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THE DOUBLE BURDEN OF PERFORMANCE: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ACADEMIC IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG VIETNAMESE UNDERGRADUATES IN A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY COURSE

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Abstract: Undergraduate research is increasingly recognized as essential in higher education. However, conducting research in a foreign language presents significant psychological and linguistic challenges. This study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine how ten Vietnamese fourth-year undergraduates experience a challenging Report Writing course requiring a 50-page thesis and a viva voce examination in English. Drawing on communities of practice and the concept of investment, the study explores the dual burden of mastering research while coping with linguistic insecurity. The findings reveal three group experiential themes, including (1) the double burden of linguistic research, where English becomes a potential barrier for students' intellectual voice; (2) the performance of identity, marked by performativity; and (3) negotiating membership in the community, as students oscillate between resisting and embracing the researcher identity. The research process emerges as a liminal crisis that compels students to reconstruct their professional identities. The study concludes by recommending a shift from performative output to more supported research processes in English as a foreign language (EFL) curricula.

Keywords: Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), undergraduate research, Communities of Practice, investment and imagined communities, Vietnamese students

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GÁNH NẶNG KÉP: PHÂN TÍCH HIỆN TƯỢNG HỌC DIỄN GIẢI VỀ SỰ KIẾN TẠO BẢN SẮC HỌC THUẬT CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM TRONG MÔN PHƯƠNG PHÁP NGHIÊN CỨU KHOA HỌC

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu khoa học bậc đại học ngày càng được công nhận là một yếu tố thiết yếu trong giáo dục đại học. Tuy nhiên, việc tiến hành nghiên cứu bằng ngoại ngữ đặt ra nhiều thách thức đáng kể về tâm lý và ngôn ngữ. Nghiên cứu này sử dụng Phân tích hiện tượng học diễn giải (IPA) để khám phá cách mười sinh viên năm cuối người Việt Nam trải nghiệm một học phần Viết báo cáo nghiên cứu có tính chất áp lực cao, yêu cầu hoàn thành một luận văn dài 50 trang và bảo vệ bằng tiếng Anh. Dựa trên khung lý thuyết Cộng đồng thực hành và khái niệm đầu tư, nghiên cứu tìm hiểu gánh nặng kép của việc vừa nắm vững phương pháp nghiên cứu vừa đối mặt với sự bất an về ngôn ngữ. Kết quả cho thấy ba chủ đề cấp cao: (1) gánh nặng kép của nghiên cứu ngôn ngữ, trong đó, tiếng Anh đóng vai trò như một rào cản đối với tiếng nói trí tuệ của sinh viên; (2) sự trình diễn bản sắc, đặc trưng bởi hội chứng kẻ mạo danh và tính trình diễn; và (3) đàm phán tư cách thành viên trong cộng đồng, khi sinh viên dao động giữa việc kháng cự và chấp nhận bản sắc nhà nghiên cứu. Tổng thể, quá trình nghiên cứu nổi lên như một cuộc khủng hoảng chuyển tiếp, buộc sinh viên phải tái cấu trúc bản sắc nghề nghiệp của mình. Nghiên cứu kết luận bằng việc đề xuất chuyển từ việc nhấn mạnh sản phẩm mang tính trình diễn sang tăng cường hỗ trợ quá trình nghiên cứu trong chương trình đào tạo EFL.

Từ khoá: Phân tích hiện tượng học diễn giải (IPA), nghiên cứu khoa học ở bậc đại học, cộng đồng thực hành, đầu tư và cộng đồng tưởng tượng, sinh viên Việt Nam

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Universities worldwide increasingly require undergraduate research projects because such experiences are recognized as meaningful practices that foster deep learning and student success (NSSE Annual Results, 2022). This shift reflects a broader move from passive learning, where students listen to lectures, to inquiry-based learning, where students actively create knowledge through research (Healey & Jenkins, 2022). Advocates argue that engaging in research develops critical thinking, problem-solving, and autonomy, strengthening the teaching-research nexus and preparing graduates for complex professional roles (British Academy, 2022). However, despite these ideals, many undergraduates perceive research as an academic hurdle rather than a meaningful professional tool, particularly when its relevance to future careers is unclear (Wishkoski et al., 2022). This tension underscores the need for pedagogical strategies that connect research tasks to authentic disciplinary and vocational contexts.

