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CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON ASSESSMENT IDENTITY: VIETNAMESE EFL LECTURERS' FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN THE MEKONG DELTA

Ly Thi Bich Phuong*, Phuong Hoang Yen

Can Tho University, Campus II, 3/2 Street, Ninh Kieu Ward, Can Tho City, Viet Nam

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Abstract: This study examines how contextual factors shape the assessment identity of Vietnamese EFL university lecturers and the adaptive strategies they employ in formative assessment practices, drawing on the frameworks of Looney et al. (2018) and Xu and Brown (2016). The semi-structured interviews with 15 EFL lecturers from the Mekong Delta region were analyzed thematically within a qualitative research design, and two interrelated themes were identified: (1) assessment identities shaped by resource constraints, workload pressures, institutional policy tensions, and cultural values - particularly face-saving principles - that fundamentally affect feedback delivery and student interactions; and (2) lecturers' professional resourcefulness in employing diverse methodologies, creative task design, selective technology integration, and student-responsive differentiation to enhance assessment effectiveness despite contextual limitations. Critically, the findings extend Looney et al.'s (2018) framework by demonstrating that cultural competence constitutes an integral additional dimension of assessment identity in Vietnamese EFL contexts, with assessment identity developing through continuous negotiation between pedagogical ideals and contextual realities, characterized by professional agency and creative problem-solving. These findings contribute to understanding professional identity development in resource-constrained settings and offer implications for designing professional development programs that build on lecturers' practical strengths, address contextual adaptation strategies, develop cultural competence, and foster collaborative learning communities in similar EFL higher education contexts.

Keywords: assessment identity, formative assessment, EFL lecturers, cultural competence, Mekong Delta

* Corresponding author.

Email address: ltpbphuong@ctu.edu.vn

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ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA BỐI CẢNH ĐẾN DANH TÍNH ĐÁNH GIÁ: THỰC HÀNH ĐÁNH GIÁ QUÁ TRÌNH CỦA GIẢNG VIÊN EFL VIỆT NAM TẠI ĐỒNG BẰNG SÔNG CỬU LONG

Lý Thị Bích Phượng, Phương Hoàng Yến

Đại học Cần Thơ, Khu 2, Đường 3/2, Phường Ninh Kiều, Cần Thơ, Việt Nam

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này xem xét cách các yếu tố bối cảnh định hình danh tính đánh giá (assessment identity) của giảng viên EFL tại các trường đại học Việt Nam và các chiến lược thích ứng mà họ sử dụng trong thực hành đánh giá quá trình, dựa trên khung lý thuyết của Looney và cộng sự (2018), và Xu và Brown (2016). Sử dụng thiết kế nghiên cứu định tính, dữ liệu từ các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với 15 giảng viên EFL tại vùng Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long được phân tích theo chủ đề, cho thấy hai chủ đề có mối quan hệ tương hỗ: (1) danh tính đánh giá bị định hình bởi sự hạn chế về nguồn lực, áp lực khối lượng công việc, mâu thuẫn trong chính sách thể chế và các giá trị văn hóa - đặc biệt là nguyên tắc giữ thể diện - vốn tác động sâu sắc đến việc cung cấp phản hồi và tương tác với sinh viên; và (2) tính chủ động và linh hoạt trong giảng dạy (professional resourcefulness) của giảng viên thể hiện qua việc vận dụng đa dạng các phương pháp, thiết kế nhiệm vụ sáng tạo, tích hợp công nghệ có chọn lọc và điều chỉnh dạy học linh hoạt theo nhu cầu người học nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả đánh giá bất chấp những hạn chế về bối cảnh. Đáng chú ý, các phát hiện mở rộng khung lý thuyết của Looney và cộng sự (2018) bằng cách chứng minh rằng năng lực văn hóa là một chiều kích bổ sung không thể tách rời của danh tính đánh giá trong bối cảnh EFL tại Việt Nam, với danh tính đánh giá hình thành qua quá trình thương lượng (negotiation) liên tục giữa lý tưởng sư phạm và thực tiễn bối cảnh, đặc trưng bởi tính chủ thể nghề nghiệp (professional agency) và năng lực giải quyết vấn đề sáng tạo. Các phát hiện này góp phần làm sáng tỏ sự phát triển danh tính nghề nghiệp trong môi trường hạn chế nguồn lực, đồng thời gợi mở hàm ý cho việc thiết kế chương trình phát triển nghề nghiệp dựa trên thế mạnh thực tiễn của giảng viên, hướng đến các chiến lược thích ứng bối cảnh, phát triển năng lực văn hóa và thúc đẩy cộng đồng học tập hợp tác trong các bối cảnh giáo dục đại học EFL tương tự.

