Exploring the Impacts of Doing Action Research on EFL Teachers' Professional Identities from an Ecological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: action research (AR), professional identities, teacher identity, researcher identity

Having been introduced to Vietnamese EFL teachers since 2008 in the milieu of the National Foreign Languages Project 2020, action research (AR) is still a novel area of inquiry in English language teacher education in Vietnam. This study explored how doing AR affected four EFL teachers' construction and reconstruction of their professional identities to contribute to this area. Data were collected from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the teachers to unveil their teaching and AR experiences. Drawing on Weaver-Hightower's (2008) ecological framework, the data were analyzed against four factors: *actors*, *relationships*, *environments and structures*, and *processes* woven into the three stages of AR (pre-research, while post-research). The results showed the influences of the complex nexus of these factors, with *relationships* and *environments and structures* standing out, on reconstructing the teachers' teacher identity and constructing their researcher identity. The study provides implications for how to use AR as a way to promote the professional development of teaching staff.

1. Introduction

Throughout the last three decades, there has been growing empirical interest in the impact of AR (henceforth AR) on language teaching (Burns, 2005). Despite possible problems teachers could encounter as a researcher, it has become easier for them to do AR thanks to Nunan's (1989) principled procedure, and teacher-centered AR is encouraged to be included in teacher professional development practices of education institutions (Goodnough, 2010). The positive relationship between doing AR and teacher professional development has also been confirmed (Borg, 2010, 2013; Burns, 2009, 2010; Nunan and Bailey, 2009). There is, however, a limited number of studies focusing on the correlation between doing AR and EFL teachers' professional identity construction and reconstruction (Steadman, Kayi-Ayda & Vogel, 2018; Tsui, 2007; Xun

& Zheng, 2014).

According to Canh (2018), though the concept of teacher professional development is not underexplored, it was introduced to Vietnamese teachers only since the 1990s as a variant often known as *"bồi dưỡng giáo viên"* (in-service teacher training). Since the National Foreign Languages Project was launched by Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training in 2008 to renovate EFL education across the country, most EFL teachers in Vietnam have been introduced to AR through workshops, one-off in-service teacher training sessions, or as a compulsory module of postgraduate TESOL teacher education programs. However, in most educational institutions in Vietnam, conducive research culture has not developed yet. Canh (2018) explained that it is because Vietnam's centralized education system seems to obstruct teacher autonomy, thus interfering directly with teachers' professional identity construction and reconstruction. This issue, along with a common perception among EFL teachers that doing AR is not their duty (Burn, 2010), that it is the job of professional researchers only (Canh, 2018), and that it has little effect on teachers' career promotion and employment (Pham, 2006) are some reasons why most Vietnamese teachers lack intrinsic motivation to embark on AR.

Drawing on an ecological framework encapsulating four categories (*actors*, *relationships*, *environments and structures*, and *processes*) proposed by Weaver-Hightower (2008), this study investigates how EFL teachers' professional identities were formed and reformed over the course of their AR experiences. Accordingly, the study aims to address this question: *How does doing AR affect EFL teachers' perceived professional identity construction and reconstruction?* To answer this question, the scope of inquiry is deliberately restricted to how teachers perceive themselves as teacher-researchers, both in the classroom and in their professional community, rather than looks empirically into all of the individual and contextual factors impacting their professional identity construction and reconstruction.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Teachers' Professional Identity Construction and Reconstruction*

Teachers' professional identity relates directly to how they define their professional roles (Lasky, 2005; Goodson & Cole, 1994; Kelchtermans, 1993) and to what they consider to be important for their teaching career (van Veen & Sleegers, 2006; van Veen, Sleegers, Bergen, & Klaassen, 2001). Recent studies have described teachers' professional identity construction and reconstruction as a long-term, underexplored process of teachers constructing and reconstructing their professional identities (Tsui, 2007; Xun & Zheng, 2014). This process might never cease (Danielewicz, 2001; Gray & Seiki, 2020; Taylor, 2017; Zembylas, 2003), and its dynamics span the teachers' entire career (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). That said, at a particular stage of their teaching career, due to various external and internal reasons, the construction and reconstruction of their professional identity could become 'fossilized'; however, this stage does not mean it could not be open to change (Olsen, 2016; Trent, 2011). This process includes multifarious aspects (Cooper & Olson, 1996), which means several

contextual factors could influence the construction and reconstruction process of teachers' professional identity (Mockler, 2011), from family background and past career experience (Barrett, 2008; Davin, Chavoshan, & Donato, 2018; Flores & Day, 2006; Gray & Seiki, 2020; Mockler, 2011), emotions or emotional experiences (Chen, 2019; Gaines et al., 2019; Hulburt, Colaianneand & Roeser, 2020; Song, 2016; Yazan & Peercy, 2016; Zembylas, 2003), and various social categories, such as race, ethnicity, gender, attitudes, beliefs, desires, values, ideologies, interactions, and relationships (Ayinselya, 2020; Bukor, 2015; Farrell, 2011; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007).