Vietnam's higher education system has undergone significant reform in recent years, driven by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) mandate to enhance research productivity and improve global university rankings (Tran & Do, 2022). This national push has introduced a double mandate for students. They must develop research competence and

simultaneously improve English proficiency, a goal reinforced by the National Foreign Languages Project (Le & Le, 2022). These dual expectations create a high-pressure environment where undergraduates are not only learning to conduct research but also doing so in a foreign language, which potentially amplifies cognitive and emotional demands (Vu et al., 2023). Understanding this unique context is essential for designing support systems that address both linguistic and scholarly challenges.

Existing research on students' attitudes toward research is largely quantitative, relying on surveys and correlations which capture trends but overlook the complexity of lived experiences (Wishkoski et al., 2022). Although interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) can reveal how individuals make sense of educational challenges, its use in higher education remains limited (Robinson & Williams, 2024). Scholars therefore call for qualitative, idiographic approaches to better understand students' meaning-making processes (Nizza et al., 2021). Moreover, most studies focus on Western contexts, neglecting EFL settings like Vietnam, where TESOL undergraduates face a dual challenge of conducting research in English and coping with linguistic and pedagogical constraints (Le & Le, 2022; Vu et al., 2023). This lack of context-specific inquiry creates a gap in understanding how language and institutional demands intersect. To address this, the present study adopts IPA to explore the lived experiences of Vietnamese students conducting research in English. The study's qualitative insights offer contextually relevant implications for bilingual teacher education.

1.2. Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. *How does the requirement to conduct and present research in English shape the students' sense of intellectual agency and self-efficacy?*
2. *How do students make sense of the institutional requirements in relation to their perceived competence?*
3. *How does the experience of the Report Writing course influence the students' investment in their imagined community of future TESOL professionals?*

2. Theoretical Framework

To investigate how Vietnamese undergraduates perceive research as a component of their academic identity, this study adopts a sociocultural perspective. This research understands identity as fluid, dynamic, and constructed through social interaction and language use. Consequently, the study is underpinned by two complementary theoretical lenses, including Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice (CoP) and Norton's (2000, 2013) theory of identity and investment in language learning. The CoP framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991) allows for the examination of the social and professional dimensions of the research experience, while Norton's (2000, 2013) theories illuminate the linguistic and aspirational dimensions. They enable a holistic understanding of how Vietnamese TESOL students construct their academic identities amidst the pressures of high-stakes undergraduate research.

2.1. Communities of Practice and Legitimate Peripheral Participation

The primary framework for understanding the professional development of the participants is the communities of practice (CoP) model (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999). A community of practice is defined as a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

Within this framework, the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) is

central to this study. LPP describes the process by which newcomers (the students) become experienced members of a community (researchers and TESOL professionals). The undergraduate students currently stand at the periphery of the academic community. They are novices attempting to master the shared repertoire of the community, specifically, the academic discourse, the 50-page report format, and the conventions of oral defence.

The study investigates the students' struggle for legitimacy. As they engage in the rigorous requirements of the Report Writing course, they are negotiating their right to belong. Success in the course moves them toward full participation. Failure or alienation keeps them marginalized. By using the CoP lens, this study can analyse whether students view the research process as a meaningful entry into the professional TESOL community or as an alienating practice that distances them from their desired professional selves.

2.2. Identity, Investment, and Imagined Communities

Given that the research is conducted in English, which is a foreign language for all participants, the study also draws upon Bonny Norton's (2000, 2013) theories of identity in language education. Norton challenges the traditional psychological concept of motivation and proposes the sociological construct of Investment.

