down policy mandates often limit autonomy and generate identity tensions, as teachers find their professional beliefs constrained by formal structures and resource limitations. Ngo[23] highlights how the premium placed on formal qualifications and English proficiency, especially under national initiatives like Vietnam's Project 2020, creates both professional pressure and identity dissonance, particularly for non-native or under-resourced educators. Meanwhile, public attitudes toward English teaching—in particular, expectations of high linguistic competence and status—shape how lecturers position themselves, negotiate credibility, and navigate discourses of native vs. non-native speaker status[24,25].

The intersection of professional and personal roles—especially for female lecturers—adds another complex layer. Studies in the Vietnamese higher education context show that married women frequently encounter conflict between familial duties and academic career demands. Ngo and Trinh[18] note that these duties limit their time for research, professional development, and identity-building opportunities. As a result, their professional identities are constructed not only around teaching but also around culturally situated expectations of caregiving and domestic responsibility.

Together, these findings point to how teacher identity is not only built through classroom practice but also continually co-shaped by institutional mandates, sociocultural expectations, qualification criteria, and gendered life-work intersections—each framing how educators interpret and perform their professional selves.

2.1.2. Internal Dimensions of Teacher Identity: Agency, Motivation, and Professional Self

While external structures such as curriculum mandates, institutional policies, and sociocultural expectations undoubtedly shape teacher identity, it is equally important to examine the internal dimensions that influence how teachers experience and perform their roles. These include agency, intrinsic motivation, emotional resilience, and personal meaning-making.

Yang et al.[26], Ross et al.[27] emphasize that a critical dimension concerns how language teachers understand their work, how they are perceived by others, and how they respond to tensions that arise between their values and external demands. In this way, identity becomes closely linked to how teachers see themselves professionally: through self-reflection, agency, long-term career paths, and the everyday decisions they make. For university English lecturers in particular, identity also involves navigating one's place within institutional structures, responding to cultural norms, and positioning oneself within larger conversations in the field

of language education.

Chávez et al.[28] argue that teacher agency is not an innate trait but a capacity that emerges from the interplay between professional knowledge, personal beliefs, and context. In higher education, English lecturers exercise agency through everyday decisions—such as modifying teaching materials, experimenting with new methods, or advocating for students—even within constrained systems. Such moments reveal how teachers perceive their autonomy and assert professional judgment in both subtle and overt ways[29,30].

Moreover, motivation plays a central role in sustaining teacher identity over time. Kang et al.[31] found that some educators are driven by a sense of calling or commitment to student development, while others are motivated by career stability, intellectual curiosity, or recognition. These motivations are dynamic and may shift depending on life stages, institutional changes, or accumulated teaching experiences.

Emotions also constitute a vital, though often overlooked, component of teacher identity. Teaching is not just cognitive labor but emotional work. Navigating disappointment, pride, burnout, or fulfillment—often simultaneously—shapes how teachers come to see themselves and their profession[32,33].

Career trajectories and life transitions further inform a teacher's evolving sense of self. Taşdemir[34] highlights how early professional experiences, role shifts (e.g., from school to university), or personal developments such as parenting or geographic relocation influence not only practical decisions but also emotional orientations toward the profession. Some teachers intentionally craft a long-term professional vision, while others respond adaptively to external opportunities or constraints, revealing varying levels of agency, clarity, and stability in their identity formation.

2.2. A Theoretical Framework for Understanding English Lecturer Identity

Bringing together both external and internal dimensions, the professional identity of Vietnamese university English lecturers emerges as a dynamic construct shaped by the intersection of contextual forces and individual meaning-making. On the external side, factors such as institutional policy mandates, qualification requirements, public perceptions of English teaching, and gendered societal norms serve as powerful forces structuring the conditions within which identity is negotiated. These sociocultural and systemic influences can both constrain and enable how lecturers position themselves in their roles, often generating tensions between personal values and institutional expectations. Simultaneously, internal factors—including teachers' agency, self-perception, career motivations, and reflective practices—play a critical role in how identity is enacted and sustained over time. Individual responses to workload, autonomy in classroom decision-making, emotional resilience, and long-term aspirations all contribute to shaping a coherent or evolving sense of self within the profession (**Figure 1**).

