



A Positioning-Theoretical Retrospective Trio-Narrative Inquiry into Vietnamese Generation-Z Teachers' Professional Identity Construction

Phan Nhat Hao^{1*}, Truong Huy Hoang², Truong Thai Thanh Tam³

^{1,3}Can Tho University, Ninh Kieu Ward, Can Tho City, Vietnam

²FPT University, Ninh Kieu Ward, Can Tho City, Vietnam

E-mail: ¹phannhathao85@gmail.com*, ²truonghh09@gmail.com, ³thanhtam161003@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

In the context of rapid educational transformation and increasing demands in English language teaching, teacher professional identity has become central to how teachers interpret experiences and sustain professional engagement. However, limited research has examined how such identities are co-constructed through the collaborative narratives. Addressing this gap, this study explores how Vietnamese Generation-Z English-as-a-Foreign-Language teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities through collaborative narrative interactions. Grounded in a post-structuralist perspective and informed by Positioning Theory, the study conceptualizes teacher identity as discursively produced and contextually negotiated through storytelling. Employing a collaborative trio-narrative inquiry design, data were generated through individual narrative interviews, group narrative conversations, and reflective journals with these three teachers. A theme-based narrative analysis, guided by Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional framework and Positioning Theory, was systematically conducted. Findings revealed that participants' identities developed through reflexive interpretations of past experiences, interactive negotiations in present teaching practices, and future-oriented projections of their possible selves. These identity (re)constructions were further embedded within a moral order characterized by personal affection, responsibility, and professional commitment. The study itself contributes to teacher identity research by foregrounding collaborative meaning-making and processes of self- and other-positioning. Pedagogical implications are offered for teacher education and continuing professional development, alongside acknowledged limitations and directions for future research.

Keywords: Teacher professional identity, Positioning Theory, a narrative inquiry, English-as-a-Foreign-Language, generation-Z teacher



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INTRODUCTION

Theoretical and contextual background

Contemporary education grows within rapid transforming with digitalization, intensified accountability regimes, and sociopolitical conditions. Teaching, therefore, has been redefined as a form of professional practices that integrates pedagogical expertise with emotional labor, personal engagement, and continuous self-reflection (Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022). Within this context, teacher professional identity impacts how teachers interpret lived experiences, make sense of social expectations, and sustain long-term commitment (Mansouri, 2021; Trinh et al., 2025). In Vietnam, transformations converge with national policy reforms foregrounding

standardization, performance-based evaluation, and educational integration. English language teaching (ELT) has acquired heightened professional values, positioning English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) teachers as mediators of global connectivity (Nguyen et al., 2020). As a result, Vietnamese EFL teachers may navigate competing discourses surrounding legitimacy, expertise, engagement, and professional worth.

Generation-Z (Gen-Z) teachers have recently entered this already demanding professional terrain. Situated in digitally saturated and globally networked environments, this generation tends to approach teaching as a meaning-oriented and value-driven practice (Phan & Tran, 2025). Recent research has documented emotional, agentic, and socio-cultural dimensions of EFL teacher identity across the diverse contexts. At the same time, the processes in which professional identity is co-constructed in collaborative narratives remain underdeveloped, particularly when explored through a positioning-theoretical lens. These opportunities become especially salient in the Vietnamese context, where generational shifts coincide with rapid educational transformation. Responding to these critical developments, this study explores how Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers (re)construct professional identities through collaborative narrative interactions. Additionally, on integrating a narrative inquiry with Positioning Theory, the study sees identity as a morally-oriented accomplishment.