The concept of investment captures the complex relationship between the language learner and the changing social world. If a student invests in the target language (English academic writing), they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources (e.g., scholarships, prestige, career advancement). This study uses investment to explore why some students embrace the arduous 50-page requirement while others resist it.

Norton (2001) argues that students' investment is often driven by their affiliation with imagined communities, which are groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination. For some participants, their imagined community may be the global network of international scholars. Thus, they view the research course as vital. For others, their imagined community may be local high school teachers in Vietnam where research is less emphasized. Therefore, they may view the English research requirement as irrelevant to their future identity.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Site and Setting

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Thu Dau Mot University in Ho Chi Minh City, focusing on the compulsory fourth-year course Report Writing. This course imposes rigorous academic demands: research is conducted entirely in English, students must produce a 50-page paper, and they participate in a mid-term oral defence of their work. These requirements create a high-pressure environment where students' professional identities are publicly performed and negotiated. As an intensity sampling context, this setting brings issues of identity, anxiety, and professional development to the forefront.

3.2. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009, 2021). In accordance with IPA protocols, this study utilizes purposive homogeneous sampling. IPA requires a small, carefully defined sample to ensure that all participants share a specific lived experience, allowing the researcher

to analyze convergence and divergence within that shared context. The sample consists of 10 participants. All participants met the following criteria:

- Currently enrolled as fourth-year undergraduate students majoring in English Language.
- Actively participating in the Report Writing course during the semester of data collection.
- Completed the mid-term oral defence.

Participants were recruited via an open invitation sent to course sections. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their participation would have no bearing on their course grades. Table 1 outlines the participants' characteristics.

Table 1

Participants' Characteristics

Pseudonym	Work mode	English proficiency	Key narrative
1. Minh	Individual	High	Deeply engaged with theory but struggles with the 50-page constraint Experiences tension between intellectual ambition and imposed structure
2. Lan	Group (3)	High	Highly confident but perfectionist Experiences anxiety tied to control and professional image
3. Tuan	Pair	Moderate	Views research as irrelevant to teaching Strong resistance to researcher identity
4. Phuc	Pair	Moderate-high	Challenges traditional academic norms Positions himself as a modern educator resisting institutional expectations
5. Vy	Group (3)	Moderate	Strong reading ability but severe speaking anxiety Feels judged by English performance rather than ideas
6. Duc	Pair	Low	Cannot express ideas in English Experiences shame and exclusion during oral defence
7. Ha	Individual	Moderate-low	Struggles with translation from Vietnamese to English Questions her belonging in the field
8. Tram	Group (3)	Moderate	Focuses on managing group conflict rather than research Defines experience as emotional labour rather than academic development
9. Khoa	Group (3)	Moderate	Relies on peers Treats research as a "game" and focuses on presentation performance
10. Yen	Individual	Moderate-high	Experiences identity transformation Develops agency and professional voice

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The primary method of data collection for this study was semi-structured in-depth interviews. An interview schedule (Appendix A) was developed based on the theoretical

framework of Communities of Practice and Investment. A pilot interview was conducted with one non-participant student to refine the questions for clarity and sensitivity (Appendix B).

The interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants and conducted in a private, quiet room within the university library to ensure confidentiality and minimize power distance. Conducted in Vietnamese, each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The field notes were taken immediately following each session to capture non-verbal cues (such as hesitation, tone of voice, or body language) which were essential for the interpretative process.

3.4. Data Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed in the original Vietnamese (mixed with English code-switching) to preserve the original meaning. Only the specific extracts selected for the final report were translated into English, with a focus on conceptual equivalence rather than literal translation. The data analysis followed the idiographic and hermeneutic principles of IPA as outlined by Smith et al. (2021), proceeding through the following six stages, including reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing experiential statements, searching for connections, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases (Appendix C).

Throughout this process, the researcher engaged in the double hermeneutic, and constantly reflected on how his own preconceptions as an academic might have served as a bias. To mitigate this, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the analysis phase (Appendix D).