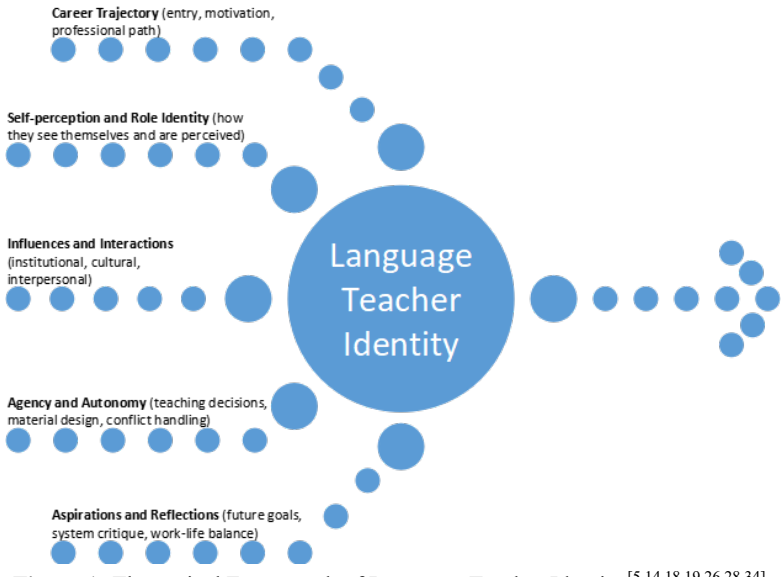

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of Language Teacher Identity[5,14,18,19,26,28,34].

Taken together, these two spheres—contextual (external) and experiential (internal)—suggest that language teacher identity in higher education is best understood as a constantly negotiated, socially embedded process (**Figure 1**). In the Vietnamese context, where global ELT discourses intersect with local realities, identity construction becomes not only a matter of teaching competence, but also of navigating institutional structures, managing sociocultural expectations, and sustaining professional purpose amid change.

2.3. Research Gap and Study Rationale

Building on the theoretical framework outlined above—which emphasizes both internal dimensions (such as agency, self-perception, and aspirations) and external factors (including institutional structures and sociocultural norms)—the professional trajectory of university lecturers in Vietnam, particularly in the public sector, tends to follow a rigidly structured path. Entry is typically through competitive civil service examinations, with predetermined placements and limited room for advancement. Hamid and Nguyen [3] argue that in recent years, however, the pursuit of a doctoral degree has emerged as a critical form of symbolic capital, serving not only as a marker of professional legitimacy but also as a gateway to leadership opportunities and greater institutional recognition. Despite these developments, the ways in which university English lecturers in Vietnam construct and negotiate their professional identities within this framework remain insufficiently examined in current scholarship.

Despite increasing interest in teacher identity globally, there remains a noticeable gap in research on how university English lecturers in Vietnam make sense of their work and roles. Much of the literature continues to focus on pedagogy or language proficiency, with little attention paid to how identity is formed through career decisions, workplace interactions, institutional policies, or cultural norms [35,36]. This study seeks to fill that gap by using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore how identity is constructed, experienced, and negotiated in the lived realities of higher education.

To respond to this gap in the literature, the present study adopts a semi-structured interview approach to explore, in depth, how university English lecturers construct and negotiate their professional identities. This methodological choice allows participants to share their experiences, reflections, and challenges in their own words, offering rich insights into the nuanced and evolving nature of teacher identity in contemporary Vietnam.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research takes a qualitative, multiple-case approach to better understand how English lecturers at Vietnamese universities shape and experience their professional identities. The participants—Lecturers Q, H, and O—were selected based on purposive yet context-driven sampling [37], with accessibility and willingness to participate being key considerations. By looking closely at three individuals—Lecturers Q, H, and O—the study explores both the common threads that connect their stories and the distinctive elements that make each case unique. This type of design is especially well-suited to identity research, where people's lived contexts, personal narratives, and ways of interpreting their roles are central to the inquiry [37].

Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the study focuses on how participants make meaning of their teaching lives—how they view themselves professionally, how they relate to their institutions, and how their identities evolve over time within the social and cultural environment in which they work.

3.2. Participants

This study draws on the insights of three female university English lecturers in Vietnam, selected through purposeful maximum variation sampling [38]. The aim was to capture a range of perspectives by including participants who differ in terms of professional experience, academic training, institutional settings, and professional motivations.

