

The Dialogical Teacher-Self: A Narrative Inquiry into a Vietnamese EFL Lecturer's Professional Identity

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Abstract

This study explores how a Vietnamese EFL lecturer constructs and negotiates his professional identity through the lens of Dialogical Self Theory (DST). Framed as a qualitative single-case narrative inquiry, the study draws on a written narrative frame and a semi-structured interview. The data were analysed using DST-informed narrative analysis, focusing on I-positions, internal and external voices, dialogical tensions, repositioning, and the maintenance of unity and continuity across the participant's professional journey. The findings reveal that the participant's teacher identity was constructed through a changing repertoire of I-positions, including tutor, lecturer-researcher, friend of students, mentor, responsible professional, pedagogical guide, researcher, and lifelong learner. These positions were shaped by early tutoring experience, postgraduate study, university teaching, influential others, institutional expectations, emotional tensions, artificial intelligence, and future aspirations. The participant negotiated tensions between care and academic accountability, among teaching, research, administration, and student support, and between the traditional role of knowledge provider and the emerging role of pedagogical guide in response to AI. Despite these tensions, he maintained a coherent sense of professional self through salient orientations as a supportive educator, developing professional, and opportunity-opening teacher. The study contributes to EFL teacher identity research by showing how narrative inquiry and DST can illuminate teacher identity as a multivoiced, relational, and evolving process of becoming situated within Vietnamese higher education.

Keywords EFL teacher identity, Dialogical Self Theory, narrative inquiry, I-positions

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher professional identity has become central to understanding teachers' agency, emotions, and professional development trajectories (Muthanna & Khine, 2023; Tian & Lin, 2026). While professional development was traditionally viewed as the acquisition of standardised knowledge and competencies, contemporary research recognises teaching as a way of being and an ongoing process of forming a professional self in relation to lived roles and imagined positions (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Chen et al., 2022; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). A strong teacher identity shapes teachers' pedagogical behaviour, work engagement, and commitment to the profession (Ostad et al., 2019; Xing, 2022; Yang et al., 2021).

For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, identity construction is especially fluid and tension-filled (Du et al., 2025; Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2024). EFL educators work at the intersection of globalised reforms, shifting pedagogical paradigms, and diverse sociocultural expectations (Chen et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2024). In contexts such as China, teachers negotiate “glonacal” global, national, and local tensions while balancing standardised research demands with students’ immediate linguistic needs (Dai & Hardy, 2024; Tian & Lin, 2026). Such boundary experiences may unsettle existing identity configurations, generate emotional labour, and require professional reconfiguration (Assen et al., 2018; Du et al., 2025).

In Vietnamese higher education, EFL lecturers work within overlapping pedagogical and institutional expectations (Ngo & Tran, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024). Beyond teaching language skills and disciplinary content (Chi & Vu, 2024; Phan et al., 2024; Phuong & Vo, 2024), they are expected to support students’ academic and professional development (Nghia et al., 2024b; Tran et al., 2024), assess course learning outcomes (Nghia et al., 2024a), conduct research, contribute to administrative and quality-assurance work (Nghia et al., 2024b; Ngo & Tran, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024), and adapt to technological change (Huynh et al., 2024; Nghia et al., 2024b). These responsibilities may position lecturers simultaneously as language specialists, mentors, researchers, institutional employees, and policy implementers (Nghia et al., 2024b; Ngo & Tran, 2024; Phan et al., 2024). The Vietnamese university context therefore provides a relevant setting for examining how an EFL teacher negotiates multiple professional voices while maintaining a coherent sense of self (Nghia et al., 2024b; Ngo & Tran, 2024; Tran et al., 2024).

To capture this complexity, Dialogical Self Theory (DST) provides a powerful theoretical lens. Based on William James’s (1890) idea of the extended self and Bakhtin’s (1973, 1981, 1986) notion of dialogism, it conceptualises the self as a “society of mind” comprising multiple I-positions shaped through internal and external dialogues (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2001; Hermans, 2012, 2013, 2019). An EFL teacher may occupy positions such as subject-matter expert, caring mentor, and researcher, each carrying distinct voices and emotions (Beijaard et al., 2000; Xu et al., 2024). Professional identity is therefore constructed through the ongoing negotiation of these positions to sustain coherence amid change. Drawing on DST, this study explores how an in-service Vietnamese EFL lecturer constructs and negotiates his professional identity through his I-positions, conflicting internal and external voices, and efforts to maintain unity and continuity across his career.