EFL Teacher Professional Identity

Professional identity of teachers has been defined as a complex, context-dependent, and discursively constructed construct. It is (re)formed through teachers' lived interactions within sociocultural environments, institutional structures, and personal experiences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Accordingly, teacher identity construction is referred to as an ongoing process of meaning-making through which each teacher interprets her/his experiences, articulates values, and negotiate (re)positioning within communities of practice (Wang et al., 2021). Within EFL settings, identity has been widely approached as a performative construct impacted by language ideologies, power relations, and global-local tensions (Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022; Li, 2023). As Ren and Pan (2025) stated, EFL teachers continuously construct senses of selves through everyday pedagogical practices, interactions with students and colleagues, institutional expectations, and dominant discourses about what constitutes a "good" language teacher (Dimitrieska, 2024). These discourses circulate around notions of native-speakerism, linguistic legitimacy, pedagogical expertise (Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2024), and emotional labor work (Meihami, 2025), influencing how teachers perceive themselves and how they are socially recognized by others (Mansouri, 2021). From a post-structuralist perspective, identity is deemed fluid, reformed through discourse and sustained by social relations (Wang, 2021). This portrays teachers' agency in (re)positioning themselves, resisting imposed meanings, and reconstructing professional trajectories (Alam et al., 2024; Li, 2022; Ngo & Trinh, 2025).

In recent years, considerable academic attention has been directed toward the identity development of younger generations of teachers, particularly those who belong to Gen-Z. Universally defined as individuals born from the late 1990s onward, Gen-Z teachers enter the profession with distinctive sociocultural experiences affected by digital connectivity, social media, globalization, and intensified educational reforms (Phan & Tran, 2025). Additionally, this teacher group demonstrates strong orientations toward collaboration, emotional expressiveness, and technological integration. They are more likely to conceptualize teaching as a cognitive, affective, and dialogic practice rather than a purely instructional endeavor. Their identities intertwine with aspirations to build supportive classrooms, cultivate mutual respect, and foster connections with the learners (Jiang et al., 2021). Within EFL settings, such identity constructions converge with the international discourses of communicative pedagogy, learner-centeredness, and digital literacies, enriching complexity and equifinality of teachers' selves construction. At the same time, Gen-Z teachers develop their identities amid rapid educational

transformations, intensified accountability mechanisms, and socio-cultural expectations for adaptability and innovation (Pishghadam et al., 2022; Sedanza et al., 2023; Yazan, 2023).

Related Studies on EFL Teacher Professional Identity

Recent research has portrayed EFL teacher professional identity as a negotiated, socially situated process accompanied by lived experiences, emotional engagements, and discursive practices. Narrative-oriented approaches, in particular, have offered richer insights into how teachers interpret identity tensions, reconfigure professional meanings, and exercise agency across diverse institutional and sociocultural contexts.

In a Chinese context, Bao and Feng (2023) employed narrative inquiry in an ethnographic framework to examine how a university EFL teacher constructed her professional identity amid institutional pressures and teaching-oriented academic expectations. Their analysis revealed that identity development unfolded through interconnected storylines with personal tensions, reinterpretations, and boundary-crossing practices. Complementing qualitative approaches, Yan et al. (2024) developed and then validated the English Teacher Identity Measure (ETIM), conceptualizing identity as a multidimensional construct including future orientation, career perception, pedagogical beliefs, and self-efficacy. This line of inquiry highlights the conceptual richness and methodological diversity in identity research. Recently, Uştuk (2025), for instance, proposed a metaxical approach that reframes identity tensions as generative experiences for pre-service EFL teachers. Through reflective practices, participants explored professional selves, expanding identity repertoires and professional imaginations.

In the Vietnamese context, the body of literature has further studied the sociocultural and emotional dimensions of identity reconstruction. To be more specific, Nguyen and Ngo (2025) examined how pre-service EFL teachers' identities were formed through the interconnection of tensions, emotions, and agency across temporal trajectories. Additionally, Trinh et al. (2025) demonstrated how dialogical self-positions changed temporally as a novice teacher negotiated her dual roles as a teacher-practitioner and teacher-researcher. Similarly, Phan and Tran (2025) explored how two Gen-Z teachers reconstructed their professional identities through imagined possible selves, reflecting aspirations, obligations, and perceived risks.

Arguably, these studies conceptualize EFL teacher identity as a fluid, emotionally charged, and socially mediated process with narrative sense-making and contextual negotiations. At the same time, research has primarily focused on individual trajectories, with limited attention to how identities are co-constructed via collaborative storytelling. Moreover, although tensions, agency, and emotions have been extensively discussed, fewer studies have explicitly examined identity development through a positioning-theoretical lens, particularly in relation to how teachers discursively locate themselves and others within moral orders. In addition, Gen-Z teachers in Vietnam remain underexplored from evidence-based perspectives. Addressing these conceptual, methodological gaps, the current study adopts a collaborative trio-narrative inquiry informed by Positioning Theory to portray how three Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers form and negotiate professional identities from language learners to language teachers.