- Lecturer Q has nearly two decades of teaching experience and entered the profession out of intrinsic interest. She is widely respected for her high expectations and sustained dedication to both teaching and academic research.
- Lecturer H brings around 15 years of experience. She takes a pragmatic, student-centered approach and is known for her ability to balance professional responsibilities with family life.

- Lecturer O, with 12 years in the field, is a career-focused educator who recently earned a doctoral degree. Her professional identity is shaped by a strong drive toward leadership and institutional recognition.

All three participants are currently teaching at public universities in Vietnam. Their work involves both general English instruction for students in non-language majors and more specialized English language courses for students enrolled in language-related programs.

3.3. Instrument

To explore how English lecturers, construct and interpret their professional identities, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was selected for its flexibility and depth, allowing participants to express complex personal and professional experiences in their own words [39]. The interview format encouraged open-ended, reflective responses and facilitated the emergence of rich narrative accounts related to identity, agency, institutional pressures, and career aspirations.

The interview guide was informed by established frameworks in teacher identity research [5,19], agency in education [28], and career development in language teaching [40]. It comprised 20 open-ended questions organized into five thematic domains (see **Appendix A**):

1. Career Trajectory (entry, motivation, professional path)
2. Self-perception and Role Identity (how they see themselves and are perceived)
3. Influences and Interactions (institutional, cultural, interpersonal)
4. Agency and Autonomy (teaching decisions, material design, conflict handling)
5. Aspirations and Reflections (future goals, system critique, work-life balance)

Each question was guided by key constructs in identity theory—such as coherence, positionality, agency, and fluidity—and grounded in contextual realities of Vietnamese higher education.

3.4. Data Collection

Each interview lasted between 60 and 75 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese, ensuring participants could communicate freely and comfortably in their native language. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

The interviews were conducted over a two-week period in a quiet, private setting at each participant's institution. The researcher followed an iterative process of data collection and initial coding, allowing insights from earlier interviews to inform subsequent ones—a practice that aligns with grounded theory and qualitative interviewing principles [41].

To determine data saturation, the researcher followed the guidance of Braun and Clarke [42], who define saturation as the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews. After completing three in-depth interviews, it became evident that core identity dimensions—such as agency, institutional constraint, and symbolic capital—were recurring and well-developed across participants. While more participants might have added nuance, thematic saturation had been reached within the scope and purpose of this multiple-case design [43].

3.5. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke [44]. The process began with repeated reading of the transcripts to become familiar with the content, followed by generating initial codes, identifying preliminary themes, reviewing and refining those themes, clearly defining and naming them, and finally constructing a narrative account for reporting.

A combined deductive–inductive approach guided the coding process. The deductive layer drew upon established theoretical constructs such as teacher trajectory, agency, and identity positioning, while the inductive layer allowed new themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives. To support organization and transparency, NVivo software was used for coding, retrieval, and comparison.

To make sense of similarities and differences across the three cases, a coding matrix and thematic comparison table were developed. These tools helped trace both shared patterns and individual distinctions in how each lecturer expressed their identity. In addition, a visual coding tree was constructed to map the relationships between overarching themes and more specific sub-themes, offering a clearer pic-

ture of how identity elements were interconnected across the dataset.

3.6. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the researcher engaged in member checking by sharing summary transcripts with each participant and inviting feedback to confirm the accuracy of interpretation. This process helped ensure that participants' perspectives were represented authentically. In addition, triangulation was built into the study design by comparing responses across three distinct individual cases, which allowed both convergence and divergence of themes to surface.

To support transferability, detailed contextual information—such as participants' teaching backgrounds, institutional roles, and career histories—was included to help readers assess the applicability of the findings to other settings. Thick description was used throughout to capture not just what participants said, but also the context in which their experiences unfolded.

All ethical protocols were carefully followed. Participants gave informed consent after being clearly briefed on the study's purpose and their rights. Ethical approval was granted by the university's research ethics committee. For confidentiality, real names were replaced with pseudonyms (Q, H, and O), and any identifying information was removed or modified in the final report.

4. Findings

To synthesize the findings across participants, the **Table 1** below presents a thematic coding matrix that captures key identity dimensions and how they manifest in each lecturer's narrative. Drawing from both theoretical codes and emergent themes, the matrix highlights contrasts in career motivation, teaching philosophy, conflict management, and professional goals. While some themes reflect convergence—such as shared institutional pressures—others reveal clear divergence in identity orientation and agency. This cross-case comparison provides a concise yet layered view of how identity is shaped differently even within a shared educational context

Thematic analysis yielded eleven major themes related to identity construction. Findings are discussed in light of key literature on teacher identity, agency, and higher education.