LITERATURE REVIEW

EFL Teacher Professional Identity

Teacher professional identity is a dynamic construct that explains how teachers interpret their roles, responsibilities, and values within institutional and sociocultural contexts. Early work, such as that of Beijaard et al. (2000), linked identity to subject-matter, didactical, and pedagogical expertise, showing that identity evolves as teachers reinterpret their experiences. In EFL, identity is especially complex, shaped by institutional demands, pedagogical traditions, and teachers’ own understandings of their work (Jiang, 2017). Research highlights its connections to commitment, job satisfaction, emotions, and engagement. Stronger satisfaction and commitment foster positive identity reconstruction (Ostad et al., 2019), while burnout and emotional trajectories also influence identity

development (Xing, 2022; Yang et al., 2021). Negative emotions and workplace conflicts can even drive growth and identity shifts (Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2024). EFL teacher identity therefore emerges as a fluid, affective, and contextually embedded process that requires theoretical perspectives, such as dialogical approaches, to explain how teachers negotiate multiple, sometimes conflicting, professional selves.

A Dialogical Perspective on Teacher Identity

A dialogical perspective conceptualises teacher identity as a negotiation between multiplicity and coherence. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) identify three interrelated dimensions, namely unity and multiplicity, continuity and discontinuity, and the individual and the social. This perspective is especially relevant to EFL teachers, whose identities are shaped by autobiographical experiences, institutional discourses, and pedagogical agency (Chen et al., 2022). In practice, EFL teachers negotiate tensions between communicative and form-focused instruction (Chen et al., 2022; Tian & Lin, 2026), learner-centred teaching and standardised assessment (Du et al., 2025; Jansky, 2026), individualised support and institutional fairness in large classes (Du et al., 2025), and demands related to syllabus completion, learning-outcome documentation, research productivity, administration, quality assurance, and performance indicators (Tian & Lin, 2026; Vandamme, 2014).

Generative AI has added another layer to these tensions by requiring language teachers to renegotiate their professional authority and pedagogical expertise as students gain independent access to extensive knowledge and language resources (Bai, 2025; Chehimi & Hejase, 2025). AI challenges the traditional knowledge-provider role by supporting grammar explanation, vocabulary expansion, translation, and feedback generation (Bai, 2025; Crompton et al., 2024). At the same time, it enables teachers to reposition themselves as pedagogical mediators, critical guides, assessment designers, and facilitators of responsible technology use, with attention to cultural interpretation, values education, critical thinking, AI literacy, and digital ethics (Bai, 2025; Chehimi & Hejase, 2025; Moorhouse & Wong, 2025). These roles point towards a human-AI collaborative ecosystem in which teachers' pedagogical judgement, ethical responsibility, and human presence remain central (Bai, 2025; Moorhouse & Wong, 2025). Rather than treating pedagogical, institutional, and technological pressures as external variables, a dialogical perspective examines how teachers interpret, negotiate, and integrate competing voices to maintain coherence across professional change (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Chen et al., 2022; Monereo & Badia, 2020).

DST as a Theoretical Lens

DST, developed by Hermans and colleagues, conceptualises the self as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions. Building on James's (1890) concept of the extended self and Bakhtin's (1973, 1981, 1986) dialogism, DST views the self as a "society of mind" in which multiple voices interact (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2001; Hermans, 2012, 2013, 2019). I-positions may be internal, such as "I as a teacher" or "I as a researcher", or external, such as "my students", "my mentor", or "my institution". Tensions emerge when positions compete; meta-positions allow reflective distance; third positions integrate conflicting perspectives; and promoter positions guide future development (Hermans, 2012, 2013, 2019).

DST is useful for teacher identity research because teachers continually reposition themselves in response to pedagogical, institutional, sociocultural, and technological change. Previous studies have examined teachers' negotiation of instructional change, professional belonging, institutional expectations, intercultural experience, workplace conflict, and policy pressures (Assen et al., 2018; Ballantyne, 2024; Chen et al., 2022; Du et al., 2025; Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2024; Stenberg & Maaranen, 2021; Xu et al., 2024). In this study, DST serves as both a theoretical and analytical lens by directing attention to internal and external I-positions, conflicting voices, meta-positions, promoter positions, repositioning, and the maintenance of unity and continuity.

