

## Research Engagement Among University EFL Lecturers in Vietnam: A Positioning Theory Perspective

Participación en la investigación entre docentes universitarios de inglés en Vietnam: una perspectiva desde la teoría del posicionamiento

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Most Vietnamese university lecturers, especially those who teach English as a foreign language (EFL), have always considered research practice an unfamiliar area and seem disempowered from conducting research activities. Hence, this qualitative study investigates the research engagement of 21 Vietnamese EFL lecturers from a positioning theory perspective, as evidenced in semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed the participants' insights into research when they play different roles: (a) lecturer, (b) action researcher, (c) EFL teacher, and (d) impossible-mission accomplisher. Regardless of the participants' positions, their research engagement was low and depended on their perception of such roles. The study discusses implications for fostering academics' research in higher education within and beyond Vietnam.

*Keywords:* EFL research practice, EFL university lecturer, positioning theory, research culture, research engagement

La mayoría de los profesores universitarios vietnamitas, especialmente aquellos que enseñan inglés, consideran la práctica investigativa un área poco familiar y parecen desmotivados para realizar actividades investigativas. Este estudio cualitativo analiza la participación en la investigación de 21 profesores vietnamitas de inglés desde la perspectiva de la teoría del posicionamiento, utilizando entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los hallazgos revelaron las percepciones de los participantes sobre la investigación cuando asumen diferentes roles: (a) profesor, (b) investigador de acción, (c) docente de inglés y (d) realizador de misiones imposibles. Independientemente de sus roles, la participación en la investigación fue baja y dependió de cómo percibían dichos roles. El estudio discute implicaciones para fomentar la investigación académica en la educación superior dentro y fuera de Vietnam.

*Palabras clave:* compromiso con la investigación, cultura de la investigación, investigación en inglés como lengua extranjera, docentes universitarios de inglés, teoría del posicionamiento

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## Introduction

Alongside teaching, engaging in research practices has been a crucial requirement for university lecturers in international contexts (Walker et al., 2019; Wisker, 2019). The underpinning argument is that research practices are believed to contribute greatly to lecturers' professional development (Hall, 2023; Kirkwood & Christie, 2006). Faculty members' active participation in scientific research activities is an important and mandatory measure to improve a university's educational quality and better meet society's increasing demands. In L2 education contexts, research practices, in addition to teaching activities, serve as a measure of lecturers' professional competence (Borg, 2009; Borg & Liu, 2013).

However, Vietnamese universities still have a modest number of teaching staff involved in research activities. Although there is a substantial number of academically distinguished professionals, the research output remains considerably low (Nguyen et al., 2016). In foreign language education, lecturers have been called to take part in research practice. However, research practice is still considered the academic "ivory tower" that most language teachers distance themselves from and feel unable to engage with (Vu, 2021). This reflects the lecturers' lack of enthusiasm for scientific research activities.

Therefore, this study develops a comprehensive insight into such engagement of English as a foreign language (EFL) Vietnamese lecturers, using positioning theory as a lens. Besides focusing on how lecturers understand and conduct research, our inquiry explores the underlying reasons for their disengagement from research by examining their positions within the context of Vietnamese universities.

## Literature Review

Research engagement refers to both engagement *in* (doing) and engagement *with* (reading and using; Borg, 2010). Teachers "do research" to improve their knowledge and contribute to better-quality learning and teaching, and their results are published in different formats—

oral and written, formal and less formal. Regarding research engagement, teachers are advised to become critical consumers of educational research, which could provide them with innovative ways of seeing, doing, talking, knowing, and thinking (Borg, 2010; Uştuk & Curtis, 2024). Many teacher-researchers mention that institutional culture significantly influences their research involvement (Borg & Liu, 2013; Rahimi et al., 2021).

While teachers and researchers have always considered research engagement as a crucial issue considering its remarkable impacts on teaching and learning (Dao et al., 2022; Sato & Loewen, 2019; Walker et al., 2019), few empirical studies have delineated teachers' research engagement in English language teaching (ELT), particularly in the context of Vietnamese higher education. Previous studies have presented significant findings on language teachers' perceptions and reasons for reading and conducting research, as well as for not doing so. Some studies consider exploring challenges to research engagement, including lack of time, expertise, and motivation as focal concerns (e.g., Borg & Liu, 2013; Dao et al., 2022), while others mention support from an advisory research committee and a policy emphasizing research as an integral part of a school's performance review as feasible solutions encouraging teachers' research engagement (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2009; Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Gao et al., 2011). Furthermore, Borg's empirical studies (2007, 2009) not only reflect respondents' perceptions of the institutional culture of research but also provide both teachers and administrators with evidence to formulate critical policies to motivate and facilitate research engagement in ELT teachers.