Từ khóa: danh tính đánh giá, đánh giá quá trình, giảng viên EFL, năng lực văn hóa, Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long

1. Introduction

Assessment practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) higher education have undergone significant transformation, with formative assessment becoming central to effective language instruction (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Heritage, 2010). However, the effectiveness of formative assessment implementation depends critically on how educators understand and enact their assessment roles within their specific educational contexts (Xu & Brown, 2016). Understanding how contextual factors influence educators' assessment identities is essential for improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010; Panadero et al., 2017).

In Vietnamese higher education, particularly within the Mekong Delta region, EFL university lecturers face complex challenges in implementing formative assessment practices. These challenges stem from multiple sources: resource constraints that limit assessment options, institutional policies that emphasize summative evaluation over formative approaches, and cultural

values — including face-saving principles — that shape classroom interaction patterns (Bui, 2023; Phan & Hamid, 2018). Current assessment approaches often create tension between institutional requirements and pedagogical best practices, while lecturers navigate the dual demands of meeting standardized assessment criteria and addressing diverse student needs (Tran & Nguyen, 2018).

The interplay between contextual influences and assessment identity remains underexplored in Vietnamese EFL contexts. While effective assessment implementation requires alignment among lecturer beliefs, knowledge, and practical capabilities, limited research has examined how EFL university lecturers in the Mekong Delta region develop and maintain their assessment identity amidst contextual pressures. Furthermore, professional development initiatives require evidence-based understanding of lecturer needs and contextual challenges to be truly effective (Pastore & Andrade, 2019; Popham, 2010).

This study addresses the identified research gap by investigating how Vietnamese EFL university lecturers navigate contextual pressures while maintaining effective formative assessment practices. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Looney et al. (2018) and Xu and Brown (2016), this research examines the complex relationship between assessment identity and contextual factors. Looney et al.'s (2018) framework conceptualizes teacher assessment identity through six interconnected dimensions: knowledge, conceptions, self-efficacy, emotional response, reported practice, and contextual factors, providing a systematic lens for examining how lecturers develop their professional identity as assessors. Meanwhile, Xu and Brown's framework offers insights into how assessment conceptions influence classroom practices.

The study employs a qualitative research design to examine how contextual realities and professional responses interact to shape assessment practice in Vietnamese higher education. The following research questions guide the inquiry:

1. *How do contextual factors shape EFL university lecturers' assessment identity in formative assessment practices?*
2. *What adaptive strategies do EFL university lecturers employ to navigate contextual constraints while sustaining effective formative assessment practices?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Formative Assessment in EFL Higher Education

Formative assessment serves as a cornerstone of effective teaching and learning in higher education, particularly in EFL contexts where language acquisition requires continuous feedback and adjustment (Guadu & Boersma, 2018). Unlike summative assessment, which evaluates learning outcomes at specific points, formative assessment involves ongoing processes that inform instruction and support learning development (Bachman & Damböck, 2018; Black & Wiliam, 2009). In EFL contexts, formative assessment encompasses various practices including classroom observations, peer feedback, self-assessment, and teacher-student conferences, enabling lecturers to monitor student progress, identify learning difficulties, and adjust instruction accordingly (Carless, 2015; Laveault & Allal, 2016). Research demonstrates that lecturers' theoretical understanding of formative assessment principles directly shapes their classroom practices, with gaps between knowledge and implementation often arising from contextual factors (Mimirinis, 2019; Sabah & Du, 2018). However, the effectiveness of implementation depends critically on how lecturers conceptualize their roles and navigate institutional and cultural constraints (Saefurrohman & Balinas, 2016; Ulla, 2024).

2.2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.2.1. Looney et al.'s Assessment Identity Framework

Looney et al. (2018) developed a comprehensive framework for understanding teacher assessment identity through six interconnected dimensions that collectively shape assessment practices. The knowledge dimension encompasses lecturers' understanding of assessment principles, theories, and practices, including both procedural knowledge (how to conduct assessments) and conceptual knowledge (understanding assessment purposes and principles) (DeLuca et al., 2010; Guadu & Boersma, 2018). The conceptions dimension refers to lecturers' beliefs about assessment purposes and practices, ranging from viewing assessment as measurement to understanding it as a tool for learning improvement (Guo, 2025; Yates & Johnston, 2018). Studies demonstrate that lecturer conceptions significantly shape assessment design, implementation, and feedback provision (Pastore, 2023; Penuel & Shepard, 2016).

The self-efficacy dimension examines lecturers' confidence in their assessment capabilities, with higher confidence correlating with more innovative and student-centered approaches (Pastore & Andrade, 2019; Yan & Brown, 2017). The emotional response dimension investigates lecturers' feelings and attitudes toward assessment responsibilities, including comfort with assessment methods, anxiety about implementation, and satisfaction with practices (Ly & Yen, 2025). Research shows that positive emotional responses facilitate assessment innovation, while negative emotions may lead to traditional, low-risk approaches (Frenzel et al., 2016). The reported practice dimension examines actual assessment implementation strategies, offering insights into how assessment identity manifests in classroom practice (Adie, 2017). Finally, the contextual factors dimension considers institutional, cultural, and policy-related influences on assessment practices, recognizing that environmental factors, professional development opportunities, and cultural norms shape assessment identity development (Looney et al., 2018; Ölmezer-öztürk & Aydın, 2019).