Theoretical Framework Underpinning the Current Study

This study draws on Positioning Theory as its sole theoretical framework to conceptualize professional identity. Initially articulated by Davies and Harré (1990) and further developed by Harré and van Langenhove (1999), this theory conceptualizes social life as unfolding through discourse, wherein individuals actively locate themselves and others within culturally available storylines imbued with the rights, duties, emotions, and expectations. A central premise of this framework is that individuals function as agentive meaning-makers who interpret experiences and shape their social realities through interaction. From this perspective, identity works via

discursive practices rather than residing as a stable internal attribute. Central to positioning theory is the notion of “position”, understood as a constellation of beliefs concerning what individuals are entitled, expected, or authorized to do and say within a particular social group (Harré, 2012). When people adopt specific positions, they come to perceive the world through particular interpretive lenses, articulated through culturally recognizable images, metaphors, and storylines (Davies & Harré, 1990). The process wherein these meanings are constructed and negotiated is referred to as “positioning”. It entails the context-sensitive assignment of discursive roles that render actions socially intelligible (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Such positioning may take the form of self-positioning and other-positioning, as well as reflexive and interactive positioning, enabling identity to develop through both intrapersonal reflection and interpersonal self-negotiation. These processes are embedded within broader moral orders-culturally and institutionally grounded normative frameworks that shape what is considered appropriate, legitimate, or desirable in a given social context (Harré, 2012).

Positioning theory aligns closely with the aims of the current study. Teaching unfolds through self-meaning-making, and professional engagement (Ismail et al., 2023). For Gen-Z EFL teachers, whose professional experiences are with collaboration, emotional expressiveness, and digitally mediated communication, identity construction often takes place through shared narratives and collective reflection. Furthermore, Positioning Theory offers a powerful lens for examining how these teachers discursively locate themselves and one another within storylines of competence and aspiration. When integrated with collaborative narrative inquiry, this framework illuminates identity as a co-authored process that emerges through dialogue, mutual recognition, and collective sense-making. This alignment enables the present study to capture how professional identities are actively negotiated, reaffirmed, and transformed in interaction. Guided by the theory, this study seeks to address the question:

How do Vietnamese Generation Z EFL teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities through acts of positioning in collaborative narrative interactions?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design informed by narrative inquiry to explore participants' lived experiences and the meanings attached to them (Pham, 2024). Additionally, it drew on a collaborative approach, which conceptualizes experience as storied and views meaning-making as a relational and dialogical process (Clandinin et al., 2000). Through shared storytelling, participants co-constructed understandings of their professional lives, negotiated interpretations of past experiences, and envisioned possible futures. Grounded in Positioning Theory, the study aligns with narrative inquiry in foregrounding how individuals make sense of their lives through discourse and self-reflection. The integration of collaborative narrative inquiry and Positioning Theory thus enables an examination of identity as a co-authored and socially negotiated process. Notably, a trio-based collaborative format was used to facilitate in-depth dialogic engagement among participants. This format allowed identities to be explored through mutual storytelling and meaning-making, capturing the interactional dimensions of professional identity development.

Participants/ Sample

This study involved three Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers who were in the early stages of their professional careers. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich, experience-based narratives relevant to the research focus. The selection criteria included: (1) belonging to Gen-Z, (2) currently working as EFL teachers, and (3) demonstrating the willingness to engage in sustained collaborative storytelling and reflective dialogues. Accordingly, the trio format was adopted to support affective meaning-

making and facilitated participants to co-narrate lived experiences, respond to one another's stories, and negotiate professional meanings through shared interaction. The small, cohesive group also facilitated trust, openness, and emotional safety, which are central to narrative inquiry.