Empirical Studies on DST-Informed Teacher Identity

DST-informed studies have examined teacher identity across teacher education, professional development, EFL teaching, and transnational academic contexts. Assen et al. (2018) showed that practising teachers justified teacher-directed practices by invoking instructor and subject-expert positions. In contrast, dialogue about classroom behaviour enabled meta-positioning and more learner-oriented thinking. Zhang and Zhang (2020) found that survival concerns, including classroom management, lesson procedures, appearance, logistics, and professional competence, shaped student teachers' early identities. Stenberg and Maaranen (2021) showed that novice teachers negotiated professional belonging, collegial approval, workload, vulnerability, and tensions between private and professional selves.

In tertiary EFL and transnational contexts, Chen et al. (2022) found that teachers authored their professional selves through autobiographical experiences, institutional discourses, classroom practices, and curriculum-reform expectations. Ballantyne (2024) described Chinese volunteer teachers' identities as shifting I-positions shaped by intercultural relationships, while Xu et al. (2024) showed how a Chinese pre-service teacher moved from outsider and uncertain instructor positions toward being recognized as a valued teacher through interactions with students, mentors, and school leaders. Moradkhani and Ebadijalal (2024) linked workplace conflict to identity fluctuation and repositioning. Dai and Hardy (2024) and Tian and Lin (2026) showed that academic identity was shaped by teaching, research, publication, administration, mentoring, local expectations, gendered responsibilities, and prestige-oriented evaluation, while Du et al. (2025) identified tensions among desired, expected, and imposed identities amid parental expectations, policy mandates, administrative duties, large classes, and accountability requirements.

Together, these studies show teacher identity as relational, emotional, and institutionally situated. However, most DST-informed studies focus on bounded transitions, such as practicums, early-career teaching, curriculum reform, international placements, workplace conflict, and academic mobility. Less attention has been paid to how EFL teachers narratively connect multiple positions, tensions, and contextual influences across a broader professional journey. This gap supports the use of narrative inquiry to examine how unity and continuity are constructed across changing professional experiences.

Narrative Inquiry, Research Gaps, and the Present Study

Narrative inquiry is appropriate for teacher identity research because identity is often constructed through stories of professional experiences, conflicts, relationships, turning points, and aspirations

(Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Pauha, 2026; Tian & Lin, 2026). Through narrative, teachers connect past experiences, present realities, and future possibilities. This aligns with the view of Tran and Hartley's (2026) about future self-continuity, in which pre-service English language teachers connect present learning with imagined professional selves through continuity in being and becoming. Narrative inquiry is therefore compatible with DST because teachers' stories reveal how I-positions emerge, interact, conflict, dominate, or transform as teachers seek coherence (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

Recent studies have examined language teacher identity in Asian and transnational contexts, including international practicum, higher education, professional reform, and future-oriented teacher development (Ballantyne, 2024; Tian & Lin, 2026; Tran & Hartley, 2026; Xu et al., 2024). However, much of this research focuses on pre-service teachers, novice teachers, specific reforms, or bounded transitions. In Vietnam, recent scholarship has highlighted EFL lecturers' and teachers' complex professional conditions, including institutional expectations and quality assurance (Ngo & Tran, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024), English language instruction and specialised disciplinary teaching (Chi & Vu, 2024; Phan et al., 2024; Phuong & Vo, 2024), learner support and student development (Nghia et al., 2024a; Tran et al., 2024), learning-outcome assessment (Nghia et al., 2024a; Ngo & Tran, 2024), continuing professional development and research expectations (Ngo & Tran, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024), and technological change in language education (Huynh et al., 2024; Nghia et al., 2024b). Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to how in-service Vietnamese university EFL lecturers narratively organise multiple I-positions, institutional tensions, influential voices, and future aspirations across a broader professional trajectory.

The present study addresses this contextual, temporal, and methodological gap by adopting narrative inquiry informed by DST to explore how a Vietnamese EFL lecturer negotiates his professional identity through multiple I-positions and voices. By using a narrative frame and semi-structured interview, the study treats the participant's narrative accounts not merely as reports of experience but as dialogical spaces in which the polyphonic nature of the teacher self can be voiced, examined, and interpreted. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions.

1. What I-positions does the Vietnamese EFL lecturer enact in his professional narrative?
2. How does the Vietnamese EFL lecturer negotiate tensions between conflicting internal and external voices?
3. How does the Vietnamese EFL lecturer maintain a sense of unity and continuity among multiple I-positions through storied representations of his professional journey?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case narrative inquiry design to explore how a Vietnamese EFL teacher constructed and negotiated professional identity through lived experience. Narrative inquiry views experience as both lived and storied, emphasising how individuals make meaning through accounts of events, relationships, tensions, and imagined futures (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Informed by DST, the study treated teacher identity as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions. It examined how the participant enacted positions, negotiated internal and external voices, and maintained unity and continuity across professional change.