Table 1. Qualitative Coding Matrix.

Theme	Code Category	Lecturer Q	Lecturer H	Lecturer O
Career entry	Trajectory	Self-motivated; chose teaching	Circumstantial choice; stable match	Peer-influenced; family-enforced
Motivation to stay	Engagement	Driven by passion + income	Feels matched and proud	Stays for practicality
Professional identity	Self-concept	Demanding but supportive	Authentic, learner-centered	Status-driven, image-conscious
Development over time	Professional growth	Evolved toward structured quality	Grew toward personalization	Shifting to self-promotion
Influences on identity	Identity construction	Strong academic and reflective base	Grounded in strong local academic culture	Pragmatic, degree-focused
Handling conflict	Conflict management	Diplomatic, proactive	Firm, principled with peers	Moody, direct, blunt with peers
Working with native teachers	Intercultural interaction	Feels pressure; asserts local strengths	Collaborates; challenges inefficiency	Admires, conforms to native norms
Autonomy in teaching	Instructional agency	High trust and autonomy	Customizes for learners	Highlights presentation superiority
Future orientation	Career goals	Wants to mentor, publish	Plans for research-focused shift	Aims for leadership title
View on education system	System critique	Wants real PD support	Wants structural workload reform	Wants realistic metrics, status rewards
Work-life balance	Personal-professional interface	Motherhood highly integrated	Balances multiple roles well	Prioritizes household over teaching

To better capture the relative strength and orientation of identity themes across participants, we offer a comparative overview of how Lecturers Q, H, and O align with key dimensions. The aim is to highlight patterns of convergence and divergence without reducing lived experiences to numerical values[45].

Lecturers' entry into the teaching profession revealed differing degrees of intentionality and motivation, reflecting the complex interplay between personal choice and circumstantial factors. Lecturer Q described her entry as incidental, referring to teaching as a "*backup plan*" after failing to secure a civil service position: "*I didn't pass the civil service exam, so I ended up teaching. It was not what I imagined at first*." In contrast, Lecturer H entered the field with a clearer sense of purpose: "*I loved languages and I wanted to help students access more than just grammar*." Lecturer O also regarded teaching as a fallback option, though her reflections suggest a gradual internalization of the role: "*It wasn't my dream job, but over time I found my way*."

Across participants, professional identity appeared as a dynamic construct, evolving in tandem with experience and reflection. Lecturer H articulated a strong, learner-centered identity grounded in continuous improvement: "*I often think about how to improve… not just methods, but also how I connect with students*." Lecturer Q also noted a shift in self-perception over time, from passive rule-follower to more adaptive and confident practitioner: "*Before, I just followed instructions. Now I try to adapt based on who I teach.*" By contrast, Lecturer O expressed limited change, relying primarily on departmental guidance: "I mostly follow what the department gives me."

When it comes to instructional autonomy and agency, the three lecturers reported varying degrees of freedom and assertiveness in their pedagogical decisions. Lecturer H demonstrated a high level of independence: "*I design all my materials. I even ignore the textbook if it doesn't work*." Lecturer Q noted increasing autonomy over time: "*They used to check my slides. Now they let me decide*." Meanwhile, Lecturer O remained constrained by perceived institutional limitations: "*I don't think I'm allowed to change much.*"

The participants also diverged in how they approached professional conflict and intercultural tensions, particularly in collaboration with native-speaking colleagues. Lecturer H was the only one to address this issue explicitly, asserting her professional voice in the face of marginalization: "*When native speakers ignore our input, I push back. We know the students better.*" In contrast, Lecturer Q adopted a more cautious stance: "*I try not to get involved in issues*." Lecturer O's silence on the matter may indicate either a lack of relevant experience or an unwillingness to engage with sensitive institutional dynamics.

Future aspirations and perspectives on systemic change further distinguished the lecturers' identity orientations. Both Q and H voiced critical views of the system, yet maintained a proactive stance. H emphasized adaptability: "*We can't wait for policy changes. We adapt first.*" Q echoed this sentiment: "*If we don't push, things won't move*." Conversely, O showed a preference for stability and compliance over reform: "*I'm just doing what's required*."