2.2.2. Xu and Brown's Assessment Conceptions Framework

Complementing Looney et al.'s (2018) framework, Xu and Brown (2016) propose a framework examining how teacher assessment conceptions influence classroom practices. Their model identifies four assessment purposes: improvement of teaching and learning, making students accountable, making schools accountable, and student accountability for their own learning (Guadu & Boersma, 2018). Research applying this framework demonstrates that lecturers holding improvement-oriented conceptions implement more formative assessment practices, while those emphasizing accountability adopt more summative approaches (Brown & Gao, 2015; Brown & Harris, 2014). Across Asian higher-education contexts, including Vietnam, formative assessment research consistently reveals concrete gaps between formative ideals and actual classroom implementation (Nguyen & Khairani, 2017; Younas et al., 2025; Yu, 2023). To address these gaps and support learning-oriented practice amid exam-driven accountability pressures, the literature advocates targeted professional development and institutional supports (Cao & Pham, 2025).

2.3. Contextual Influences on Assessment Practices in Vietnamese EFL Education

Contextual factors significantly shape how EFL lecturers implement formative assessment (FA) practices in Vietnamese higher education. Policy environments that prioritize standardized testing and summative evaluation create persistent tension with FA principles, underscoring the need for learning-oriented assessment approaches to be supported by

professional development and institutional structures (Nguyen & Khairani, 2017; Pham & Nguyen, 2020). In addition, resource constraints, including limited access to technology, insufficient professional development opportunities, and large class sizes, pose substantial barriers to the effective adoption of FA in Vietnam (Nguyen & Khairani, 2017). The Vietnamese context indicates heterogeneity in student populations and English proficiency, complicating FA implementation and highlighting the need for context-sensitive strategies (Phuong et al., 2024; Vu & Peters, 2020).

Cultural and institutional factors further influence FA practices. Regional research on FA in Asia highlights how feedback norms, authority structures, and expectations around teacher-led assessment can shape the design and delivery of FA in contexts like Vietnam, reinforcing the importance of assessment literacy and targeted professional development (Nguyen & Khairani, 2017). Moreover, findings from studies focused on Vietnamese FA practices emphasize the role of teacher beliefs and university policy in shaping the integration of self- and peer-assessment approaches into language teaching and learning activities (Phuong et al., 2024). These contextual dynamics - policy constraints, resource limitations, student diversity, and cultural norms - collectively create a complex landscape where lecturers navigate the balance between formative aims and accountability requirements (Frenzel et al., 2016; Nguyen & Khairani, 2017).

2.4. Adaptive Strategies in Formative Assessment

Despite contextual constraints, research shows that effective EFL lecturers employ various adaptive strategies to maintain quality formative assessment practices (Lei & Lei, 2025). Task adaptation represents a primary strategy, with lecturers modifying, simplifying, or reordering assessment activities to suit student needs and contextual limitations (Abdullateef & Muhammedzein, 2021; Tomlinson, 2022). This includes adding culturally relevant examples, deleting inappropriate content, and restructuring tasks to better align with students' proficiency levels (Graves & Xu, 2000). Lecturers also utilize technology to enhance assessment effectiveness, even with limited resources, by incorporating digital tools that facilitate feedback provision and student engagement (Harmer, 2001).

Collaborative approaches represent another important strategy. Professional learning communities enable lecturers to share experiences, resources, and innovative practices, fostering collective problem-solving for contextual challenges (Greeno & Gresalfi, 2008; Wenger, 1998). Research indicates that peer collaboration enhances assessment literacy and supports identity development through mutual learning and resource sharing (Tran, 2022). Additionally, lecturers employ culturally responsive assessment strategies that acknowledge face-saving principles while maintaining assessment integrity, such as providing private feedback and emphasizing improvement over deficiency (Gay, 2018). These strategies demonstrate how lecturers actively mediate between their assessment identity and contextual constraints, developing professional agency in challenging educational environments (Lee et al., 2023).

2.5. Research Gap and Study Contribution

Previous research has examined various aspects of formative assessment in EFL contexts, including assessment literacy development (Pastore & Andrade, 2019; Hidri, 2020), the impact of professional development on assessment practices (Bazvand et al., 2025), and the relationship between teacher beliefs and practices (Anderson, 2003; Brookhart, 2004). In Vietnamese contexts, studies have investigated challenges in implementing communicative language teaching (Lam et al., 2021; Vu Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021), student perceptions of feedback (Glazzard &

Stones, 2019; Van der Kleij & Lipnevich, 2021), and the impact of large class sizes on assessment practices (Monks & Schmidt, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2015). However, limited research has systematically examined how EFL university lecturers in the Mekong Delta region develop and maintain their assessment identity while navigating specific contextual constraints.