To protect these participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used. An overview of participant characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Teaching experience	Qualification
Duc	24	Male	4 years	M.A in ELT
Tai	23	Male	3 years	B.A in English Studies
Tam	22	Female	3 years	B.A in English Studies

Data Collection

Data were qualitatively generated through a set of narrative-oriented methods designed to capture participants' lived experiences and professional meanings. The data collection process began with individual narrative interviews to foreground each participant's personal voice and experiential trajectory. Two interview rounds were conducted with each participant, one at the beginning and one toward the end of the data collection period. These interviews followed a semi-structured, narrative-oriented format that encouraged extended storytelling. Participants were invited to recount their educational backgrounds, early teaching experiences, turning points, and evolving professional aspirations. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. These interviews provided a temporal and biographical foundation for portraying individual identity development. Following individual interviews, trio-narrative conversations were conducted as the primary data source. A total of four sessions took place over a period of two months, from September 2025 to November 2025. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes. These sessions were designed as open narrative spaces in which participants shared their lived experiences, reflected on critical incidents, and responded to one another's stories. Guided by Positioning Theory, prompting questions focused on day-to-day teaching challenges, affectively salient moments, institutional encounters, pedagogical beliefs, and imagined future selves. The interactive nature of these sessions facilitated dialogic meaning-making and enabled identity work to emerge through co-narration and mutual positioning. In addition, they maintained reflective journals throughout the study. They were encouraged to write weekly entries documenting classroom experiences, emotional responses, moments of uncertainty, and emerging professional understandings. These journals captured reflexive sense-making processes and supported the examination of identity as an ongoing interpretive activity. When relevant, supplementary narrative artifacts such as lesson plans, feedback messages, or personal notes were collected to enrich contextual understanding and narrative depth. All interviews and conversations were conducted in Vietnamese to support expressive richness. They were audio-recorded by a portable device and transcribed verbatim. Selected excerpts were later translated into English for reporting purposes using a meaning-oriented approach.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a theme-based narrative approach informed by Clandinin and Connelly's (2022) three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework and Positioning Theory. The three-dimensional framework structured the analysis around temporality, sociality, and spatiality. Temporality oriented the analysis toward how participants narrated experiences across past, present, and imagined future. Sociality directed attention to emotions, values,

meanings embedded in narratives. Spatiality foregrounded the institutional, cultural, and material contexts in which experiences were situated. In parallel, Positioning Theory enabled an examination of how participants (re)positioned themselves and others through narrative acts, revealing changes in professional duties and identity claims across interactional contexts.

The analytic process began with repeated holistic readings of all transcripts, journal entries, and narrative artifacts to develop an in-depth familiarity with the data. During this stage, the research team attended to the narrative flow, emotional textures, and experiential continuity. The data were then organized into narrative units, each representing a coherent story segment rather than isolated statements. These units typically revolved around critical incidents, professional dilemmas, emotionally salient moments, or future-oriented projections. Each unit was subsequently examined through the three-dimensional lens to explore how meanings were constructed across time, relationships, and contexts. Building on this narrative reading, a theme-based analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns of meaning across participants' stories while preserving the narrative coherence and contextual richness. Themes were developed inductively through constant comparison and iterative refinement. These themes captured how participants made sense of professional becoming, negotiated emotional experiences, and articulated evolving pedagogical commitments.

Positioning theory was then applied as an interpretive lens to examine how identities were discursively enacted within and across these themes. Analytical attention focused on how participants positioned themselves and others within specific storylines. This included self-positioning, which illuminated how participants narrated their roles, values, emotions, and competencies; other-positioning, which revealed how they represented students, colleagues, institutions, and broader social expectations; reflexive positioning, which captured internal dialogues and self-understandings; and interactive positioning, which emerged through dialogic exchanges and co-narration during the trio conversations. These positioning practices were further examined in relation to the moral orders. Such orders reflected culturally and institutionally grounded expectations affecting what participants perceived as appropriate, legitimate, or desirable.