Contextual mediators that could affect teachers' professional identity construction and reconstruction were first mentioned in Reynolds (1996), who emphasized that the teachers' surroundings, other individuals' expectations, and what teachers allow to have an impact on them would significantly influence their professional identities. According to Reynolds, teachers' workplace could be a persuasive, demanding, and often restrictive landscape. In a more recent study by De Costa and Norton (2017), neoliberal demands and globalized settings are also viewed as modern factors that would considerably impact teacher identity construction and reconstruction.

Agency, an individual's ability to adjust or change a pre-existing condition or situation (Giddens, 1984) or power (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Miller, 2009), is another factor that contributes to teachers' professional identity construction and reconstruction (Kayi-Aydar, 2018). Teachers might or might not be able to exercise agency in order to respond to external factors, which might enforce their established identities or construct their desired ones. If they are given the power to make a difference in their teaching context, their identity reconstruction is likely to occur. On the other hand, in case teachers are unable to contribute to the change or adjustment of their teaching context or to be aware of their own identity as a teacher, or in case the identity self-reflection process is discontinued, it might result in their rigid, unchangeable teacher identity.

2.2 Roles of Teachers Inside and Outside the Classroom

Brown (2007) summarized five main roles of teachers in the language classroom: controller, director, manager, facilitator, and resources, ordering from most directive to least directive roles. Harrison and Killion (2007) expanded the notion, adding ten more roles of teachers as leaders (e.g., resource provider, instructional specialist, curriculum specialist, classroom supporter, learning facilitator, mentor, school leader, data coach, and learner) by putting it outside the classroom context. Teachers could practice their leadership through performing their extramural responsibilities as a teacher and professional interactions with their colleagues. Based on Harrison and Killion's notion of teacher roles, with the study by Quoc et al. (2021) highlighting teaches' role as learning facilitators and coaches in teaching English pronunciation as an example, it is realistic for teachers to embark on and seriously pursue their research career in order to be effective facilitators or resources in the classroom, as well as to take leading roles outside the classroom.

2.3 *Action Research*

McNiff and Whitehead (2010) explain the definition of AR in two aspects: *action* (the doing) and *research* (the methodology and explanation of the doing). Action is defined as a process whose purpose is to improve practice, therefore improving learning and also influencing thinking and behaviors, while *research* was about creating knowledge about the practice. In the scope of this study, AR is referred to as a type of classroom research (Cain, 2011; Wallace, 1998) or an action-driven and interventional approach to research (Burns, 2009) that requires collaboration as an essential condition (Aldridge et al., 2020; Borg, 2013; Burns, 2009, 2010).

AR in the field of language teaching is rooted in a teacher-researcher movement (Borg, 2013; Burns, 2010; Crook, 1993; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Wallace, 1998), which has contributed to shortening the distance between research theories and practice (Canh, 2018; Crookes, 1993; Johnson, 2002). The focus of educational AR is not on finding what is wrong but more on how to improve the practice of teaching and learning (Eileen, 2000; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

2.4 *Action Research and Teachers' Researcher Identity*

It is essential to understand language teachers' researcher identity - how they perceive themselves as researchers - since it has a great impact on the manifestation of their sense of agency, their autonomy development, and their professional development (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Hong, 2010). In the language education field, considerable attention has been paid to teachers' research engagement (Borg, 2009), particularly in higher educational institutions, as the performance of teachers has become an essential factor for recruitment, job security, job evaluation, and promotion (Bai & Millwater, 2011; Canh, 2018; Fox, 2020). Associating research with identity, Taylor (2017) and Trent (2012) claimed that engaging in conducting provides language teachers with opportunities for professional development and a sense of empowerment.

Several studies (e.g., Borg, 2006; Burns, 2000, 2015; Connelly & Hughes-Stanton, 2020; Edward & Burns, 2016a, 2016b; Fox, 2020; Long & Huang, 2017; Trent, 2020; Xiang, 2019) explored the influence of individual factors and contextual factors on teachers' professional identity construction and reconstruction. Their common finding was that contextual factors had a more prominent impact on teachers' motivation to conduct AR. A more recent study by Tran, Burns, and Ollerhead (2017) found that in a university context in Vietnam, language teachers were faced with tensions and challenges while trying to meet their institutions' new demands for them to partake in doing research besides teaching without any institutional support or mentorship having provided for them beforehand. Some gave positive responses towards the requirements and showed confidence in their research abilities and potentials. At the same time, other teachers were put under great pressure and were discouraged due to a lack of confidence in their capacity to achieve research goals. However, despite the previous findings on the connection between doing AR and teachers' professional identity, the impact of doing AR on how EFL teachers perceive themselves in their professional roles remains unclear.