Research Context and Participant

The study was conducted at a public university in Vietnam, where English lecturers teach language skills and specialised linguistics and culture-related courses and also engage in assessment, learning-outcome documentation, student support, research, administration, quality assurance, and professional development. The participant was a male EFL teacher with nine years of teaching experience, including two years as a university lecturer. He holds a bachelor's degree in English Studies and a master's degree in Principles and Methods in English Language Education. He was purposively selected because his trajectory from private tutor to university lecturer reflected multiple roles, transitions, relationships, and institutional responsibilities relevant to the study. Identifying information was withheld to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were collected sequentially through a written narrative frame and a semi-structured interview. The Vietnamese narrative frame included 37 prompts across eight sections. It generated a 1,421-word account of the participant's professional journey, teacher identity, influential people, community expectations, challenges, responses to change, future aspirations, and reasons for remaining in teaching. After reviewing the narrative, a 47-minute Zoom interview was conducted in Vietnamese to explore emerging I-positions, external voices, identity tensions, teaching and research responsibilities, adaptation to artificial intelligence, and continuity of professional values. The interview was audio-recorded, transcribed with TurboScribe, and checked against the recording. Both data sources were analysed in Vietnamese, and only selected excerpts were translated into English for reporting; translations were checked for meaning, tone, and contextual nuance.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed five stages, namely repeated reading of both data sources; mapping of key narrative episodes across the professional trajectory; first-cycle coding of self-positionings, external voices, emotions, turning points, and values; second-cycle DST coding of conflict, dominance, meta-positioning, third positions, promoter positions, and repositioning; and cross-source synthesis to develop themes aligned with the research questions. The analysis drew on Hermans' concepts of internal and external I-positions, dialogical tension, meta-position, third position, promoter position, and repositioning (Hermans, 2012, 2013, 2019), as well as Akkerman and Meijer's (2011) dimensions of unity-multiplicity, continuity-discontinuity, and individual-social identity.

Table 1. *Example of DST-Informed Coding and Narrative Interpretation*

Raw narrative excerpt	Initial descriptive code	DST category	Narrative interpretation
"The mentor in me wants to listen... but the professional side reminds me that I must maintain academic standards."	Empathy versus standards	Conflicting internal I-positions	Dialogical tension between care and accountability
"I learned to prioritize strategically instead of trying to be perfect in everything."	Acceptance of professional limits	Meta-positioning and repositioning	Reflective reconstruction of professionalism around balance

“I sometimes ask myself how my supervisor would view this situation.”	Internalized mentor guidance	External and promoter position	Mentor voice provides continuing professional direction
“AI does not make the teacher’s role less important, but makes it different.”	Reinterpretation of teacher expertise	Repositioning	Movement from knowledge provider to pedagogical guide
“Education can open opportunities for human development.”	Stable educational commitment	Organizing/promoter position	Core value supports narrative continuity

Trustworthiness and Research Rigour

Trustworthiness was guided by Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) framework. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of the narrative frame and semi-structured interview, together with participant validation of the complete Findings section. Dependability was supported by records of data collection and analysis, including the narrative frame, interview protocol, transcript, coding notes, and theme development. Confirmability was reinforced through reflexive analytic notes documenting assumptions, interpretations, coding decisions, and alternative explanations. The researcher also returned to the Vietnamese original narrative frame and transcript to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the participant’s words. At the same time, translated excerpts were checked for meaning, tone, and contextual nuance.

FINDINGS

The analysis showed that the participant’s EFL teacher identity was constructed through shifting I-positions, dialogical tensions, and efforts to maintain unity and continuity across professional change. These I-positions functioned not as fixed roles but as voiced standpoints through which he interpreted experience, responded to institutional expectations, and imagined his future self. Three major themes were identified, namely a changing repertoire of professional I-positions, the negotiation of tensions through dialogue and repositioning, and the maintenance of unity and continuity through salient positions and an enduring educational commitment.

A Changing Repertoire of Professional I-Positions

From tutor to lecturer-researcher

The participant’s professional identity did not begin with a clear vocational calling. Instead, his entry into English teaching was narrated as a practical choice shaped by his academic background and early tutoring experience. The narrative frame records this point in his own words.

“I became an English teacher because I hadn’t thought that I could do anything else at that time. My major was English studies, and I was an English tutor during university life.”