In recent years, Vietnamese teacher-researchers have reconsidered their research engagement in ELT. Pham (2006), who investigated the research culture of university ELT educators in Vietnam, found that the participants expressed the need to conduct research. However, multiple obstacles discourage teachers from being research-engaged, including the dissatisfaction with evaluation regulations, the presentation formats

of research findings, insufficient library skills to access materials, and inadequate training to develop research skills. Similarly, Vu (2021) found that, despite teachers' regard for the importance of research in teaching, certain factors prevented their participation, including time constraints, non-practical publications, and a lack of research competence.

Scholars have also discussed research culture to determine whether it stimulates or hinders research engagement. Activities such as using educational research, publishing papers, and the steps English teachers take to conduct research require further exploration to reveal more themes of teacher research engagement and related challenges. These may also be fundamental in formulating practical solutions.

While several studies have explored L2 lecturers' perceptions of and engagement in research in international higher education contexts, only a few have focused on EFL lecturers' research engagement in Vietnamese higher institutions. Therefore, this study adopted the positioning theory perspective to provide more insights into ELT teachers' conceptions of both reading and conducting research, including a more comprehensive overview of the research culture in Vietnamese universities.

### Positioning Theory

This study draws on positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) to understand the research engagement of Vietnamese EFL lecturers at four state universities. This theory supports the views that participants can be considered active agents in their lives and that their negotiation of position is a result of discursive practices (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999).

This theory conceptualizes "position" as "a cluster of beliefs with respect to the rights and duties of the members of a group to act in a certain way" (Harré, 2012, p. 196). Accordingly, when a person adopts a certain position as their own, they view the world through their positional set of opinions and with regard to

specific images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts made relevant within the specific discursive practices in which they are positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990). The process of cognitively and socially formulating such positions is called "positioning," which can refer to "the assignment of fluid 'parts' or 'roles' to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 17). Analyzing positioning in oral discourse would help uncover people's identities (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). As this study aims to explore how the participants adopt their positions through interviews, their identities could be captured.

Positioning has two modes: reflexive, defined as the process of assigning positions to oneself, or what one says positions oneself; and interactive, which represents the assignment of positions to others, or what one says positions others. Both modes enable an exploration of how EFL lecturers perceive themselves as they navigate their respective research paths.

## Method

### Context

We selected four Vietnamese universities (coded U1-U4) co-administered by the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. These are multidisciplinary but well-known institutions with specialized areas (see Table 1). Accordingly, these universities share a core curriculum framework. Moreover, their students generally show inconsistent and low English proficiency, and they do not allot significant time to ELT within the curriculum, as they focus on their specialized areas of study (Lam, 2018). Notably, although the universities vary in research time requirements, especially among their promotion levels, EFL lecturers spend substantial hours on teaching, as they must teach students from different cohorts and different majors.

### The Researchers' Position

The researchers in this study were not participants in the interviews. Rather, they were working at one of the four institutions involved in the research. Their responsibilities included teaching, researching, and other tasks assigned by their superiors. Therefore, their roles were dual in nature: both as external observers fulfilling the role of researchers, and as insiders with a deep understanding of the issues being studied, as well as the significance of addressing them.

### Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to invite specific participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After selecting the four participating universities, we sent invitation emails to all their EFL lecturers; however, most rejected our request while others did not respond. As a result, our final sample consisted of 21 Vietnamese EFL lecturers from four universities. As shown in Table 1, we coded the participants' names to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, and facilitate better data analysis. Table 1 also provides the basic information about the participants

and their universities. The hours presented were based on the requirement for lecturers with master's degrees.

The participants included three men and 18 women. Regarding qualifications, two lecturers had doctoral degrees in education and the remaining 19 held master's degrees in teaching English to speakers of other languages. The participants' working experience in tertiary education in Vietnam ranged from 3 to 20 years; meanwhile, their research experience was based on the number of research papers they published in institutional journals and/or national conferences (the highest reported being five).

### Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were the main data source, as they are regarded as a method for participants to express their work cognition (Borg, 2015). The interview questions were adapted from the frame of questions developed by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2012). More questions were asked depending on specific circumstances surrounding the interviews. The main interview questions are listed in the Appendix.

**Table 1.** Context and Participants

University	Main specialization	Number of participants (codes)	Minimum number of research hours per year	Minimum number of teaching hours per year
U1	Water resources	11 (TLo1-TL11)	95 (nearly two proceedings at national conferences or one article in a national peer-reviewed journal)	270
U2	Agriculture and forestry	2 (BG01-BG02)	200 (85% of one proceeding at national conferences or 85% of one article in an international peer-reviewed journal)	300
U3	Forestry	4 (LNo1-LNo4)	180 (one proceeding at national conferences or 75% of one article in a national peer-reviewed journal)	280
U4	Agriculture	4 (NN01-NN04)	120 (two proceedings at national conferences or one article in the institutional journal)	270

After formulating the interview questions, the research team discussed them and consulted two ELT experts based in Vietnam for their relevance and clarity. The questions were then translated into Vietnamese using back-translation (Sousa & Rojjanasrirat, 2011) so that all the interviewees would easily understand the questions and their purposes.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

Before conducting the interviews, we performed document analysis as a preliminary activity to demographically characterize both the setting and participants of the study rather than a strategy to collect data. The document analysis aimed to explore the context of research practices in which the interviewees worked, specifically their institutions' official requirements for research and teaching duties. To identify these requirements, we searched public documents on the universities' websites and reported the average quota of a lecturer with a master's degree. This allowed us to develop the interview questions and analyze the results more effectively. Then, we engaged the participants in individual online semi-structured interviews, conducted entirely in Vietnamese, via Zoom. These interviews were scheduled according to the participants' personal timetables and were recorded with their consent. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes.

We transcribed the interview data and translated it into English following back-translation procedures (Liamputpong, 2010). The translation process was supported by two EFL lecturers specializing in languages and linguistics. The English version of the interview data was used in this research.

After repeatedly reading the data, we analyzed it and assigned codes based on the guide proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in four main steps. First, we sought to become familiar with the data. Second, we generated initial individual codes representing data features that we found interesting, including "research

duties," "research interests," and "motivation to do research." In the next stage, the themes underwent a broader level of categorization; for instance, "research interests," "motivation to research," "reasons for reading," and "frequency of reading" were combined under the theme "engagement with research." Next, we reviewed the themes to ensure they appropriately reflected the coded data extracts and the whole dataset. This was supported by an expert with a PhD in education who made appropriate modifications to the set of themes.

We used positioning theory as a lens to investigate EFL lecturers' research work; thus, it was important to identify the positions to which EFL lecturers referred themselves and those with which they did not associate. Therefore, a further step was to categorize the themes into broader positions. The codes and themes reported in the research were inductive, emerging during the data analysis. Finally, we identified four discursive positions among the themes: (a) lecturer, (b) action researcher, (c) EFL teacher, and (d) impossible-mission accomplisher.

### **Findings**

The findings indicated that the EFL lecturers positioned themselves and were positioned by others according to the four discourses mentioned above. This section discusses the relevant details of these discourses.

#### **EFL Lecturer Position**

Generally, Vietnamese university lecturers have two important and basic functions: teaching and researching. Both practice and theory clearly demonstrate that these two functions have an organic relation, are closely linked, and support each other. Research practice provides lecturers with the basis, conditions, and premises to perform well in their teaching duties in the classroom. Conversely, teaching reflects the results of research activities. Hence, those who position themselves as university lecturers are prepared to fulfill these two tasks simultaneously, with the research

task being considered a necessity. The representations of this self-need, however, range widely from the lecturers' perceptions of their tasks to their desire to do "something" related to research and then to actually engage in research activities.