4. Findings

The analysis of the interview transcripts yielded three group experiential themes that capture the students' lived experience of the Report Writing course. These themes illustrate the complex journey of the English-majors as they navigated the double burden of academic and linguistic demands. The analysis moves from the linguistic struggle (Theme 1) to the performance of identity (Theme 2), and finally to the negotiation of professional membership (Theme 3). The structure of these group experiential themes and their corresponding sub-themes are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Group Experiential Themes and Sub-Themes

Group experiential themes	Sub-themes	Analytical focus
1. The double burden of research	The muted voice	reduction, frustration
	The text as adversary	exhaustion, opacity, hostility
2. The high-stakes performance of identity	The costume of the researcher	faking it, dress-up, fear
	The mid-term defence as judgment	shame, exposure, silence
3. Negotiating membership in the community	Resistance and pragmatism	rejection, utility, real world
	Transformation: research as agency and voice	advocacy, realization, power

4.1. Group Experiential Theme 1. The Double Burden of Research

This group experiential theme encapsulates the double burden described by the students, including the cognitive load of mastering complex research protocols (content) compounded by the struggle to encode and decode these protocols in a foreign language (form). The data

reveal that English proficiency may negatively influence their professional identity, and often leads to feelings of intellectual reduction and alienation.

4.1.1. The Muted Voice

A pervasive sentiment across the cohort was the feeling that their professional identity was “shrunk” when operating in English. Participants described a painful gap between their complex internal thoughts (in Vietnamese) and their simplified external expression (in English). This was particularly acute for Duc, who entered the course with lower self-reported English proficiency. For Duc, the requirement to present his research findings in English did not feel like an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, but rather a mechanism that exposed his linguistic deficits. He described the sensation of his intellect being trapped:

My brain runs fast, you know? In Vietnamese, I can explain why translation methods are important. I can argue. But in the Q&A session, my English is... it acts like a wall. The lecturer asks a deep question, and I have the answer in my heart, but my mouth can only say simple sentences. I feel like a primary school student, not a researcher. It makes me feel small. (Duc)

Duc’s use of the metaphor ‘a wall’ suggests a physical blockage that separates his true self from his performed self. This sentiment was echoed by Vy, who, despite having strong reading skills, experienced the oral defence as a moment of severe dissociation. Her anxiety about “sounding professional” overwhelmed her engagement with her own data on speaking anxiety:

I practiced the script for three days. I memorized every word. But... when I stood there and the PowerPoint started, I felt like I was just a machine making sounds. I wasn’t thinking about my topic anymore. I was just... praying my grammar was correct. If I make a grammar mistake, they will think my research is bad too. It is unfair. (Vy)

Here, Vy reveals a critical anxiety, which is the conflation of linguistic accuracy with intellectual validity. Her fear that a grammar error equates to ‘bad research’ indicates that for these students, the language medium may become a metric of their legitimacy within the academic community.

4.1.2. The Text as Adversary

The double burden also manifested in the students’ engagement with the required literature. The English textbooks and journal articles were often perceived as adversaries to be conquered. This was an emotional struggle against the otherness of the academic voice. Minh, a high-achieving individual researcher, described the physical toll of navigating this literature:

It is exhausting... After one hour of reading the methodology chapter in English, I have to sleep. It drains me. (Minh)

While Minh experienced exhaustion, Tuan experienced alienation. As a student who identifies more as a pragmatic teacher than a scholar, he found the dense English academic prose to be disconnected from his reality. He expressed frustration at the opacity of the language, which he felt was designed to exclude rather than invite:

Why do they write like that? I read a paragraph five times and I still don’t understand the epistemology part. It feels like the authors are trying to show off how much complex English they know. (Tuan)

Tuan’s narrative highlights the barrier to legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). He cannot access the community of practice because the shared repertoire (the language) feels hostile.