He later clarified that his decision “*did not come from a clear vocational calling at the beginning*” but “*quite naturally*” from his learning background and tutoring experience. At this stage, “I as a tutor” emerged from practical competence rather than a stable teacher identity.

Over time, this pragmatic position became more meaningful. Tutoring, his first salary, and positive feedback from students' parents helped him see teaching as valuable. His description of tutoring as *"a foundational position"* suggests that it became an early identity anchor, allowing him to see himself as someone capable of explaining, supporting, and motivating learners.

A turning point occurred during his MA studies, when he encountered a young PhD lecturer who made an academic future imaginable.

"When I saw a very young person in the position of a university lecturer, I began to imagine another possibility for myself. For the first time, I could imagine a future version of myself, someone who could teach, conduct research, and develop academically."

This shifted his narrative from "I as a tutor" toward an imagined "I as a lecturer-researcher." His later aspiration to make *"meaningful contributions to research, teacher education, and student development"* shows that "I as a researcher" was tied not only to institutional expectations but also to a future-oriented academic self.

From friend of students to mentor and responsible professional

After becoming a university lecturer, the participant's identity continued to shift from relational closeness towards a more professionally balanced role. At the beginning of his formal teaching career, he positioned himself as *"a friend of [his] students,"* explaining that he *"connected with students a lot, talked and shared in a friendly way."* This early position emphasised approachability, emotional connection, and a comfortable learning environment. However, he gradually realised that friendliness alone was not sufficient for university teaching. As he reflected,

"Students did not only need a friend. They also needed someone who could guide, support, give feedback, and sometimes set necessary boundaries."

This marked a process of repositioning in which the friendly self was not abandoned but reorganized within a broader professional identity.

Over time, the earlier *"friend of students"* position developed into the roles of mentor, facilitator, supporter, and companion. In the narrative frame, he described his current teacher self as *"a mentor, a facilitator, a supporter, and a companion in my students' learning and careers."* This expanded identity was also evident in the interview, where he stated that English teaching was no longer only about *"teaching grammar, vocabulary, language skills, or even specialized knowledge,"* but about *"accompanying students in their personal and professional development."* He further emphasised that he did not see himself only as *"a language lecturer,"* but also as *"a mentor, a supporter, and sometimes a person who helps students find their future direction."* These accounts show that his teacher identity moved beyond language transmission towards a more developmental and relational understanding of teaching.

Alongside this mentor position, the participant also enacted "I as a responsible professional." This position became visible when he discussed institutional expectations, including syllabus completion,

teaching materials, learning outcomes, assessment duties, student-achievement documentation, administrative work, and performance indicators. As he wrote,

“Another side of me appears when I have to meet institutional expectations, complete administrative requirements, or ensure that students achieve the expected learning outcomes. In those moments, I become a responsible and demanding professional.”

This position was not merely about efficiency but about maintaining academic standards, fairness, and accountability.

Rather than presenting care and accountability as separate identities, the participant viewed them as interconnected dimensions of the same professional commitment. While the mentor position emphasized care, confidence, and future direction, the responsible professional position emphasized standards, assessment, fairness, and institutional responsibility. As he explained,

“Sometimes these different sides of me work well together because both are driven by the same goal of helping students grow and succeed.”

His professional identity was therefore constructed through the negotiation of closeness and boundaries, care and standards, and support and accountability.

Influential others as external and promoter positions

The participant's professional I-positions were shaped not only by personal experience but also by external voices that became internalised as guiding positions. Three voices were especially significant, namely a young PhD lecturer, his MA thesis supervisor, and a student who struggled but persisted.

The young PhD lecturer made an academic future imaginable. Before this encounter, the participant *“mainly saw [himself] as a tutor, or at most as a future teacher.”* However, seeing *“a very young person in the position of a university lecturer”* allowed him to *“imagine another possibility”* for himself. This voice served as a promoter role, helping him move from *“I as a tutor”* towards an imagined lecturer-researcher identity.

His MA thesis supervisor also became a powerful guiding voice. She taught him that teaching was *“not only about transmitting knowledge but also about continuously questioning, learning, and growing as a professional.”* During the thesis process, when he *“doubted [his] own ability,”* she *“understood”* and *“guided”* him, and her trust helped him realize that he *“could develop further if [he] persevered.”* Her voice remained active beyond that period, as he noted,

“Even now, when I face difficulties in teaching or research, I sometimes ask myself how she would view this situation.”