First, most participants were aware of their positions as lecturers at higher institutions. They demonstrated their research practice engagement through their perceptions of the tasks of a university lecturer. They reported that, as lecturers, they were well-informed of their research tasks alongside their teaching duties and of the importance of research practice at the tertiary level. All participants agreed that conducting research was substantially important for university lecturers. Several participants ( $n = 16$ ) showed a willingness to perform the tasks and managed to fulfill these university requirements. They understood that research was "parallel tasks with teaching" (LNo4) and conducted research to further develop themselves. Moreover, they considered research practice as the basis for incentives such as rewards or a salary increment. According to one lecturer,

I find that doing research is very beneficial for my teaching. And doing research also encourages other competitions at the university. If you don't do research, you will not be considered for other bonuses or even a promotion. Then, I have to strive for research. (LNo1)

Besides the participants' willingness to engage in research activities, they expressed positive attitudes towards their institutional research culture. They agreed with the institutional requirements for lecturers and believed that they were provided with conditions that were conducive to research activities. This opinion is reflected in the following excerpt:

I think the university always encourages its teaching staff to do research, as evidenced by the fact that it provides funding for teachers who present at conferences and have high-ranking publications. There are many supported workshops at the division level. (TLo6)

The participants demonstrated their research engagement through their considerable understanding of research practice. Most interviewees ( $n = 14$ ) showed a substantial understanding of the nature of research. Despite having individual definitions of research, they generally agree that "research is a careful and detailed study into a specific problem, concern, or issue using the scientific method" (TLo2) or that conducting research means "investigating into a problem and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions" (TLo10). One lecturer also stated: "Research allows me to find out if my judgements or my personal views of real situations are true or not. My judgements are only one-sided. I have to collect data to prove my point of view" (TLo2). These insightful interpretations of research identity demonstrate these EFL faculty members' self-perception of their position in a university.

Besides demonstrating substantial knowledge of the nature of research, other lecturers ( $n = 5$ ) enumerated the systematic procedure in conducting research. The process began with a research topic and research questions, followed by a review of the literature, and then the selection of appropriate methods, data collection, and data analysis. Afterwards, the findings were synthesized and written up to provide implications. One participant shared his knowledge as follows:

First, I choose the topic and search for documents related to it. I read the documents to see if there's anything unknown about the topic I have chosen. Then, I finalize my research questions. The next steps, also depending on the type of research, can be an interview or a survey, and then I will interpret the results of the study. (TLo8)

This lecturer was quite clear in explaining the basic steps of conducting research. Others also provided comprehensive knowledge of the salient features of research, mentioning terms such as "ethics," "plagiarism," "reliable data," and "existing theory." These insights showed their interest in research work and the extensive

effort they exert in their research activities. The following quote reflects their point:

One of the most prominent features of quality research is the ethics of research. Ethics here, for example, are related to the people participating in the study. Do they participate voluntarily or not? Is the data they collect reliable or not? Does my writing violate plagiarism issues? Then I must meet the basic criteria of such research. (TL11)

However, only a few participants showed an understanding of such a systematic process. This entails the fact that most participants were uncertain about and/or lacked knowledge of and skills in research.

Beyond perception, most interviewees ( $n = 16$ ) expressed their desire to read scientific articles and do "something" related to research practice. Although time constraints prevent them from regularly reading journal articles (they often do so only when they need information), they clearly demonstrate their endeavor to understand and acquire new knowledge. One lecturer said, "I see many very positive effects from reading scientific articles. Sometimes I learn a lot. There are things that I can't think of, but when I read scientific articles, I find some answers there" (LNo1). Three others expressed their desire to conduct higher-level research instead of small division-level studies. One said,

I don't want to do research at the division level anymore. I want to do something bigger, so I recently chaired a research project. It is also a premise for me to have more confidence and more experience in the future to do research at a higher level. (LNo4)

Evidently, for these EFL lecturers, while research is no longer compulsory, it has become a self-imposed need.

University lecturers' actual participation in research activities is the ultimate expression of their positioning. Most lecturers have only recently been engaged in research activities (approximately 5 years); however, 14 of the 21 lecturers reported attending conferences, either as speakers or participants, several times, especially at annual

institutional conferences. As one lecturer emphasized, "I attend conferences almost every year, from faculty to academy level to international level. Almost every time I have a full paper" (NN04). Another shared that she has attended a substantial number of conferences: "I have attended about 12 or 13 conferences, both in my university and in other institutions. Every year, there is an annual conference organized by my university" (NN01).

Most lecturers ( $n = 16$ ) also reported publishing their articles, but only in the proceedings of institutional conferences, rather than in international publications. Some did publish their research in institutional journals, but only a few did so outside national specialized journals. Each lecturer published 1–5 articles. Although most of these publications were at the institutional level and have yet to have a major impact or widespread influence, they have demonstrated a commitment to research practice among EFL lecturers.