3. Theoretical Framework for Analysis

Given the complex interplay of individual and contextual factors that shape EFL teachers' research engagement and the construction and reconstruction of their professional identities, the ecological perspective framework proposed by Weaver-Hightower (2008) will provide a helpful lens through which to answer the research question of this study. Weaver-Hightower applied a four-part metaphor of ecological elements in this framework, including *actors*, *relationships*, *environments and structures*, and *processes*.

- *Actors*: Actors are the individuals and groups in an ecosystem of schools and school systems that function in many roles, sometimes simultaneously. An apparent example is teachers, who need to play a variety of roles in their classrooms, sometimes with more than one role at a time.

- *Relationships*: Actors interact with each other and establish *relationships*, which may involve collaboration to achieve a shared goal, such as adapting a curriculum. *Relationships* take two forms: actors compete for similar interests (*competition)* and coexist without noticeable collaboration or support or predatory relationships in which policies negatively affect educational programs or funds being used for other purposes (*symbiosis*).

- *Environments and structures*: Environments and structures (e.g., school context, educational policies), which are impacted by social, historical, cultural, and economic conditions, affect actors and their relationships. When the context puts pressures (changes) on individuals or groups, they respond in different ways, adapt themselves to specific roles required by structures and traditions, and show different levels of effectiveness as they change or enhance the functioning of the ecosystem.

- *Processes*: Many processes are invoked that can keep an ecosystem sustainable, but these may also make the system become chaotic and collapse or even lead to the establishment of a new system. To prevent possible chaos, *actors* may use resources from the ecosystem to pre-empt breakdown, anticipate future needs, and adapt to meet the new requirements.

Given their ecologically interlacing nature, these components are instrumental in unveiling the complex interplay among many variables such as personal experience, knowledge, values, schooling practices, and institutional values, justifying themselves as an appropriate backdrop against which this study's participants' AR engagement and professional identity dynamics are analyzed.

4. Methodology

4.1 *Method*

A narrative approach was adopted to answer the research question of this study. As an effective social science research approach, narrative research has been commonly used in collecting research data associated with identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2011) view narrative research as "the study of how different humans experience the world around them" (p. 400), also emphasize the relation between the development of narrative research on teacher research and AR trends over the last decade.

As the most common source of narrative data (Bold, 2012; Chase, 2011), semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to thoroughly scrutinize the participants' experiences. Ten close-ended and open-ended questions were prepared based on the literature and the theoretical framework reviewed above (Appendix A1). The questions focused on two main aspects: (1) teachers' teaching experiences before and after doing AR and (2) their experiences in doing AR from the beginning until the time they were interviewed. Follow-up questions were made based on the participants' answers to the guiding questions to elicit more details and/or clarify the given information.

This study also adopted restorying and storytelling, two distinctive techniques commonly used in narrative research (Gay et al., 2011). Restorying, as defined by Creswell (2012), is "the process in which the research gathers stories, analyzes them for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewrite the story to place it in a chronological sequence." (p. 509). Besides engaging in interviews in informal settings such as coffee shops and the teacher's breakroom, due to one participants' preference, storytelling was used when participants did not prefer the use of an audio recorder. In such cases, field notes were recorded after the conversations. This technique is essential to collect the data that could provide a closer look at the participants' works and explain why they did what they did during the AR (Gay et al., 2011).

4.2 *Participants*

The target participants of this were four Vietnamese EFL in-service teachers who had done or are doing at least one AR study during their teaching career. The context of the study was based in a large city in southeastern Vietnam, where Nam and Lan (pseudonyms) teach for a large privately-owned English language center while Hoa and Thanh are lecturers at a public university. These institutions set high standards for their teaching staff, thus offering copious opportunities for continued professional development such as weekly teacher professional development seminars and favorable conditions for doing research for publication. The demographics of these participants are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Background Information of the Participants

Name	Gender	Title	Years of teaching experience	Education Qualification	Research Area
Nam	Male	Full-time Teacher	7	MA in English language education	English language education
Lan	Female	Full-time Teacher	8	MA in English language education	English Language education
Hoa	Female	Full-time Lecturer	10	MA in English language education	English Language education
Thanh	Female	Full-time Lecturer	12	MA in English language education	English Language education

4.3 *Data Collection and Analysis*

Two semi-structures were conducted with Nam (18 minutes), two with Lan (25 minutes), one with Hoa (46 minutes), and one with Thanh (60 minutes). These interviews focused on their experiences in conducting AR from before they started their first research to the time they were interviewed.