This shows that the supervisor became part of his internal dialogical space, guiding later reflection and professional judgement.

The third voice came from a student who struggled academically but continued trying. This student made him “*rethink how [he] viewed learning,*” especially his earlier focus on “*measurable results such as grades, tests, or classroom performance.*” Through this student, he came to value “*effort, persistence, and not giving up*” as important signs of development. Thus, students were not merely recipients of teaching but active external voices that reshaped his caring and developmental orientation.

These voices expanded the participant’s professional self. The young PhD lecturer opened an imagined academic future, the supervisor sustained reflection and confidence, and the struggling student deepened his understanding of learning beyond visible achievement.

Negotiating Tensions through Dialogue and Repositioning

Care versus academic accountability

One of the most salient tensions in the participant’s narrative was between “I as a caring lecturer” and “I as a responsible professional.” The caring lecturer wanted to listen to students’ personal difficulties and respond flexibly, while the responsible professional emphasised fairness, academic standards, assessment, and institutional accountability. This tension appeared clearly when he stated,

“I may want to spend more time listening to students’ personal struggles and adapting my teaching to their needs, but at the same time I feel pressure to finish the syllabus, prepare PowerPoint slides, and satisfy institutional requirements, especially meet the KPIs.”

In the interview, this tension became more concrete through his reflection on students facing personal difficulties.

“The mentor in me wants to listen, support, and be more flexible with students. I understand that each student has personal circumstances that may affect learning outcomes. But the professional side reminds me that I must maintain academic standards and ensure fairness for the whole class.”

The conflict, therefore, was not between a positive and negative self-position. Both were professionally meaningful. The caring lecturer was grounded in empathy and student support, while the responsible professional was grounded in fairness and academic quality.

The dialogical nature of this tension became especially visible when the participant imagined the two voices speaking to each other. The mentor voice might say, “*Students are also human beings. They need to be listened to and understood,*” while the professional lecturer would respond, “*That is true, but students also need clear standards and expectations in order to develop.*” The mentor might continue, “*Grades are not everything,*” but the professional would answer, “*That is true, but in education, we still need evidence of learning outcomes.*” Rather than silencing either voice, the participant kept both active within his teacher-self.

This negotiation carried emotional weight. As he admitted,

“These contradictions are intertwined inside me. I think no voice is completely right. Many times, I feel stuck. Sometimes it is quite stressful.”

The tension was further intensified by workload and class size; in one semester, he might teach *“more than 200 students,”* making it difficult to respond deeply to every individual case. Thus, the care-accountability tension was not only personal but also institutional, shaped by workload, assessment systems, institutional requirements, and limited time. His response involved neither complete flexibility nor rigid standardisation. Instead, he tried to hold both positions together, reflecting a meta-position from which he could recognise the legitimacy and limits of both care and accountability.

Teaching, research, administration, and student support

A second major tension concerned the participant’s multiple responsibilities as a university lecturer. He described *“balancing multiple professional responsibilities, including teaching, conducting research, completing administrative work, and supporting students at the same time,”* which left him feeling *“overwhelmed, exhausted, and sometimes uncertain”* about whether he was meeting expectations. In the interview, he similarly recalled periods when he had to manage *“teaching, research, administrative work, and student support at the same time,”* feeling as if he was *“being pulled in many different directions.”*

This tension reflected the coexistence of several I-positions, namely “I as a teacher,” “I as a researcher,” “I as a university lecturer,” “I as an administrative worker,” and “I as a supporter of students.” The difficulty was not that one position mattered more than another, but that *“all these roles were important.”* The participant therefore problematised institutional expectations that required lecturers to *“teach well, conduct research well, do administrative work, support students, participate in community service, and meet different evaluation indicators.”* While he did not reject these expectations, he noted that *“each requirement may be reasonable on its own,”* but when combined, *“they can become overloaded.”*

His response was strategic prioritisation rather than withdrawal from any role. As he wrote, he learned to *“prioritize tasks strategically while accepting that [he] could not do everything perfectly at the same time.”* In the interview, he restated this more directly.

“I learned to prioritize strategically instead of trying to be perfect in everything.”