4.2. Group Experiential Theme 2. The High-Stakes Performance of Identity

This second group experiential theme examines the performative demands of the course.

The data suggests that for the participants, becoming a researcher was a series of high-pressure ‘performances’ where their legitimacy was publicly tested. Whether standing on the podium during the mid-term defence or struggling to fill the quota of the 50-page final paper, students described a profound dissonance between their internal sense of self (as novices) and the external role they were forced to inhabit (as experts). This theme explores the psychological challenges of this acting, ranging from acute imposter syndrome to strategic cynicism.

4.2.1. The Costume of the Researcher

A recurring pattern across the interviews was the sense that being a researcher was a role one put on, akin to a costume. This was articulated by Vy, whose anxiety regarding the mid-term presentation was rooted in a deep sense of fraudulence. Despite her diligent preparation of the literature review, she felt that the public nature of the defence required a level of authority she did not possess. She described the experience of wearing formal business attire for the presentation as a physical manifestation of this disconnect:

I put on the blazer and the high heels because... that is what a professional looks like. But... I felt that if the lecturer looked closely enough, they would see that there is just... a scared student. (Vy)

This feeling of “faking it” was not limited to the anxious students. Khoa, who relied heavily on his group mates for the written content, approached the presentation as a theatrical performance. For him, the identity of the researcher was not about truth, but about convincing the audience. He openly admitted to the strategic manipulation of his image:

I don't need to know everything... about the data. I just... need to look like I know. If I speak loudly and make eye contact, they believe me. (Khoa)

However, Phuc, the student critical of traditional academia, viewed this performance with disdain, seeing it as a barrier to authentic learning:

We spend more time designing the PowerPoint slides to look academic than we do analyzing the actual interviews. It is all for show. (Phuc)

The narratives of Vy's anxiety and Khoa's strategy reveal that the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is perceived by the students as requiring a specific performance of competence. Whether they fear exposure (Vy) or embrace the artifice (Khoa), the identity of the researcher is experienced as fragile and external.

4.2.2. The Mid-Term Defence as Judgment

The mid-term oral defence was universally experienced as the emotional climax of the course. The participants described this event as a tribunal where their worthiness to belong in the academic community was adjudicated by the lecturer. For Lan, the group leader driven by perfectionism, this event was fraught with the danger of losing face. Her narrative reveals how the group dynamic amplified the stakes of the performance. She felt that her professional identity was being held hostage by the performance of her less proficient group mates. Her description of the Q&A session highlights the intense pressure of maintaining a facade of collective competence:

My heart stopped every time the lecturer looked at my group mates. I was terrified they would say something wrong in English and ruin everything I had built... When the lecturer asked about our sampling method, I instinctively stepped forward to answer, even though... it was not my turn. (Lan)

In contrast, Duc, who struggles with English proficiency, experienced the defence as a public unmasking of his inadequacies. For him, the tribunal was a judgment he had to endure.

His account provides a visceral depiction of the power dynamics at play in the classroom:

The room was so quiet. The lecturer looked at my slide, and asked, “What is your rationale for this?” I froze. I knew the answer [in Vietnamese], but the English words evaporated. At that moment... I knew I didn’t belong there. (Duc)

Both Lan and Duc perceive the lecturers as gatekeepers standing in judgment. The performance of the defence, therefore, becomes a barrier to genuine investment. The goal becomes avoiding shame rather than seeking feedback.

4.3. Group Experiential Theme 3. Negotiating Membership in the Community

The final group experiential theme addresses the “So what?” of the participants’ experience. Drawing on Norton’s (2001) concept of imagined communities, this theme illustrates how students aligned (or failed to align) their current research work with their future professional selves. For some, the course confirmed their exclusion from the academic ivory tower, while for others, it provided the first tangible sense of professional empowerment.