The audios and footnotes were transcribed in full to avoid any bias arising as a result of selective transcription. The transcripts were subsequently sent to the participants for verification and feedback. Each transcript was then analyzed based on the key elements described in the theoretical framework and the themes related to the stages of the AR process (pre-AR, while-AR, and post-AR) highlighted. This makes allowance for retelling the participants' AR experiences in chronological sequence, including their educational and professional backgrounds, involved characters, reasons why they did, what they did, the obstacles and solutions during the process, how they applied the findings in their teaching context, plans, and possible changes in the way they identified themselves, and their classroom practice.

Subsequently, the participants were asked to write a narrative which was then used to confirm the interview data. The narratives were analyzed, using the partially ordered meta-matrix suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The characteristics of the teachers' professional identity were identified based on their professional life cycle (Huberman, 1989, 1993), the three stages of research identified by Long and Huang (2017, and Weaver-Hightower's (2008) framework.

5. Results

The data indicated that all four participants exhibited a more positive attitude towards both teaching and research after conducting AR. Compared to the pre-research stage, the participants' enjoyment of and commitment to their teaching career were intensified. Also, their awareness of the teacher roles they play inside and outside the classroom has been changed dramatically. By getting engaged in AR, the four participants' confidence in their teaching and research skills, despite individual and contextual obstacles, was augmented, and all of them perceived doing AR to be a necessary and beneficial professional development activity. In what follows, the teachers' perceptions will be presented in tandem with each stage of the AR process.

5.1 *The Pre-research Stage*

It was found that at this stage, two factors, namely *actors* and *environment and structures*, appear to dominate the construction of the four teachers' professional identities. As they reported, their motivation to engage in conducting AR is rooted in their personal observation and self-reflection process of their own teaching practices.

In all cases, the teachers reported their need to improve their teaching competence to find solutions to the classroom problems they faced, which motivated them to conduct AR, even though they were not aware of the AR concept. Lan, for example, reported that she desired to be a *good teacher*, but her previous poor performance in teaching writing contradicted this identity. Despite this contradiction resulting in her disappointment in herself, it fueled her proclivity for doing AR to improve her teaching.

> *I know that my responsibilities as a teacher are significant, so I've put a lot of pressure on myself like I have to do this and that to be a good teacher, so when I fail to help my students improve their writing skills after a course, I blame myself a lot. I consider two writing courses as my failures, I still remember them until now,   and I feel really guilty. That's a motivation for me to find ways to improve my teaching. So I did small-scale research, a small study, and then found a more effective way to correct students' mistakes.* (Excerpt 1: Lan)

Identifying with Lan, the other teachers commented that they enjoyed teaching and had a strong passion for their career, but they also encountered lots of difficulties that inhibited their *good teacher* identity. Nam described himself as a traditional teacher who would just complete his normal teaching routine on a daily basis, while Thanh identified herself as a responsible teacher after struggling with how to teach a young learner class in her teacher training course. Similarly, Hoa was concerned about what she called "*ethical values*" of the teaching profession: how to help her students become fluent English speakers. What stands out from these teachers' perceptions is that the question of how to teach better strongly motivated them to find ways to become a better version of themselves, and one of the ways they realized was to turn to AR.

Another common perception among the teachers is that *a supportive institutional environment*

inspired them to be more dedicated to their teaching profession and professional development, which is a significant source of motivation for them to conduct AR. Alluding to this matter, Hoa, for example, said:

> *I love teaching, and I want to have a stable job. As a woman, I don't have any ambition to climb any career ladder; that's why I choose to work for X University. I think we have a good chance there to work with the professional lecturers to gain more experience, not only about teaching but doing research as well. If I don't work there, I would say that maybe I haven't got any chance to improve my research ability.* (Excerpt 2: Hoa)

It can be seen that, although Hoa does not have a strong initial motivation for developing herself professionally, her engagement with more competent and experienced colleagues at her school has allowed her to take her teaching abilities to a different level, and more importantly, this has strengthened her belief in her ability as a researcher. Obviously, institutional support is a driving force for even the least motivated teachers such as Hoa to reimagine themselves in their academic profession. Sharing this perception, Thanh commented that the knowledge and skills in the area of English pedagogy she gained from her undergraduate English teaching program and her language center's institutional training program allowed her to conduct her first-ever AR study as part of her graduation thesis.

Despite not standing out in the data, *relationships* were reported to contribute to the teachers' commitment to teaching. Personal relationships such as family and friends, for instance, were the reason behind Lan and Hoa's decision to embark on teaching. In Thanh's case, she was encouraged to switch from a business-related job to a teaching career by her training program mentor, who recognized her strong English competence.

5.2 *The While-research Stage*

All four participants expressed their concerns about carrying out their first AR study without being fully aware of what AR truly involves. Even after being introduced to the concept of research in general and AR in particular, they reported a certain level of anxiety and a lack of self-confidence in their research capacity. Excerpts 3 and 4 illustrate their *bewildered selves*.