### Action Researcher Position

To conduct action research, researchers must take and evaluate actions to improve teaching practices, as action research involves planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Research must also be future-oriented and context-specific, allowing researchers to identify issues in their teaching process (Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010). The positioning of an action researcher involves their beliefs regarding the nature of research and their experiences of processes associated with action research. Accordingly, those who position EFL lecturers in this discourse highlight the link between research and classroom practices. They intend to make changes and learn from their classroom experiences. This does not necessarily mean being involved in writing journal articles or attending conferences, but it is worth trying, implementing, and reflecting on. All interviewees invoked this positioning as action researchers but demonstrated it in different ways.

First, according to most participants ( $n = 20$ ), it was important to engage with or read pedagogical research

that enables them to implement useful methods and techniques for their students. The following quote reflects this point:

Recently, I have made efforts to apply English-language games to teach vocabulary to first-year students at my university. I searched for reading material, such as articles on the Internet, and found out that games could be effective in boosting students' vocabulary. Also, when I teach my students and identify a problem, I resort to different publications on the Internet to read and deal with that problem. (BGo1)

Second, all interviewees engaged in or conducted research within the classroom context, primarily by observing their students, identifying problems, and finding solutions to improve classroom practices and enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Accordingly, they placed value on changes in educational quality more than on publications. Whether the results of their action research were written and published was not important; instead, they only desired to implement changes in their classrooms based on a cycle of action, observation, and reflection. The following quote illustrates these points:

My own research findings can be from what I have done in my class. For example, I used games in my lessons. In 10 vocabulary games, I described and employed all of them. Then I conducted mini-research to know which game could help students enhance their lexical sources and motivate them the most. Then, I surveyed and interviewed the students to explore their perceptions of the games' effectiveness, and their additional needs related to the games. I just did that kind of research, but I did not publish it. I do not think it is too important. (LNo1)

### EFL Teacher Position

The role of EFL teachers evokes beliefs and practices in the participants' careers associated with teaching English as their primary or sole duty, as illustrated below.

First, despite having worked for many years, all participants, even those with PhD degrees, had little experience in research. Specifically, as everyone shared in the interviews, they have already taught for many years at various higher education institutions, working with students from diverse backgrounds and at different levels of proficiency. However, they confessed that they lacked research experience, as shown by the overall number of conferences they have participated in and their published work.

I have been teaching for over 20 years, and my main responsibility is to teach non-English-major students at different universities. I have been working at this university for 13 years, and I teach general English. I started working with English-major students this year. Regarding research, I have not done much. I have had three papers in our university's conference proceedings and participated in five conferences at my university. (TLo6)

Second, all interviewees reported that they had read and/or conducted research only when required to do so. Most of them would simply choose to teach, as teaching skills had been acquired in previous educational experiences, and teaching had been a familiar activity since their graduation. This aspect of discursive positioning is evident in the fact that they allocate their time mainly to teaching, and conducting research is considered a compulsory duty. This is elaborated by the following quote:

I do not do research regularly. I just do it once a year to meet the minimum requirement of the university. Talking about the negative influence of research, when I have to teach and do research at the same time. As you know, doing research is really time-consuming. A research paper at our university is equivalent to 50 teaching hours, so I am willing to choose teaching, not researching. (TLU05)

Third, most participants ( $n=18$ ) focused on research papers that discuss effective teaching methods and/or techniques that they could immediately implement in

their respective teaching contexts. As shared by TLo2, “I usually read practical research papers by the British Council because they focus on teaching methods that I can learn and potentially use in my class. I do not like too many academic and theoretical papers.” Sharing this viewpoint, NNo2, TLo8, and TL10 also preferred articles that introduce teaching methods and activities that they can immediately use in their classes.