This shift reflected a meta-position through which he recognised both the value and limits of each professional responsibility. Strategic prioritisation meant distributing time and emotional energy across teaching, research, administration, and student support according to urgency, impact, and available capacity. Rather than resolving the tension completely, he reconstructed professionalism around *“balance, self-awareness, and realistic expectations rather than constant self-sacrifice.”*

Repositioning from knowledge provider to pedagogical guide in response to artificial intelligence (AI)

The emergence of AI created another moment of professional reflection and repositioning. The participant initially described his response to AI as *“curiosity mixed with concern.”* He recognised its potential to support learning and expand access to knowledge, but worried about student overreliance and weakened critical thinking. In the interview, he explained that AI made him *“reconsider the role of the teacher,”* since teachers were previously seen as those who *“held and transmitted knowledge,”* whereas students can now access information *“within seconds.”*

This technological shift challenged the position of “I as a knowledge provider,” but the participant did not view AI as making teachers irrelevant. Although he first worried that AI *“might reduce the role of teachers,”* he gradually realised that teachers’ value *“no longer lies mainly in knowing more than students.”* Instead, he repositioned himself as a pedagogical guide whose role is to help learners *“ask the right questions, evaluate information, use technology responsibly, and develop critical thinking.”* His conclusion that *“AI does not make the teacher’s role less important, but makes it different”* shows a shift from knowledge transmission to guidance, judgement, and critical mediation.

Thus, AI functioned as an external contextual voice that unsettled an established I-position while enabling a new one. The participant’s response was not merely technical adaptation but identity repositioning, reflecting a future-oriented and adaptable professional self.

Maintaining Unity and Continuity

Salient positions across the professional journey

Although the participant enacted multiple I-positions and experienced several tensions, not all positions remained equally salient across his professional journey. Some were stage-specific. “I as a tutor” and “I as a friend of students” were most visible in the early stages, but their relational qualities did not disappear. Instead, they were reconfigured into broader positions such as mentor, facilitator, supporter, and companion.

Across the narrative, three orientations remained central. The first was the supportive educator, initially expressed through tutoring and friendliness and later developed into mentoring and accompanying students. The second was the developing professional, visible in his efforts to improve his English proficiency and later in his researcher and lifelong learner positions. The third was the opportunity-opening teacher, grounded in his belief that education can expand learners’ personal and professional possibilities.

These orientations converged in his self-description.

“I am a teacher, researcher, and lifelong learner who strives to open doors of opportunity while continuing to learn alongside my students.”

This statement brings together the positions of teacher, researcher, lifelong learner, and opportunity-opening educator, showing that his identity was not a single fixed role but a coherent configuration of changing yet connected positions.

Education as an enduring organizing commitment

A central belief organised the participant's sense of unity and continuity, namely that education can open opportunities and transform lives. This belief was rooted in his own trajectory, as he explained,

"What keeps me going is the belief that education can change people's lives, reflected in my own journey."

For him, education was not limited to course completion or examination success but was *"about expanding possibilities for human beings."* As he put it, teaching is not only about helping students *"pass exams or complete courses,"* but also about helping them *"see opportunities they may never have thought of before."*

The participant identified this belief as the most stable element of his professional identity. Although his *"teaching methods, professional responsibilities, and career goals have changed,"* he emphasised that,

"One thing has remained relatively stable: the belief that education can open opportunities for human development."

This belief functioned as an organising centre that connected different I-positions, including tutor, lecturer, mentor, researcher, and lifelong learner. As he reflected,

"From being a tutor, then an MA student, a lecturer, a researcher, and a mentor, that belief has always remained. It connects different parts of my professional identity and helps me feel that my journey has consistency."

Thus, the participant's unity stemmed not from sameness but from a lasting educational commitment that connected shifting roles and aspirations. His story revealed continuity in values such as care, learning, growth, opportunity, and becoming as he moved from tutor to lecturer, friend to mentor, and teacher to academic contributor. This integration allowed him to sustain a coherent professional identity amid change.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how an in-service Vietnamese EFL lecturer constructed and negotiated professional identity through DST. The findings show that his identity was not fixed but formed through shifting I-positions, including tutor, lecturer-researcher, friend of students, mentor, responsible professional, pedagogical guide, researcher, and lifelong learner. These positions emerged through tutoring, postgraduate study, university teaching, institutional expectations, influential others, technological change, and future aspirations, supporting the view that teacher identity is dynamic, relational, affective, and contextually embedded (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2000; Chen et al., 2022).