> *Honestly (AR is) just a thing that I couldn't do because something related to research really is a big problem not only for me but also for my classmates. And, you know, the name is so big, and we didn't know how to do it.* (Excerpt 3: Nam)

> *It took me a lot of energy. I would say that some kind of mental problems like headache and stress and pressure… because I didn't do research for my Bachelor's degree.* (Excerpt 4: Hoa)

Regardless of the teachers' reported pressure, their *relationships* once again played an important role in promoting their AR engagement. While conducting AR, they received considerable spiritual and academic support from their mentors, which augmented their teaching capacity and positively influenced their disposition toward AR. Excerpt 4 below illustrates key points expressed.

She [her mentor] had a great impact on my teaching career. She was oriented and helped me know the right teaching methods since she's an experienced teacher trainer. From theories, she also instructed me how to apply those to the real teaching context and showed me many other things, so I learned a lot from her. Since I've been guided by her, teaching has become easier compared to before I knew her... (Since then) I got a general idea of doing research mostly thanks to my mentor, and as you can see, the way I want to conduct research is influenced by her a lot. (Excerpt 4: Thanh)

However, *relationships* with dispassionate colleagues tended to be an inhibitor for the four teachers developing their research profession, but they tended to remain their interest. Extract 5 demonstrates how the lack of cooperation and encouragement from other teaching staff made Lan want to withdraw from AR and intensified her self-restraint.

In some AR, we need cooperation, and we need maybe 2 or 3 teachers. Doing alone makes me sometimes depressed or disappointed when I don't know what to do next. So I need some kind of support from the others, but now I'm just doing it alone because I think it is quite new in the center context… I tried to suggest some teachers try the teaching method I've done for my classes, but they rejected it because their schedules and teaching contexts are different from mine, so now I don't really want to share my research findings... Maybe (that is) because of my style, I'm kind of introverted. I'd better do something on my own. (Excerpt 5: Lan)

In the face of such an inhibitor, the teachers expressed their desire to reconnect with their former professors in their graduate programs as they thought such connections would make their AR continue to be a reality.

In terms of *institutional environments* and *processes*, despite the teachers receiving methodological support from their graduate programs, they encountered some obstacles in the process of doing AR. Lan, for instance, could not control the number of students coming to her class at a private English center as their attendance was not compulsory. For Nam and Hoa, there were two difficulties: his huge teaching load draining much of his energy and his lack of access to relevant literature resources due to journals' close access policy. In addition, Thanh was reluctant to publish her research in the journal of her school as she did not need institutional recognition, while Hoa worried about not being able to meet the requirements of top-tier publishers. These institutional factors, in a way, interfered with the teachers' researcher identity construction while they were short of coping strategies.

5.3 *The Post-research Stage*

Most noticeable in this AR stage was the change in the teachers' professional identities. All the four participants became more aware of their role as a *facilitator* in the classroom and also developed their identities as *research-orientated teachers* with enhanced confidence in conducting classroom AR.

Since her AR study received positive feedback, Lan found it much more enjoyable to teach her

writing classes. Having applied her findings in several courses, she became increasingly confident in the positive effects of her AR on her students' writing development. She was also positive about her new role as a *teacher-researcher* and believed strongly in the necessity of AR; however, she identified herself more as a teacher than as a researcher and showed no desire to pursue AR seriously. She said:

> *I still love teaching. So I think I just do action research for my class. I don't want to become a professional researcher.* (Excerpt 6: Lan).

After his AR-based Master's thesis, Nam better understood his duty as a teacher. He recognized that what he should do is not only lecturing but also flexibly adapting himself to the requirements of his teaching context. He described himself as a *facilitator* in the classroom, where he adjusted his teaching to meet students' on-the-spot needs instead of controlling their learning process based on a pre-determined curriculum. Noticeably, his AR intensified his aspiration for teaching and researching, as he put it:

> *So maybe I can say that I am ambitious enough to be a mentor, but it's a long way to go.* (Excerpt 7: Nam).

> *Maybe this is just an example, 30% for teaching and 70% for doing research. I think that's suitable for me.* (Excerpt 8: Nam).

Similarly, Hoa became more confident in selecting teaching techniques and classroom activities to better support her students' learning, and her classes became more student-centered than before her research. Furthermore, there was an increase in her confidence and interest in conducting AR; she gained a better knowledge of what she called "*better measurements"* for making her research "*more scientific and logical.*"

Among the four participants, Thanh most clearly identified herself as an *action researcher*. She affirmed the importance of doing AR for her professional development and demonstrated a strong desire to become *a better researcher*. She did this by finding ways to upgrade the quality of her research and reconnecting with expert researchers in the field. Excerpt 9 illustrates how she planned for the advancement of her imagined identity.