Most existing studies focus on either assessment challenges or practices in isolation, without comprehensively exploring the interplay between assessment identity dimensions and contextual factors (Koh et al., 2018; Yan & Pastore, 2022). Furthermore, while Looney et al.'s (2018) framework has been applied in various international contexts, its manifestation in Vietnamese EFL higher education remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by integrating Looney et al.'s (2018) and Xu and Brown's (2016) frameworks to examine how Vietnamese EFL university lecturers develop assessment identity and employ adaptive strategies amidst contextual pressures. By focusing specifically on the Mekong Delta region, this research provides contextualized insights into the complex relationship between assessment identity and practice in resource-constrained settings, contributing to both assessment literacy theory and professional development practice in Vietnamese higher education contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore how contextual factors influence assessment identities of Vietnamese EFL university lecturers in the Mekong Delta region. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for in-depth examination of lecturers' experiences, perceptions, and adaptive strategies as they navigate formative assessment within their specific cultural and institutional contexts. This exploration is framed by the assessment identity framework proposed by Looney et al. (2018) and the assessment conceptions framework developed by Xu and Brown (2016), which provide a lens for examining the dynamic relationships between lecturers' assessment identities and the contextual factors influencing their assessment practices.

3.2. Participants

This study involved 15 Vietnamese EFL university lecturers from higher education institutions across the Mekong Delta region. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation across key dimensions relevant to assessment identity development, including teaching experience, educational qualifications, and institutional contexts.

The selection criteria required participants to: (1) be currently employed as full-time EFL lecturers at accredited universities in the Mekong Delta region; (2) have at least two years of teaching experience to ensure familiarity with institutional assessment practices and formative assessment implementation; (3) be actively involved in classroom formative assessment activities; and (4) voluntarily agree to participate and provide informed consent. The sampling strategy deliberately included representation from both public and private universities to capture diverse institutional contexts that might influence assessment identity development. Participants varied in their years of teaching experience, ranging from novice lecturers with 2-5 years of experience to veteran educators with over 15 years of teaching, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of how assessment identity evolves across career stages. Educational backgrounds included lecturers holding master's degrees and doctoral degrees, reflecting the typical qualifications of EFL university instructors in the region.

3.3. Instrument

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument. The interview protocol was developed based on Looney et al.'s (2018) six dimensions of assessment identity (knowledge, conceptions, self-efficacy, emotional response, reported practice, and contextual factors) and Xu and Brown's (2016) framework on assessment conceptions. The protocol was organized around three interconnected themes to explore how contextual influences shape lecturers' assessment identities and practices.

Theme 1: Assessment-Related Beliefs and Conceptions. This theme explored lecturers' fundamental beliefs, principles, and philosophies regarding formative assessment and the ways contextual factors influence their assessment decision-making. Questions included: (1) What are your beliefs about classroom formative assessment in the EFL context? (2) What influences your decisions when assessing students? (3) In your opinion, what are the most important aspects of being a good assessor as an EFL university lecturer in the Mekong Delta context?

Theme 2: Assessment-Related Feelings and Contextual Challenges. This theme concentrated on the emotional aspects and contextual challenges that EFL university lecturers face in implementing formative assessment practices. Questions included: (4) Describe a time when you faced a difficult situation while assessing students and how you dealt with it. (5) How do you make sure your assessments are fair and unbiased given the contextual constraints you face? (6) How do cultural values, particularly face-saving principles, affect your feedback delivery and assessment practices?

Theme 3: Assessment-Related Practices and Adaptive Strategies. This theme examined the practical aspects of assessment implementation and the strategies lecturers employ to navigate contextual constraints. Questions included: (7) What kinds of assessments do you usually use in formative assessment, and why? (8) How do you use feedback to help students learn and improve despite time and resource constraints? (9) How do you change or adapt your assessments to meet the different needs and learning styles of your students? (10) What specific strategies do you employ to overcome resource constraints, large class sizes, or other institutional limitations? (11) How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your assessment methods? (12) How has professional development impacted your assessment knowledge, skills, and identity?

The interview questions were designed to elicit rich, detailed responses, allowing participants to share their experiences, perspectives, and adaptive strategies regarding formative assessment within contextual constraints. The protocol was piloted with three EFL lecturers not included in the main study. Following the pilot, questions were refined for clarity. The piloting process confirmed that the 45- 60-minute interview duration was appropriate for covering all questions adequately.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered over a three-month period from September to November 2024. Potential participants were first approached through email invitations that outlined the purpose and procedures of the study. Lecturers who expressed interest were provided with detailed information sheets and consent forms. After informed consent had been obtained, individual interview appointments were scheduled at times and venues that were convenient for participants.

Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese to ensure participants could express their thoughts naturally and fully. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. During interviews, the researcher took field notes to capture non-verbal cues and relevant contextual information. After each session,

the recording and notes were reviewed to identify areas that required clarification or follow-up, when necessary, brief follow-up inquiries were sent to participants via email.

3.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze patterns within the interview data, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis adopted a hybrid inductive-deductive approach. The primary orientation was inductive: themes were allowed to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' own accounts of their experiences. At the same time, the theoretical frameworks of Looney et al. (2018) and Xu and Brown (2016) functioned as sensitizing conceptual lenses during the later stages of theme development and interpretation, providing a deductive frame through which emergent themes were refined and theorized. This combined approach enabled both responsiveness to the richness of participants' narratives and systematic engagement with the study's theoretical foundations. First, the researcher transcribed all interviews and read the transcripts multiple times to achieve familiarization with the data. Second, initial codes were generated systematically across the entire dataset, with attention to features relevant to the research questions. Third, codes were collated into potential themes that captured significant patterns related to assessment identity and contextual influences.

Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined through iterative examination to ensure internal coherence and distinction between themes. Fifth, themes were defined and named to clearly represent the data patterns they captured. The analysis revealed two interrelated themes: (1) assessment identities shaped by contextual factors including resource constraints, institutional demands, and cultural values such as face-saving principles; and (2) lecturers' adaptive strategies involving diverse methodologies, technology integration, and task modification to enhance assessment effectiveness despite contextual limitations. Finally, the researcher produced the analysis by selecting compelling extract examples and relating the analysis back to the research questions and theoretical frameworks.

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, inter-coder reliability was established through independent double-coding of a randomly selected subset of the data. A trained second coder, familiar with qualitative research and the study's theoretical frameworks, independently coded approximately 20% of the interview transcripts (three transcripts) using the same codebook developed by the primary researcher. The two sets of codes were then compared, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated to quantify inter-coder agreement, yielding a value of .82, which reflects strong agreement and confirms the reliability of the coding scheme (Landis & Koch, 1977). To further enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted with five participants who reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of interpretations derived from their interviews.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written informed consent after receiving comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process by assigning pseudonyms to participants and removing identifying information from transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected computer accessible only to the research team. Data will be retained for five years following publication and then securely destroyed in accordance with university research data management policies.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of interview data from 15 EFL university lecturers revealed two interrelated themes that illuminate how contextual factors shape assessment identities and the adaptive strategies lecturers employ to navigate contextual constraints in the Mekong Delta region.

4.1. Theme 1: Assessment Identities Shaped by Contextual Factors

All 15 participants reported that contextual factors profoundly shaped how they understood and enacted their roles as assessors, manifesting across three interrelated sub-themes: resource constraints and workload pressures, institutional policy tensions, and cultural values centered on face-saving principles.

4.1.1. Resource Constraints and Workload Pressures

Large class sizes emerged as the most frequently cited barrier, with all 15 participants teaching between 35 and 45 students per class. These conditions directly constrained the range and depth of formative assessment approaches lecturers felt they could realistically implement, creating a persistent gap between their pedagogical ideals and classroom practice. Teacher 3 captured this tension directly: *“The only difficulty is the time spent on feedback - sometimes I cannot implement it synchronously for each student due to quite large class sizes.”* Teacher 13 elaborated further: *“Perhaps large class size is the biggest difficulty when I implement my assessment activities because I cannot observe or record in the most objective way students’ participation or contributions, their progress in the learning process.”* Teacher 12 similarly reflected: *“The first thing I immediately think of is class size as too many learners will affect assessment work. If teaching and assessing too many students, it will take a lot of time.”*

Heavy teaching loads compounded these challenges. Teacher 9 described how the number of classes directly determined which assessment methods were viable: *“When I have a relatively small number of classes in a semester, I consider choosing the Learning Diary format... However, in semesters when I have many large classes with over 40 students, I have to choose assessment methods that ensure I can review and give feedback to all students, so portfolio is not often my choice.”* Teacher 4 offered a concrete illustration: *“Now in one semester I teach 3 classes, each class has 40 students, total 120 students - how can I have enough time to read all students’ diaries from each class session?”* These accounts demonstrate that resource and workload constraints did not merely inconvenience lecturers but fundamentally redefined what they perceived as possible, recalibrating their assessment identity around pragmatic sustainability rather than pedagogical ideals alone.

4.1.2. Institutional Policy Tensions

Eleven of the 15 participants described conflicts between their professional assessment values and institutional policies that constrained their autonomy as assessors. Course failure regulations represented a particularly salient source of tension. Teacher 11 expressed deep professional frustration: *“I’m definitely not very satisfied. Because I am aware that I may not always accurately judge students’ true competency... according to regulations, I would not allow pupils to fail the course provided they attended lessons on a regular basis.”* This policy undermined Teacher 11’s ability to maintain standards she considered integral to her assessment identity.