His movement from tutor to lecturer-researcher suggests that teacher identity may begin pragmatically and later gain professional meaning through reinterpretation of experience (Beijaard et al., 2000). Early tutoring, parental feedback, and the first salary anchored "I as a tutor," while the

encounter with a young PhD lecturer functioned as a promoter position that helped him imagine a future academic self (Hermans, 2012, 2013). His later shift from “friend of students” to mentor and responsible professional further shows that identity develops through reconfiguration rather than replacement. Relational closeness was transformed into mentoring, guidance, feedback, and boundaries, supporting Akkerman and Meijer’s (2011) view of multiplicity and continuity, as well as Chen et al.’s (2022) account of teacher identity as authored through autobiographical experience, pedagogical practice, and institutional discourse.

The findings also show how tensions were negotiated dialogically. The care-accountability tension involved two legitimate voices, namely the caring lecturer, who emphasised empathy and flexibility, and the responsible professional, who emphasised fairness, standards, learning outcomes, and institutional accountability. This resonates with Du et al. (2025), while the participant’s internal dialogue between these voices reflects meta-positioning. Similarly, his struggle to balance teaching, research, administration, and student support reflects the institutional complexity of higher-education identity, in which multiple valued roles compete for time, energy, and recognition (Dai & Hardy, 2024; Tian & Lin, 2026). Strategic prioritisation, therefore, represented a dialogical response to role accumulation and institutional overload.

In a technological context, AI challenged the participant’s knowledge-provider position but enabled repositioning as a pedagogical guide who supports questioning, evaluation, responsible technology use, and critical thinking. This aligns with recent work showing that generative AI shifts language teachers’ roles towards mediation, ethical guidance, AI literacy, assessment redesign, and critical judgement (Bai, 2025; Chehimi & Hejase, 2025; Crompton et al., 2024; Moorhouse & Wong, 2025). From a DST perspective, AI acted as an external contextual voice that destabilised one I-position while enabling another.

Despite these changes, the participant maintained unity and continuity through a stable belief that education opens opportunities for human development. His identity shifted from tutor to lecturer, friend to mentor, knowledge provider to pedagogical guide, and individual teacher to future academic contributor. However, these shifts were connected through enduring orientations towards care, learning, growth, and opportunity-opening. This reflects identity as both multiplicity and unity, and as continuity and discontinuity (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011), and resonates with continuity in being and in becoming (Tran & Hartley, 2026).

PEDAGOGICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest that EFL teacher development should move beyond techniques and language knowledge to include identity-oriented reflection. Teacher trainers may design professional development programmes that use narrative frames, reflective writing, critical incident analysis, guided dialogue, and I-position mapping to help teachers recognise and negotiate multiple professional voices. Such programmes should also support teachers in balancing empathy with fairness through transparent assessment criteria, structured feedback, principled flexibility, and reflective decision-making. Mentoring can provide a dialogical space for teachers to discuss uncertainty, emotional strain, aspiration, and professional growth. In AI-mediated contexts, training should move beyond tool use to support AI-aware task design, responsible assessment, critical thinking, digital ethics, AI literacy, and learner autonomy.

At the institutional level, teacher identity tensions should not be treated merely as issues of individual resilience. Workload, class size, administrative demands, research expectations, and performance indicators also shape them. University policymakers may therefore design support systems that recognise invisible labour, such as mentoring, consultation, feedback, assessment preparation, and documentation, as legitimate professional work. Clearer task allocation, protected time for research and professional learning, structured mentoring, peer support groups, and communities of practice can help lecturers sustain multiple I-positions more sustainably. AI-related policies should also promote teacher agency, ethical use, pedagogical reflection, and constructive professional repositioning rather than simple compliance.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to EFL teacher identity research by showing how a Vietnamese university EFL lecturer narratively constructed professional identity across a broader career trajectory. By combining narrative inquiry with DST, the study demonstrates how teacher identity is formed through changing I-positions, dialogical tensions, external voices, and enduring values. It also shows that unity and continuity do not require professional sameness. Rather, teachers may maintain coherence by narratively connecting transformed positions around a stable educational commitment.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. As a single-case narrative inquiry of one Vietnamese EFL lecturer, findings are context-specific rather than generalisable. Broader research could include more participants across institutions and career stages. Reliance on a single retrospective interview limits the insights; longitudinal designs with repeated interviews, observations, or journals could better capture identity change. Including students, colleagues, and administrators would highlight external voices. Finally, AI-mediated teacher identity warrants deeper investigation.

DISCLOSURE OF AI USE

The author used ChatGPT as an AI-assisted writing tool to support the translation of selected interview excerpts from Vietnamese into English and to improve the grammatical clarity and readability of the manuscript. The author reviewed, revised, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure accuracy, contextual appropriateness, and consistency with the original data. ChatGPT was not used to generate or analyse the research data independently.

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