Fourth, 14 interviewees demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of teaching requirements but did not have a clear idea of regulations in terms of research. This means that the participating lecturers paid more attention to their main activity regarding teaching practices, rather than their research work. For example, LNo2 postulated that she only understood the number of required teaching hours and was not involved in any research projects, so she did not know how management supported her. Similarly, NNo2 admitted that she did not care about research regulations and was unsure about the number of research hours or the financial support for her research. NNo2, however, was certain about his salary and the hours he must spend teaching. The following excerpt from TLo3 represents this point:

Certainly, I know the minimum number of teaching hours. I am also aware of the research requirements at this university, but I only write simple papers, so I do not know how the university encourages and supports researchers in conferences and publications. I only remember that the financial support for conferences is 50% of travel expenses in the Northern provinces, but I am not sure. I think I will know the requirements when they affect me and when I do research. (TLo3)

Lastly, when some interviewees ( $n=9$ ) shared their expectations, they showed no desire for research promotion, such as more workshops or seminars, research funding, and support, but hoped for a reduction in teaching hours, implying that their work as lecturers mostly involved teaching. For instance, TLo9 stated that “the only wish is that the university management

will reduce the number of teaching hours, which is quite overwhelming now, so that we can teach and do research at the same time.” Other participants, such as TLo1, TLo2, and TLo5, shared this opinion. According to NNo1, alongside authorities’ attempts to promote research at their university, they should reduce the number of required teaching hours, especially for lecturers in social sciences and humanities.

The evidence from the interviews showed that teaching was the main, and sometimes only, activity in the participants’ work. Teaching occupied a larger portion of their perception and performance. Therefore, research is either entirely absent or constitutes only a minor part of their professional duties, leaving them lacking a critical component in the expected responsibilities of a lecturer. In this case, they positioned them solely as EFL teachers.

### Impossible-Mission Accomplisher Position

Research engagement seems an unfeasible activity for many language teachers, considering various obstacles (Borg, 2010). Throughout the interviews, the participants who positioned themselves as impossible-research accomplishes identified and explained both the external and internal factors impeding their research engagement. In this study, the lecturers first highlighted the impacts of institutional barriers on their infrequent and low level of research involvement. Key themes, including time constraints, a lack of research materials, financial challenges, and difficulties in disseminating research, are discussed below.

Participants most often cited time constraints resulting from a heavy teaching workload as the reason they do not conduct and publish research. The interviewees have always considered themselves as multitaskers, not only teaching students in class but also planning lessons, designing tests, and working as head teachers. Nearly all respondents ( $n=18$ ) stated that their work commitments leave them almost no opportunity, time,

and energy for research engagement. They could not find time to read even a single article as they had to teach too many classes in a semester. Other participants shared this view, as reflected in the following excerpt:

One of the toughest challenges is work pressure. English teachers in my university are always busy with lecturing lessons and other tasks such as designing and marking tests. Last year, I had to cover 600 to 700 class hours, so I did not have time to do research. (TLo8)

Reading educational research can benefit teachers in general, not only by informing their instructional decisions but also by suggesting ideas and gathering literature for their research. Therefore, a lack of both tangible and digital materials was another considerable challenge to respondents' research engagement: 19 of 21 interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction with their library resources, which had a limited number of relevant books and journal articles for their ELT research. The available materials in libraries and learning resource centers are mostly concerned with agriculture, forestry, and water resources, targeting the universities' common majors, with meager resources concerning English language education and linguistics. Their infrequent engagement in research was partly due to the library only providing a wide range of resources for the university's popular majors. English teaching methodology is a relatively new field of study, so the available research materials are limited, as highlighted by the participants (e.g., TLo2 and NNo4).

While universities have recently improved their digital library databases to facilitate teacher research, most participants ( $n = 17$ ) demonstrated hesitation and a reluctance to read and conduct research due to the unavailability and inaccessibility of electronic books and journals. NNo4 even reported that "there is no database for English teachers to do research." Other participants ( $n = 11$ ) conducted online searches for necessary references instead of exploiting their institutes' databases after experiencing several difficulties while logging in to

websites and links provided by the library. For example, LNo1 seemed disappointed when he accessed digital resources via library links, reporting that "sometimes, I got the links to access new publications from the library. However, there were fewer journals on English studies than those on other fields."