Departmental examinations imposed by external bodies created a further layer of tension. Teacher 12 articulated how this removed assessment ownership: *“The subject I teach has final exams organized by department, not by me... It also affects my classroom assessment*

because I'm not quite sure that the final assessment is completely compatible with my strategic assessment goals in class." These accounts reveal that institutional policy tensions did not merely create practical difficulties; they challenged lecturers' sense of professional autonomy and coherence as assessors, requiring ongoing negotiation between imposed requirements and personal assessment beliefs.

4.1.3. Cultural Values and Face-Saving Principles

Thirteen participants discussed how Vietnamese cultural values, particularly face-saving principles, fundamentally shaped their assessment identity by determining how, when, and to whom feedback could be appropriately delivered. Rather than treating cultural values as external constraints, these lecturers had deeply internalized them as core professional commitments. Teacher 4 described his systematic approach: *"I give feedback according to the principle of face-saving for learners — don't make learners lose face. For example, if I write a sentence needing feedback on the board, if it's wrong in meaning, I ask students, 'How can this sentence be better in terms of ideas?'"* This reframing of correction as collaborative inquiry exemplifies how cultural competence shaped not just feedback delivery but the very design of assessment interactions.

Teacher 5 expressed a similar philosophy, explicitly communicating the cultural reasoning behind her feedback approach to students: *"I told my students that I give feedback here not to make you lose your face or point out your bad points, but I just want you to recognize the areas that need to improve with my suggestions."* These accounts demonstrate that face-saving was not experienced as a constraint limiting assessment quality, but as a dimension of professional competence that shaped how lecturers conceptualized effective formative feedback in their cultural context.

4.2. Theme 2: Lecturers' Resourcefulness and Adaptive Strategies

Rather than passively accepting contextual limitations, all participants demonstrated remarkable professional resourcefulness in sustaining formative assessment practices despite constraints. Four distinct adaptive strategies emerged from the data: collaborative and peer-based approaches, selective technology integration, culturally responsive feedback strategies, and differentiated student-responsive assessment.

4.2.1. Collaborative and Peer-Based Approaches

All participants employed collaborative approaches as a primary strategy for managing large class sizes while maintaining assessment quality. By shifting feedback responsibilities onto students themselves, lecturers distributed the assessment workload and simultaneously enhanced the pedagogical value of the process. Teacher 4 articulated the underlying philosophy: *"Students learn from each other. I definitely don't correct it myself for students; then learners don't do anything."* Teacher 11 described a more structured peer feedback system: *"Later, I usually have students give feedback to each other according to criteria I provide. For example, when Group 1 presents, the other groups provide feedback, and then the teacher gives general comments to all groups."* This orchestration of peer and instructor feedback demonstrates sophisticated understanding of assessment as a shared learning community practice, enabling comprehensive formative feedback that would be impossible for a single lecturer to provide individually across 40-plus students.

4.2.2. Selective Technology Integration

Eight participants strategically integrated digital tools to extend the reach and efficiency of their feedback practices without proportionally increasing their workload. Teacher 9

described a deliberate format choice that enabled individualized written feedback at scale: *“Usually I choose the format because working on Google Doc files allows commenting. I won’t edit the diary content, but I’ll comment... some parts will be corrective feedback, some parts are in suggestion form.”* Teacher 12 similarly adopted e-portfolios through Google Classroom as a practical solution: *“I also use e-portfolios more than traditional portfolios to collect student assignments or products after they submit them on Google Classroom... it helps me save time.”* These technology choices were not arbitrary; they reflected deliberate pedagogical judgments about which digital tools preserved the formative value of feedback while remaining sustainable across large classes. This selective, purpose-driven integration illustrates how lecturers developed digital assessment competence as a direct response to contextual constraints.

4.2.3. Culturally Responsive Feedback Strategies

Participants developed culturally responsive assessment strategies that acknowledged face-saving principles while maintaining assessment integrity. These strategies represented not a compromise of assessment standards but a sophisticated adaptation of feedback practice to the cultural realities of the Vietnamese classroom. Teacher 6 described a strengths-first approach: *“Usually I praise and tell students, ‘Thank you for completing the product. And I tell you that if it were me, I couldn’t do it like you.’... But then there will be things that need a little more improvement.”* This deliberate sequencing - affirmation before correction - enabled Teacher 6 to deliver substantive formative feedback while preserving the relational trust essential to effective assessment in face-saving cultures. Teacher 4 extended this principle by embedding correction within collaborative inquiry, asking students to improve sentences collectively rather than identifying individual errors publicly, thereby transforming potentially face-threatening correction into a shared learning activity that maintained both pedagogical rigour and student dignity.