The cross-case synthesis reveals both converging and diverging patterns in how Lecturers Q, H, and O construct their professional identities. While all three participants work within similar institutional and cultural settings, their narratives reflect distinctive orientations toward career entry, identity development, autonomy, and future outlooks: lecturer H stands out as the most agentive and reflective among the three. Her entry into teaching was motivated by intrinsic interest, and she continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to pedagogical innovation and personal growth. H also exhibits confidence in navigating intercultural tensions and proactively shaping her professional environment. Lecturer Q, although initially uncertain about her career, shows signs of increasing autonomy and identity maturation over time. Her narrative captures a transition from externally driven compliance to more adaptive, student-centered practices. In contrast, Lecturer O's identity appears more static and institutionally bounded. Despite holding a doctoral degree for three years, her responses suggest a preference for maintaining established norms rather than initiating change.

These findings illustrate the dynamic and multilayered nature of teacher identity in the Vietnamese higher education context. Identity is not a fixed attribute but an evolving construct influenced by personal motivations, institutional cultures, and the broader sociopolitical environment. These contrasts will be discussed in greater detail in the thematic sections that follow, where each dimension is unpacked with reference to narrative excerpts and theoretical lenses.

5. Discussion

The comparative narratives of Lecturers Q, H, and O present distinct patterns of identity construction, offering a robust foundation for deeper interpretation. Rather than serving merely descriptive ends, these patterns illuminate how teacher identity is dynamically shaped at the nexus of individual agency, symbolic resources, and institutional pressures. Building upon contemporary theories of professional identity—particularly agency [46], symbolic capital [47] and structural conditions [5,48] - this section examines how identity is co-constructed through negotiation, resistance, and adaptation within the Vietnamese higher education system.

5.1. Identity and Situated Agency

Lecturer H's narrative illustrates what Hökkä et al. [49] describe as "transformative agency"—where educators actively shape their professional environments through pedagogical innovation and cultural critique. Her willingness to challenge native-speaker norms and redesign materials underscores a dynamic, future-oriented identity driven by internal values and professional confidence. Conversely, Lecturer O exhibits limited agency, shaped by managerial expectations and an implicit deference to institutional hierarchy. This contrast exemplifies Priestley et al.'s [46] assertion that agency is neither innate nor constant but emergent and contextually mediated. It also aligns with recent Vietnamese research [50,51] indicating that junior faculty often face curtailed autonomy due to hierarchical structures and lack of collegial support.

5.2. Symbolic Capital and the Politics of Legitimacy

Rahman et al. [47] concept of symbolic capital offers a powerful lens through which to interpret how authority and recognition shape identity performance. Lecturer H leverages her doctoral credentials and linguistic expertise to project a voice of authority, gaining legitimacy both from students and institutional stakeholders. Lecturer Q, though still completing her PhD, strategically accumulates symbolic capital through pedagogical engagement and reflective discourse. In contrast, Lecturer O, despite holding a doctorate, demonstrates low symbolic resonance, suggesting that qualifications alone do not guarantee professional recognition. These patterns corroborate McKinney and Norton's [19] and Liu's [52] argument that symbolic capital is context-dependent and relational—it accrues through alignment with dominant norms, perceived legitimacy, and institutional endorsement, not merely through academic degrees.

5.3. Institutional Structures and Constraints

The influence of institutional structures is evident in all three narratives, though manifested differently. Lecturer Q's account of administrative control over teaching materials reflects what Smith et al. [48] term "identity under surveillance"—a condition where external controls shape internal self-concepts. Lecturer H's strategic resistance to the dominance of native-speaker ideologies reflects a counter-hegemonic identity that asserts local pedagogical authority. Lecturer O's avoidance of critique signals an internalized compliance with institutional norms, illustrating Banderlipe's [53] notion of "discursively regulated identity." These experiences underscore how identity construction is both shaped by and enacted within structural boundaries, often through subtle negotiations rather than outright defiance.