Research was described by some interviewees ( $n = 6$ ) as an impossible mission in terms of finances. They argued that the time they spend writing a paper could be used to teach a class and earn money. Meanwhile, writing an academic article is difficult and time-consuming, and the financial support for publishing a paper is often insufficient and difficult to obtain. Participating in conferences is also very costly and can frequently interfere with their teaching schedule. Given their modest monthly salaries and their respective institutions' measly financial support for their research activities, the teachers were discouraged from engaging in research. As one participant explained, "I cannot focus on research when I receive such a low salary. Firstly, I had to earn a living" (NNo3). Furthermore, funds for researchers were insufficient for research activities, including printing questionnaires, conducting phone interviews, and analyzing data. As LNo1 illustrated, "It cost me a lot of money to print out my project again and again to meet all requirements of the committee." Another interviewee discussed economic matters as follows:

In recent years, funding for research has been cut down, so teachers and students have to self-finance their institutional projects. They can get about 1 million VND as a small support from the academy until their project is approved at the end of the school year. (NNo1)

Many interviewees ( $n = 10$ ) highlighted difficulties in research dissemination that impeded their research involvement. First, despite their high expectations to publish articles, many English teachers could not contribute to their home journals as they mainly covered agriculture, fishery, and forestry. Additionally, external publication was not a priority among the participants,

considering the significant time spent on reviews and the low acceptance rate. These challenges are reflected in the following comment:

It is impossible for English teachers to submit their articles to our home journal, which specializes in agriculture, forestry, veterinary medicine, and land management. Articles on ELT have to be submitted to an external journal. It is an obstacle. (BG02)

Second, some interviewees explained that they did not bother to complete and publish studies because of the harsh review process and revision activities. Conducting a project was considered “a painful experience,” and they had to “deal with a lot of comments from the committee and make various adjustments to have it approved” (LNo1). Those activities might take much time and require patience and effort, which challenged their limited time budget, also allocated to many other work-related activities.

Lack of expertise, energy, determination, and passion for research studies was the internal challenge discouraging participants from conducting research activities. Inadequate expertise was another cause of participants’ reluctance to conduct research. A good command of English is fundamental for a deep understanding and critical evaluation of research studies; hence, the participants’ deficiency in language competence hindered their ability to consume and write journal articles.

Teachers at my university are reluctant to do research. Some teachers are even unable to write a report for the seminar at the division level. They do not have any research experience. They make a report in order to get by. (LNo4)

While three participants initially showed a willingness to engage in research, they ultimately quit due to a lack of confidence in their research skills and knowledge. They were not extensively trained in research when pursuing their bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Besides, they did not spend much time researching;

hence, such a deficiency was understandable. Meanwhile, they expected to be mentored and supervised by experienced researchers, sharing that “I want to, but I am not confident enough to start my research career. I hope to have a mentor to advise me when I run into problems” (LNo3). However, their colleagues were not confident in research activities, either, so research became increasingly impossible.

Inactivity was another obstacle. As highlighted by LNo4, “English teachers who teach English as a basic subject are inactive in doing research.” Some participants who worked in technical universities ( $n = 8$ ) tended to consider English as a basic subject. The respondents’ simple everyday work in these contexts gradually demotivated them from examining and applying research findings on different aspects of the English language. LNo1 stated, “Research engagement is really limited among English teachers in the context of a technical university. We do not think of any topics to study.”

The last point that emerged from participants’ comments was a lack of determination and interest in research studies, seemingly due to personal rather than external constraints, as asserted by BG01: “Obstacles in doing research often come from personal factors.” Moreover, six respondents often found it impossible to overcome various difficulties including the complexity of research studies, family commitments, and even their lack of energy. LNo3 and TL10, who reported having no passion for research, stated that “doing research is such a daunting task.”

## **Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

This study provided an overview of EFL university lecturers’ research perceptions and engagement from the perspective of positioning theory. Specifically, 21 lecturers from four public universities participated in semi-structured interviews, during which they shared their perspectives on what research meant to them, how important research was, how they engaged with and in

research, and what might impact their research practices at their institutions. As a result, this study identified four positions that the interviewees assumed as EFL lecturers: lecturer, action researcher, EFL teacher, and impossible-mission accomplisher. The participants' discursive positioning clearly reflected the sociocultural context of EFL tertiary education in Vietnam, especially at technical universities. Specifically, Vietnamese tertiary education requires substantially more teaching hours per year, far exceeding the number required for research. Therefore, Vietnamese EFL lecturers demonstrate a low attendance at conferences and a poor research experience. They might also be considered as "teaching machines" (Vu, 2021). Regarding research practices, the participants primarily considered and conducted action research, which could improve their class performance. They planned, observed, implemented, and evaluated the process, both with and without writing for publications.