4.3.1. Resistance and Pragmatism

A significant portion of the cohort experienced a conflict between their identity as future teachers and the institutional demand to become researchers. These participants viewed the academic community as distinct from, and often irrelevant to, the practical community of the classroom. Consequently, they engaged in a form of non-participation (Wenger, 1999), performing the necessary tasks to pass the course while internally rejecting the researcher identity.

Tuan, who already works part-time at a local English centre, articulated this rejection most clearly. He viewed the research course as an intrusion on his vocational training. For Tuan, the imagined community he strives to join is one of practical pedagogy, not theoretical inquiry. He expressed a transactional relationship with the course, valuing practical tips over abstract data:

I teach students every evening. They... don’t care about literature reviews. They care if I can help them pass their IELTS exam. (Tuan)

This sentiment of resistance was shared by Phuc, though his skepticism was rooted in a desire for modernization rather than pragmatism alone. Phuc challenged the traditional authority of the academic community, suggesting that the university’s definition of research was outdated. His resistance was not just about utility, but about a clash of values:

The lecturer wants us to write like it is 1990. But the world has changed... Why must I follow these rigid rules? (Phuc)

Both Tuan and Phuc demonstrate a low investment in the researcher identity. They protect their sense of self by positioning the research work as ‘other’. This is external to their core professional values.

4.3.2. Transformation: Research as Agency and Voice

Conversely, for other participants, the arduous process of research facilitated a profound shift from the periphery to the centre of the community. In these cases, the burden of the 50-page paper was reframed as a platform for advocacy. This was evident in the journey of Yen, who focused her research on teacher identity in rural Vietnam.

Initially overwhelmed, Yen found that the data collection process allowed her to articulate the struggles of her own community. The research ceased to be an assignment and became a mission. Her narrative describes a moment of realization where the student identity gave way to the advocate identity:

At the beginning, I just wanted a topic that was easy. But when I interviewed the teachers in my

hometown, everything changed. I heard their stories about low pay and lack of resources, and I felt angry... I realized that if I don't write this report, nobody will know their pain. (Yen)

Similarly, Minh, despite his struggles with the volume of the work, found a sense of validation in the rigorous methodology. For him, the ability to execute a complex study provided the confidence that he belonged in the academic sphere:

When I found a significant correlation in my data, I felt a click... It was the first time I felt I had something real to say. (Minh)

For Yen and Minh, the friction of the course was transformative. It allowed them to move from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation, where they felt entitled to contribute to the field's knowledge base.

5. Discussion

5.1. *English-Medium Research and Students' Intellectual Agency*

Across the cohort, the requirement to conduct and present research in English shaped students' sense of agency in two interlocking ways, including a felt shrinking of intellectual voice, and a conflation of linguistic accuracy with research validity. These patterns are consistent with the first superordinate theme and were expressed most acutely by participants with lower self-reported English proficiency. Interpreted through CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991), English academic discourse functioned as a membership criterion where inability to perform the shared repertoire (e.g., jargon, genre, defence talk) produced marginality rather than movement toward legitimate peripheral participation.

These findings align with research on EFL academic literacy as cognitive load, where higher order reasoning is constrained by working memory demands of EFL production (Kormos, 2023) and the well-established distinction between conversational fluency (BICS) and academic proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2008). The observed negative coupling of anxiety and self-efficacy echoes meta analytic evidence of a strong inverse relation in foreign language learning (Zhou et al., 2023), and the cohort's 'English as filter' experience mirrors global evidence on the manifold costs borne by non-native English speakers in scholarly activities (Amano et al., 2023). In the Vietnamese higher education context, the double mandate (research and English) has been documented, with students reporting simultaneous pressure to meet disciplinary and language demands (Le & Le, 2022), which resonates with our participants' routine code switching behind the scenes to make sense in the first language (L1) before producing 'correct' EFL text.