4.2.4. Differentiated, Student-Responsive Assessment

Twelve participants described adapting their assessment approaches to the diverse proficiency levels, learning styles, and needs of their students, despite institutional pressures toward standardization. Teacher 15 articulated the underlying principle: *“According to me, it depends on students’ level, their learning capacity, or whether that lesson is too difficult; then, depending on the lesson, we choose appropriate activities and specific questions that help to check students’ comprehension of the lesson.”* Teacher 2 highlighted the particular importance of maintaining authoritative teacher feedback for certain learner profiles: *“For students who study seriously, they really need teacher feedback. Because when their classmates correct their work, some students disagree with their classmates’ corrections and comments.”* This nuanced understanding of when peer feedback is insufficient reflects the kind of context-sensitive professional judgment that characterizes strong assessment identity. Collectively, these differentiation strategies reveal lecturers actively exercising professional agency - making deliberate, student-centred assessment decisions within, rather than despite, their constrained contexts.

5. Discussion

Addressing research question 1, the findings demonstrate that contextual factors function as fundamental shapers of assessment identity across three interrelated dimensions, corroborating and extending Looney et al.’s (2018) framework. The resource constraints and workload pressures arising from large class sizes - with lecturers managing up to 120 students across multiple classes per semester - directly constrained which assessment approaches were

viable, compelling lecturers to continuously recalibrate their professional self-conception as assessors around pragmatic sustainability. This aligns with Looney et al.'s (2018) contextual factors dimension, which recognizes that environmental conditions shape the manifestation of assessment identity. The institutional policy tensions identified by eleven participants - particularly the conflicts between course failure regulations and lecturers' professional judgment about student competency - further illustrate how assessment identity develops not through unconstrained expression of pedagogical ideals, but through ongoing negotiation with institutional structures. As Xu and Brown (2016) argue in their Teacher Assessment Literacy in Practice (TALiP) model, context-tested assessment practices and institutional norms set boundaries for what teachers should and should not do, making contextual engagement rather than abstract knowledge the primary driver of assessment identity formation.

The third and most distinctive contextual influence identified - Vietnamese face-saving cultural values - reveals a dimension of assessment identity that existing theoretical frameworks do not fully capture. Thirteen participants demonstrated that face-saving principles were not experienced as an external constraint imposed upon their practice, but as an internalized professional value that shaped how they conceptualized effective formative feedback. Teacher 4's deliberate reframing of public correction into collaborative inquiry, and Teacher 5's explicit communication of the cultural rationale behind her feedback approach to students, illustrate how cultural competence had become integral to these lecturers' sense of professional identity as assessors. This finding extends Looney et al.'s (2018) six-dimensional framework by identifying cultural competence as a seventh dimension particularly salient in non-Western educational contexts. It also extends Xu and Brown's (2016) framework by demonstrating that assessment conceptions in Vietnamese EFL contexts are shaped not only by beliefs about improvement versus accountability purposes, but by culturally specific values about relational dynamics between teachers and students that fundamentally alter feedback design and delivery.

Addressing research question 2, the four adaptive strategies identified in Theme 2 - collaborative peer-based approaches, selective technology integration, culturally responsive feedback, and differentiated student-responsive assessment - collectively reveal an assessment identity characterized by professional agency rather than passive compliance with constraints. Critically, these strategies were not random workarounds; they reflected deliberate, pedagogically informed decisions rooted in each lecturer's deep understanding of their students, their context, and their professional values. This pattern supports Vähäsantanen et al.'s (2008) conceptualization of professional agency as an active negotiation between ideals and constraints, and aligns with Xu and Brown's (2016) TALiP model, which positions assessment identity development as a cyclical process in which context-tested practices continuously reshape and renew professional knowledge and self-perception. Lecturers such as Teacher 11, who designed structured peer feedback criteria to distribute assessment workload without diminishing formative value, exemplify how professional agency transforms contextual constraints from barriers into catalysts for pedagogical innovation.

A key insight emerging from the relationship between the two themes is that contextual constraints did not simply impede formative assessment - they actively generated the conditions that drove adaptive professional learning. The same large class sizes that prevented comprehensive portfolio assessment (Theme 1) prompted lecturers to develop technology-mediated feedback systems and collaborative peer assessment structures (Theme 2). The face-saving cultural values that constrained public error correction (Theme 1) gave rise to strengths-first feedback sequences and collaborative inquiry approaches that proved more pedagogically sophisticated than conventional correction models (Theme 2). This dynamic relationship

challenges deficit framings of resource-constrained teaching contexts, suggesting instead that assessment identity development in such settings involves a distinctive form of adaptive expertise that should be recognized and cultivated rather than remediated. This finding resonates with Xu and Brown's (2016) argument that TALiP emerges through contextual engagement, and with Looney et al.'s (2018) recognition that the interaction between assessment identity dimensions - particularly between contextual factors and reported practice - produces the most significant professional growth.