> *I've just finished writing a research paper for another AR I did in my university class, but I don't want to publish it just yet. Next year, I will repeat that research on a larger scale; then, maybe I will submit my paper to a renowned journal… I'm also reconnecting with those expert researchers… I want to invest more in researching for my own professional development".* (Excerpt 9: Thanh)

Despite the teachers positively perceiving the importance of AR, they reported that the lack of enthusiasm from their colleagues and excessive teaching are two *institutional factors* inhibiting their engagement with AR. They, however, we're hopeful for a future where doing research will become a mandatory program in higher education institutions. Hoa, for instance, stressed this by saying, "*… for some prestigious universities, the main role of lecturers is doing research*". (Excerpt 10: Hoa).

6. Discussion

6.1 *Conducting AR and Teachers' Professional Identities*

When teachers are in the early stage of their teaching career, oftentimes, they are not fully aware of the demands and expectations from their students, their academic community (Huberman, 1989). This is true of the study's four teachers in their pre-research stage, when their professional identity was limited to the basic agenda they were supposed to perform in their classroom, including delivering lectures and assessing students' learning outcomes. This is illustrated by their labeling their teacher role as traditional. Regarding AR, none of the teachers showed a thorough understanding of research methodology, nor were they conscious of the value of conducting AR towards their teaching profession.

Since it was not until 2008 that AR was introduced to Vietnamese EFL teachers through the *National Foreign Languages Project 2020* and in-service teacher training courses served in-service teachers only (Le, 2018), none of the four participants had the chance to get familiar with the concept in their undergraduate programs. During their first year of teaching, they faced real classroom problems and were concerned about their pedagogical capabilities, which urged them to take action. To pursue their professional identities as more capable teachers, they enrolled in a graduate TESOL program in which they sought to attend one-off professional development agenda workshops where AR was introduced. It can be seen, therefore, that their instrumental motivation was the driving force for them to find ways to construct their desired professional identities: teacher identity (Kayi-Aydar, 2018; Reynolds, 1996) and researcher identity (Beijaard et al., 2000; Hong, 2010).

In their while-research stage, all the teachers conducted AR as a compulsory component in the same graduate program they partook in. Despite their different stories in conducting AR, all of them experienced a similar change in their teacher identities, from *traditional teachers* to *classroom facilitators*, with their methods of teaching shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered. They reported that having gained a deeper understanding of research methodology and AR, they saw considerable increases in their confidence in teaching and researching. They accordingly identified themselves as *teacher researchers* and were determined that becoming *expert researchers* is their long-term goal. The teachers' sense of empowerment in their careers was indeed heightened by their engagement in conducting AR (Taylor, 2017; Trent, 2012). In addition, the teachers' willingness to continue conducting AR was enforced by the sufficient input about research methodology they received through their graduate programs, workshops, and conventions. The good rapport and support from their mentors also played an important part in encouraging them to continue doing AR, although the lack of cooperation from colleagues was a demotivator. This echoes the claim of Edward and Burns (2016a) that relationships between teachers and their superiors, managers, and colleagues need to be negotiated so that their sense of agency can be achieved and that the teachers' researcher identity can be recognized in their academic community.

According to the findings, during the three stages of conducting research, the four teachers

changed their view of the roles they play in and outside the classroom and the relationship between teaching and conducting AR. All of them acknowledged the importance of AR to their professional development. That is, they could successfully apply their AR findings in their teaching context to make a difference in their own teaching. However, there is a slight difference between their *researcher identities*. Nam, Hoa, and Thanh had a strong interest in research and publication, thus making efforts to enhance their research ability to advance in their research profession as *educational research experts*. Meanwhile, Lan had a profound passion for teaching and AR but took little interest in writing and publishing. It could be seen that she considered AR just as a tool for her to realize her identity as *a competent EFL teacher*.

6.2 *Teachers' Professional Identities from an Ecological Perspective*

The transformation of the professional identities of the four participants during their three stages of conducting AR indicated that a teacher's professional identity is affected by various individual factors and social factors. From an ecological perspective (Weaver-Hightower, 2008), throughout the three stages of conducting AR, the four factors, namely *actors*, *relationships*, *environments and structures*, and *processes*, were shown to intertwine with one another to both facilitate and constrain the teachers' professional identity construction and reconstruction.

In this study, the four EFL teachers played the role of the main *actors*. They had *relationships* with superiors and colleagues (other actors) in their *professional environments*, where the *institutional structure* impacted their teaching (e.g., classroom context, academic and non-academic duties), the national educational policies (e.g., National Foreign Languages Project 2020), and *social conditions* (e.g., increasing investment in language education and Vietnam's demand of EFL teachers with advanced proficiency). The pressure from their professional environments caused them to pursue a graduate qualification (Master's degrees) and conduct AR, which subsequently transformed their professional identities. This identity reconstruction process also changed their points of view about the roles they play as EFL teachers to adapt to institutional and social expectations and demands and the value of AR in their professional development.