5.2. *Institutional Performance Demands and Perceived Competence*

The students made sense of institutional requirements (e.g., a 50-page report and an English oral defence) as performative trials of legitimacy rather than formative learning opportunities. Many described the 'costume of the researcher', a form of strategic image management during defences, and an emphasis on page counts over analytical depth. These were signals that assessment design calibrated quantity and performance as proxies for competence. Read through CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the mid-term defence was experienced as a gatekeeping tribunal, not a mentoring exchange. Through investment (2000, 2013), its emotional cost (e.g., shame avoidance, image work) often outweighed perceived learning gains, depressing willingness to engage beyond minimum requirements.

This interpretation nuances global narratives around the teaching-research nexus (TRN) and high impact practices (HIPs). While TRN frameworks argue that research experiences build critical thinking and autonomy (British Academy, 2022), and HIPs are effective when quality

elements like feedback and authenticity are present (NSSE Annual Results, 2022), my cohort's accounts emphasize performance over process, and suggest that when authenticity and formative feedback are thin, undergraduates may experience research as a high stakes hoop rather than a developmental pathway. The perception that 'research feels distant' parallels work showing many students see methods courses as anxiety provoking and initially irrelevant until pedagogy explicitly supports self-concept as researcher (Wishkoski et al., 2022).

5.3. Investment, Imagined Communities, and Identity Transformation

The course influenced students' investment in their imagined TESOL communities along three trajectories (Theme 3), including resistance and pragmatism, membership as social management, and agency transformation. Students whose imagined community is local classroom practice tended to engage in strategic non-participation: doing the minimum to pass while rejecting the scholar identity as ivory tower (Norton's (2000, 2013) investment misalignment). Others framed membership as team navigation, where identity centred on conflict mediation rather than analytic practice. In contrast, the third group reframed research as voice and advocacy, aligning topic and values (e.g., rural teacher identity) and reporting movement from the periphery to empowered participation.

These trajectories cohere with contemporary views of teacher identity as fluid, dynamic, and context-dependent (Banegas, 2023; Hong et al., 2024) and underscore that becoming a teacher-researcher is not linear but negotiated amid sociocultural and institutional forces. They also suggest that the dominance of English in scholarly communication potentially privileges certain identities but constrains others, shaping who imagines themselves as legitimate contributors (Canagarajah, 2024; Flowerdew & Habibie, 2021; Kuteeva & Andersson, 2024). In the Vietnamese reform context, where MOET's push couples research outputs with English proficiency, the double mandate magnifies identity tension, and this explains why the same course may contribute to either alienation or activation depending on students' imagined futures.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

The study shows that Vietnamese undergraduates' transition into research is closely tied to English, creating a double burden where linguistic insecurity is often perceived as intellectual inadequacy. Challenging requirements, such as the oral defence and 50-page paper, potentially compel the students to perform an unfamiliar professional identity and lead to strategic code-switching. The research process therefore empowers some students to achieve transformation and participation, while alienating others who reject the researcher identity in favor of a more practical teaching role.

6.2. Practical Implications

These findings hold significant implications for university curriculum designers and TESOL educators, suggesting that the current institutional emphasis on high-volume output and high-stakes performance may be counterproductive to genuine professional investment. Instead of fostering deep engagement, the rigid constraints often encourage performativity and cynicism. Therefore, institutions should consider supporting the research process with a greater emphasis on process over product, perhaps by reducing page limits to prioritize quality of thought or by offering bilingual mentorship opportunities that validate the students' L1 voice. Furthermore, lecturers need to explicitly address the emotional and linguistic dimensions of

research anxiety, creating safe spaces for low-stakes rehearsal to help students bridge the gap between their student identity and their emerging professional voice without the fear of immediate judgment.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

This study has limitations typical of qualitative research. The small, homogeneous sample (10 students from one university) limits generalizability, making findings context-specific. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data and interpretative analysis introduces subjectivity, while the high-pressure course context may have intensified negative experiences. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to track whether research identity persists into professional practice. Comparative studies across institutions or EFL contexts could examine how factors such as L1 use influence agency. Mixed-methods approaches may also help quantify issues like research anxiety and offer broader evidence for curriculum development.

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APPENDICES

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