The differentiated, student-responsive assessment strategies documented in Theme 2 further illuminate the conception dimension of Xu and Brown's (2016) framework. Participants consistently demonstrated improvement-oriented assessment conceptions - viewing formative assessment primarily as a tool for learning enhancement rather than merely for accountability or grading. Teacher 15's explicit calibration of assessment activities to student proficiency levels, and Teacher 2's nuanced judgment about when peer feedback was insufficient and authoritative teacher input was required, reflect the sophisticated understanding of assessment purposes that Xu and Brown (2016) associate with high TALiP. Importantly, these improvement-oriented conceptions persisted despite institutional accountability pressures that might have pushed lecturers toward more standardized, summative approaches. This persistence of improvement-oriented conceptions under institutional pressure suggests that assessment identity in this context functions as a stabilizing professional resource, enabling lecturers to maintain pedagogical commitments while still negotiating institutional requirements.

These findings carry significant implications for professional development program design. The hierarchical competence pattern evident across both themes - where lecturers demonstrated stronger practical assessment capabilities than theoretical knowledge - suggests that effective programs should build upon lecturers' existing practical strengths rather than beginning with abstract theoretical principles, consistent with Looney et al.'s (2018) emphasis on the reported practice dimension as a foundation for identity development. Furthermore, given that face-saving cultural competence emerged as a core dimension of assessment identity in this context, professional development must explicitly address culturally responsive assessment design as a central professional capability rather than treating it as a peripheral cultural sensitivity issue. Finally, the collaborative strategies documented in Theme 2 suggest that peer learning communities - where lecturers share contextually tested adaptive strategies - represent both an effective professional development format and a practical application of the assessment values these lecturers already hold. Such communities would leverage the collective problem-solving capacities that participants demonstrated individually, scaling adaptive expertise across institutions in the Mekong Delta region.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how contextual factors shape the assessment identity of Vietnamese EFL university lecturers and the adaptive strategies they employ to sustain formative assessment practices despite contextual limitations, drawing on the frameworks of Looney et al. (2018) and Xu and Brown (2016). Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 15 lecturers from the Mekong Delta region, the study revealed two interrelated themes. The first theme demonstrated that assessment identities are fundamentally shaped by resource constraints and workload pressures arising from large class sizes, institutional policy tensions that conflict with professional pedagogical judgment, and Vietnamese cultural values - particularly face-saving principles - that are not merely external constraints but deeply internalized dimensions of

professional identity. The second theme documented four adaptive strategies through which lecturers exercised professional agency: collaborative peer-based approaches that distributed assessment workload while enhancing pedagogical value; selective technology integration via platforms such as Google Docs and Google Classroom; culturally responsive feedback strategies that preserved student dignity while maintaining formative rigour; and differentiated, student-responsive assessment calibrated to diverse learner needs and proficiency levels.

The study offers two principal theoretical contributions. First, it extends Looney et al.'s (2018) six-dimensional assessment identity framework by identifying cultural competence as a seventh dimension particularly salient in non-Western EFL higher education contexts, where face-saving values fundamentally shape how formative feedback is conceptualized and delivered. Second, it extends Xu and Brown's (2016) TALiP model by demonstrating that improvement-oriented assessment conceptions persist and adapt under institutional accountability pressures in Vietnamese contexts, and that the cyclical relationship between contextual engagement and identity formation produces a distinctive form of adaptive expertise rather than a simple deficit. Most significantly, the findings reveal that contextual constraints did not merely impede effective assessment - they actively generated the conditions that drove lecturers' professional learning and innovation, challenging deficit framings of resource-constrained teaching contexts and positioning constraint navigation itself as a form of professional competence.

These findings carry practical implications for professional development program design in Vietnamese EFL higher education. Programs should build upon lecturers' existing practical strengths rather than beginning with abstract theoretical principles, explicitly address contextual adaptation strategies as core professional capabilities, develop cultural competence in assessment design and feedback delivery as a central programmatic focus, and foster collaborative learning communities that enable lecturers to share and scale contextually tested adaptive strategies. Institutional leaders should also consider how policy environments - particularly course failure regulations and externally imposed examinations - create unnecessary tensions between professional assessment judgment and administrative compliance, and explore how greater lecturer autonomy in assessment design could strengthen both identity coherence and formative practice quality.

This study has several limitations that point toward productive future research directions. The qualitative methodology with 15 participants from the Mekong Delta region, while enabling rich contextual insight, limits the generalizability of findings to other Vietnamese regions and EFL higher education contexts. Future research employing mixed-methods designs with larger samples across diverse institutional contexts could strengthen the evidence base for the theoretical framework extensions proposed here. Longitudinal studies tracking how individual lecturers' assessment identities evolve over time in response to changing contextual conditions would also deepen understanding of the dynamic relationship between constraint and professional growth documented in this study. Finally, comparative research examining assessment identity formation across different EFL contexts in Southeast Asia could illuminate which dimensions of the framework - including the cultural competence dimension proposed here - are context-specific and which may have broader applicability across the region.

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