6.2.1 *Actors*

As mentioned above, in the pre-research stage, the four participants' perception of their professional identities involved only the basic agenda an average teacher needs to do in the classroom, with teaching being their main responsibility. They were not concerned about other roles they were expected to perform in their teaching community, and doing research was simply beyond their abilities. Their perception of teachers' duties was rooted in their past learning experiences in which they observed the practices of their teachers. From the ecological perspective of Weaver-Hightower (2008), the relationship between *actors*, the participants, and their teachers, in this case, left them with a strong impression of the basic role of language teachers in the classroom. Such impression could be considered as a key factor for the construction of their initial professional identities.

Interestingly, the four teachers' choice of teaching as their lifetime career was clearly influenced by other *actors* in their personal or semi-professional environments. Lan and Nam's belief in their teaching potential was enforced with positive feedback from the students they were tutoring, while Thanh turned to the teaching profession because of the encouragement from her superiors. For Hoa, she embarked on her undergraduate program in English teaching with great moral support from her family. This could be considered the first cycle of constructing the teachers' professional identities where they (*actors*) responded to the positive pressure from *other actors* by taking concrete action (*processes*).

6.2.2 *Environments and Structures*

In their undergraduate programs in English teaching, the teachers were trained in the area of teaching methods and techniques; still, they remained unaware of what was ahead once they entered the real world of teaching. Although they strongly desired to become competent English teachers, their hands-on experiences in this real-world allowed them to see their deficits while simultaneously encouraging them to seriously pursue a better qualification and participate in professional development activities. Lan and Nam were faced with classroom problems they were unable to solve due to their limited pedagogical knowledge and experience. Meanwhile, Hoa and Thanh struggled with the academic pressure from their position as university lecturers. Evidently, *environments and structures*, the teachers' career challenges, and their schools' policy, in this case, made them change themselves for the better by going through *processes*. These extrinsic factors motivated them to start their Master's studies and conduct AR, thus turning their *traditional teacher identity* into *researcher identity* (Long & Huang, 2017).

The institutional and social environments provided the teachers with favorable conditions to study and do AR. They received support from their institutions, such as flexible schedules to participate in their graduate program and permission and classroom conditions to conduct their research. This reflects the claim that teachers are more likely to do research if they are given opportunities and favorable conditions to put their knowledge into practice (Borg & Sanchez, 2014). In addition, the top-down educational policies such as National Foreign Languages Project 2020 made teachers more aware of the urgent need to improve themselves, which further fueled their pursuit of graduate education and professional development activities such as training workshops.

The institutional academic context facilitated the teachers' professional identity construction and reconstruction. They gained necessary knowledge of pedagogy from their graduate TESOL program and workshops and research and also the support from senior researchers in conducting and publishing their research, confirming the positive influences of graduate studies on the evolution of teachers' professional identity (Shahri, 2018; Steadman et al., 2018; Yazan, 2017). Despite their initial lack of research experience, these favorable conditions enabled them to uncover and sharpen their research capabilities, have more freedom to conduct AR, translate their findings into classroom teaching, and, most importantly, construct their researcher identity. Their increased sense of agency helped them build up confidence in teaching and encouraged them to perform other professional roles both in and outside the classroom. This corroborates

the positive correlation between active engagement in research and teachers' professional identities (Borg, 2006; Burn, 2000, 2015; Edward & Burns, 2016a, 2016b; Smith Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014)

On the other hand, some difficulties remain in their institutions and the broader academic context in Vietnam that the teachers have to grapple with. Demanding workloads are the most commonly mentioned obstacle among the four teachers. Although they could still manage to do AR, it was hard for them to balance their teaching, research, and personal lives. Regarding the academic context in Vietnam, because of few local educational journals and closed access to well-known journals (Le, 2018) and a lack of social connections with high-profile researchers, the teachers considered publishing in prestigious international journals as a great challenge. This was a major inhibitor for their research engagement and publication, which limited the scope and quality of their research to an institutional level. Notwithstanding these barriers, almost all of the four participants indicated their intention to persist in pursuing AR but for their own classroom teaching purposes, which demonstrates that teachers' internal attributes, including internal motivation, play a crucial part in their resilience in the face of abundant hindrances (Araghian & Ghanizadeh, 2021).

The participants (Hoa and Thanh) were dissatisfied with the research culture of their academic community. Hoa's expectation for AR to become compulsory in her institutional context and for more time for research rather than for teaching only was not met. In Thanh's case, since her perception and her institution's about AR and its values were mismatched, she had to seek support from a more professional research community. Unfortunately, all the four teachers could not seek connections and support from external research experts after their graduate program, and the number of one-off training courses, workshops, conferences, or conventions was extremely limited in their context. Such a lack of bottom-up professional support and training might trigger a feeling of isolation, confusion, and even vexation, all that the Vietnamese teachers in Vu, Winser, and Walsh (2020) also experienced when faced with the misalignment between top-down curriculum reforms and their insufficient preparations to adapt. That deficiency was another major demotivator for the teachers' research engagement in this study, which hindered their researcher identity construction.