5.4. A Third Space: Strategic Conformity

One of the most compelling insights from this study is the emergence of what might be termed "strategic conformists"—lecturers who construct their professional selves in alignment with institutional optics rather than intrinsic pedagogical beliefs. This triadic model (transformative–adaptive–strategic) moves beyond the binary identity models [6] by adding a nuanced category that reflects the complexities of modern academic life in Vietnam. As Richards [54] notes, institutional narratives increasingly mediate identity in global TESOL settings, and this study extends their argument by showing how such mediation becomes an identity strategy in contexts of constrained professional recognition.

5.5. Localized Identity Construction in Vietnamese HE

While international literature has long emphasized the sociopolitical nature of teacher identity [55,56], this study con-

tributes a localized perspective, revealing how Vietnamese lecturers navigate identity under a hybrid logic—balancing Confucian values of hierarchy and harmony with neoliberal discourses of accountability, global benchmarking, and performativity[57,58]. Lecturer Q's evolving confidence, H's assertive resistance, and O's cautious compliance all reflect differing responses to this complex interplay. Their narratives show that teacher identity in Vietnamese higher education is not only dynamic but deeply embedded in cultural expectations and institutional demands.

5.6. Implications for Professional Learning and Policy

These findings carry significant implications for teacher education and professional development. Identity construction should be a central concern—not an afterthought—in educator training. Programs must move beyond technocratic skill-building to offer dialogic spaces for reflection, narrative sharing, and agency development[59,60]. Additionally, institutions need to rethink how they define professional success. Rather than narrowly valuing publications or international degrees, a broader framework should recognize leadership in teaching, relational pedagogy, and ethical engagement. Such recognition would validate diverse identity pathways and allow teachers to thrive within their own terms.

6. Conclusions

This study set out to understand how three university English lecturers in Vietnam make sense of who they are as educators—how they build, adjust, and express their professional identities while navigating a landscape shaped by institutional demands, social expectations, and personal beliefs. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research uncovered distinct identity trajectories: Lecturer Q, guided by a strong inner drive and sense of vocation; Lecturer H, balancing pragmatic decisions with student-centered values; and Lecturer O, strategically crafting her identity around advancement and institutional recognition.

Although they shared the same disciplinary field and worked within similar university contexts, their identities as teachers unfolded in unique ways. Q and H centered their practice on pedagogy, student growth, and ethical commitment. O, in contrast, was more concerned with positioning—how credentials, titles, and visibility shape her professional standing. These differences reinforce the idea that teacher identity is not one-dimensional or fixed; rather, it is shaped over time by the interplay of personal agency and external structures.

The findings resonate with prior research that frames teacher identity as dynamic[61], socially constructed[19], and context-sensitive[62]. They also highlight the importance of looking beyond teaching techniques—to how educators see themselves, how they are seen by others, and how they negotiate their place within a shifting educational landscape.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the Scientific Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Electric Power University, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS), World Health Organization (2016). All procedures were conducted in accordance with relevant institutional and international regulations.

Informed Consent Statement

Written informed consent to participate in this study was obtained from all participants.

Data Availability Statement

The interview data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. However, anonymized excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Semi-interview questions:

1. Could you share your journey to becoming a university English lecturer?
2. How long have you been teaching English at the university level?
3. What motivates you to continue pursuing a teaching career?
4. How would you describe yourself as an English teacher?
5. What does being a university English lecturer mean to you, both personally and professionally?
6. Do you think your professional identity has changed over time? If so, how?
7. In your opinion, how do students, colleagues, or institutional leaders perceive your role?
8. What personal experiences have influenced the way you teach and perceive your role?
9. How has your academic or professional training shaped your teacher identity?
10. How have institutional policies, regulations, or your working environment influenced your professional identity?
11. Do you think there are any societal or cultural expectations that influence your role as an English lecturer?
12. Have you ever experienced a conflict between your personal teaching beliefs and institutional expectations? If so, how did you handle it?
13. Can you recall a specific situation in which your professional identity was challenged?
14. Do you feel pressure to conform to the "native speaker" model or global standards in English language teaching? How do you respond to that?
15. How would you describe your level of autonomy in teaching (in terms of content, methodology, materials, etc.)?
16. Could you share an instance when you made a professional decision based on personal judgment, even if it did not fully align with institutional norms?
17. When designing your lessons, what do you prioritize? What factors influence your decisions?
18. How do you envision your role as an English lecturer changing over the next 5 to 10 years?
19. In your opinion, what kinds of support or professional development would benefit you most?
20. If you were to give advice to a new English lecturer, what would you say about developing a professional identity?

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