Notably, the interviewees manifested and interplayed several positions, one of which became dominant in their positioning. For example, one participant might position themselves as an EFL lecturer, an EFL teacher, and an impossible-mission accomplisher when discussing their research engagement (e.g., TLo5). However, their position as an EFL teacher stands out because, although they enjoyed reading and conducting research, they would prioritize teaching over research if given the choice. They conducted research mainly because their institution required it. Specifically, what many of the lecturers viewed as research was indeed teaching methods, techniques, or innovations they applied in their teaching practices within the scope of their own classes solely to enhance class performance, rather than systematically engaging in empirical research or other types of research.

Besides, their knowledge of and skills in research remain limited due to their previous educational and research experiences. Also, alongside other personal commitments, the lecturers had a substantial teaching workload each week, and many of them take on

additional employment to supplement their income. Another contributing factor could be the absence of role models or mentors to provide guidance and support in doing research, as their colleagues are also occupied with other responsibilities. Additionally, it could be due to a lack of institutional encouragement and backing. As a result of these factors, they tend to perceive conducting research as an impossible mission, and to default to familiar teaching practices as EFL teachers, despite fully recognizing that their role as EFL lecturers encompasses teaching, conducting research, and fulfilling other duties. Therefore, it appears that the positions are contradictory, but in fact, it is reasonable to provide a coherent explanation of how those positions coexist.

This study's findings were consistent with those of other studies (e.g., Borg, 2007, 2009; Borg & Alshuaimeri, 2012; Borg & Liu, 2013; Pham, 2006; Vu, 2021). Overall, this study contributes a Vietnamese perspective to the literature on teacher research engagement, informing educational policymakers' promotion of lecturers' professional development in its truest sense. Based on the findings of different discursive positionings, this study provides several recommendations for enhancing EFL lecturers' involvement in research and promoting the position of a real lecturer. At the micro-level, although EFL lecturers recognize the importance of research in teaching and daily life, they must strengthen their motivation to read more research papers and conduct more studies. Specifically, they should read research articles as part of their daily activity or for relaxation—even 15–30 minutes per day can be beneficial in the long run. Additionally, they can start attending and participating in conferences to broaden their networks and learn from other researchers (Hall, 2023). They can engage in informal discussions about research topics as an interesting and useful activity to formulate ideas for their own research (Vu, 2021). Moreover, lecturers can collaborate with other colleagues in a research team to facilitate knowledge creation and research productivity (Borg, 2010). At the meso-level, EFL departments and

faculties must highly appreciate research engagement as an important task among lecturers. Faculty-level management can organize regular workshops, webinars, or programs with the support of research-experienced experts, including occasional research competitions. These initiatives can help raise lecturers' awareness of research as a beneficial activity and provide them with opportunities to acquire research knowledge and skills (Rahimi et al., 2021). Furthermore, management should arrange lecturers' teaching schedules effectively to facilitate a balance between teaching and research. Notably, faculty authorities should be experts in research so that they can set an example to inspire their colleagues. At the macro level, institutions must alleviate lecturers' heavy teaching workloads by recruiting additional staff, thereby allowing them more time for research engagement (Vu, 2021). Furthermore, university management should invest more in resources such as databases, journal articles, and books to improve lecturers' access to them, especially when they plan to conduct research (Borg, 2010). Additional financial support should be provided for lecturers to encourage their participation in national and international conferences and publication of journal articles based on the quality of their research (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012; Farsani & Babaii, 2019).

The current study has two main limitations. First, the scale was limited, which hindered the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. However, the findings could be a source of reference for those interested in teacher research engagement. Future research should explore lecturers' research engagement in broader contexts and larger populations to capture a more comprehensive overview. Secondly, the current study relied on qualitative interview data, based on participants' opinions and experiences, making it difficult to track changes in research engagement over time. Therefore, more research is needed to understand more about how EFL lecturers' research practices progress throughout their careers. Such research could shed light on the factors that sustain or diminish research engagement.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What are the characteristics of “research”? What do you understand about research? Is research important? Why/Why not?
2. How do you read published research? How often do you read research? What impact do you believe this reading may have on your teaching practices? Or any influences on your life? What are the reasons why you do not read research?
3. How do you do research? How often do you do research? What impact do you believe doing research may have on your teaching practices? Or any influences on your life? Why do you do research? What are the reasons why they do not engage in doing research?
4. What are your institutional cultures in terms of research?