6.2.3 *Relationships*

Relationships greatly impacted the four teachers' professional identities (Edward & Burns, 2016a, 2016b; Long & Huang, 2017). They received moral support to conduct AR and the recognition of their researcher identity from their mentors, senior researchers, and office superiors. The encouragement from office superiors is one of the most prominent reasons why Lan and Nam were willing to continue doing AR after their Master's thesis, despite their workload and difficulties in approaching literature. Likewise, connections with supportive mentors and supervisors and acknowledging their researcher identity and research capabilities from superiors gave Hoa and Thanh enough confidence to persist in becoming expert researchers. However, they need to constantly seek a balance between their roles as EFL teachers and researchers.

According to Edwards and Burns (2016a), conflicts and unsupportiveness in a professional community might cause stagnation to teachers' research professionals affecting their professional development, both teachers and researchers. In this study, the teacher's relationship with their colleagues regarding the research profession was not positive as none of them reported being motivated to conduct AR by these people. Lan and Nam, for instance, were discouraged by the lack of acknowledgment, participation, and moral support from other teachers in their institutions. This led them to isolate themselves from their colleagues; Lan refused to share her research findings publicly, and John preferred to conduct AR independently rather than seeking peer cooperation in this endeavor.

6.2.4 *Processes*

The findings showed that the entire process of doing AR affected their classroom practice and their students' learning experiences on an ongoing basis. Having gained some AR experience, the four teachers' perception of their classroom roles was switched from traditional lecture-style teachers to facilitators and teacher-researchers. Their pedagogical approach shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered, evidenced by their efforts to increasingly engage students in their lessons and take less control over students' learning progress than before. Their students welcomed this revolutionary change as they reported positive feedback, better participation, and improvements in their students' learning outcomes. Thanks to their research findings, the teachers believed strongly in their chosen teaching methods, therefore, promoting their positive attitude towards teaching and researching. These developments echoed the positive perception of Saudi Arabian teachers in Assalahi (2021), who also strongly agreed that professional development is key to improvements in teaching and students' learning. Last but not least, such pronounced success earned the teachers recognition for their teaching and researching capacity and became a source of motivation for junior colleagues in their professional community to embark on the AR journey. Their AR process paved the way for others to commence, it appears.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

The study investigated how four Vietnamese EFL teachers reconstructed their teacher identities and constructed their researcher identities throughout the three stages of doing AR. Based on the teachers' narrations of their teaching and AR experience, overall, it was found that conducting action research positively affected their professional identity construction and reconstruction, but with the complex interplay of several individuals, institutional, academic, and social factors in Weaver-Hightower's (2008) ecological framework. *Environments and structures*, including institutional, academic, and social contexts, had significant impacts on the teachers' research engagement, which indirectly transformed their professional identities. *Relationships* between the teachers and their colleagues, office superiors, and senior researchers also played an important role in constructing and reconstructing their professional identities. These findings extend the existing literature on teachers' professional identity by answering the question of how conducting AR influences teachers' perceived professional identity

construction and reconstruction in an EFL context like Vietnam.

Accordingly, these findings above provide implications for EFL teachers and educational institutions in EFL contexts. Teachers should be more aware of AR and its potential contributions to their professional lives. To better themselves as teachers, they should invest their time not only in teaching but also in seeking higher education in pedagogy and research methodology so that they can conduct AR in their teaching context. They should also actively participate in one-off training courses, conferences, and workshops to get more input on research methodology and to establish connections with research experts in the field and extend their research profession. Educational institutions should focus on promoting their teachers' research engagement by providing them with opportunities and favorable conditions for their AR projects. Teacher preparation programs should be customized to meet teachers' specific needs for how to deal with specific classroom problems they might encounter in the future. In this respect, Assalahi (2021) calls for the creation and application of standards that "enable[d] teachers in identifying their priorities in terms of their competencies, the preferred PD types, constraints and enablers of PD and based on this, they can choose the suitable PD type (formal or informal) to address these needs". Additionally, to help teachers publish research papers in top-tier journals, educational institutions could create opportunities for them to network with senior researchers and experts in the field.

Beyond the scope of this study are social categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, ideologies that could be examined in further research about the connection between teachers' professional identity and AR. Neoliberal demands and globalized settings (De Costa & Norton, 2017), if included, could also throw more light on the issue. What is more, since the study reported the lack of collaboration between teachers for AR, investigating the dynamics of collaborative AR, especially how it shapes teachers' professional identities, is a potential topic for future studies.

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