Throughout the analytic process, analytic memos were composed to document emerging interpretations, theoretical connections, and reflexive insights. These memos functioned as a dialogic space between data and theory and supported analytical transparency. Preliminary thematic and positioning-based interpretations were subsequently shared with participants during follow-up conversations to support collaborative sense-making and further refine the analytic constructions.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical principles guided all of the stages of the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. They were fully informed about the aims of the study, the nature of their participation, and the use of their narratives for academic purposes. Pseudonyms were assigned, and all identifying information was anonymized to protect participants' privacy. Audio recordings, transcripts, and written materials were stored securely and accessed only by the researchers. Most importantly, given the personal nature of narrative inquiry, particular attention was paid to relational ethics. The researcher cultivated a respectful space that supported participants' emotional safety and autonomy in storytelling. They retained the rights to review, revise, or withdraw any parts of their narratives. In this case, it ensured ethical accountability and mutual trust throughout the study.

The trustworthiness of this study was established in accordance with the four criteria by Lincoln and Guba (1985) including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources (individual interviews, narrative conversations, reflective journals, and narrative

artifacts), and the ongoing member engagement, which supported shared sense-making and interpretive refinement. Transferability was addressed via the use of thick, contextualized descriptions that conveyed participants' lived experiences, institutional settings, and relational dynamics in detail. Besides, dependability was strengthened by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting research procedures, analytic decisions, and reflexive memos. Confirmability was supported through systematic reflexive practices and transparent documentation, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in participants' narratives rather than in the researcher's assumptions and interpretations.

FINDINGS

Reflexive Self-Positioning via Past Narratives of Becoming Teachers from Language Majors

Participants' past-oriented narratives were reflexive spaces in which they made sense of their unique transition from *language learners* to *practicing teachers*. Correspondingly, their early professional stories were recalled around moments of uncertainty, improvisation, and self-regulated learning. Through self-positioning, they portrayed themselves as beginners who entered teaching with strong linguistic knowledge yet limited pedagogical preparedness. These narratives foregrounded identity as a process of becoming through practicing.

Duc recalled his first weeks of teaching as a period of emotional confusion and cognitive overload in 2020. He described how he initially relied on textbook knowledge and grammatical explanations, while feeling unsure about classroom management and student engagement:

"I knew English, but I did not know how to teach. I copied how my old teachers explained grammar. When students looked bored, I panicked inside myself. I asked myself, "What should I do now to keep them engaged?"" (Duc, Interview 1)

Through this narrative, Duc positioned his earlier self as a novice learner of teaching. His repeated self-questioning illustrated how identity worked through reflexive interpretation of past actions. The narrative reframed early struggles as part of a meaningful learning trajectory. Complementing Duc's narrative, Tam's story further highlighted the gaps between linguistic competence and pedagogical confidence. She described her very first classroom experience as overwhelming, even though she had performed well academically as a student:

"I always got good grades at school. I thought that meant I could teach. But when I stood in front of students, I myself forgot what to say. I realized knowing English and teaching English were two different worlds." (Tam, Interview 1)

Tam reflexively positioned her earlier self as someone equating academic success with teaching readiness. Her present retelling reinterpreted that assumption through experiential insight. In this case, her identity development entailed a shift from seeing oneself as a high-achieving learner to becoming a reflective practitioner. The metaphor of *"two different worlds"* further expressed a realization: *teaching required relational sensitivity, situational judgment, and emotional presence.*

In his individual interview, Tai's narrative emphasized the unique role of senior teachers in shaping his early professional identity. He described observing experienced colleagues and gradually adopting their practices:

"I watched how my teacher mentor talked to students. She was calm. She listened. I copied her way of speaking. Slowly, I felt more like a teacher." (Tai, Interview 1)

Tai positioned himself as a teacher-apprentice figure whose identity developed through relational learning. His use of the word *"copied"* suggested imitation as a legitimate mode of early professional growth. In this reflexive positioning, he narrated his identity as constructed through modeling, observation, and adaptation.

These individual stories became shared interpretive resources during trio sessions. When participants discussed their early struggles, they collaboratively reframed them as necessary stages of professional becoming:

Duc: "I think confusion is part of the process, and I do think it is normal."

Tam: "Yes, because we didn't major in English teacher education."

Tai: "Practice makes perfect. We learned by doing." (Trio-session 1)

This exchange revealed how reflexive positioning extended beyond individual storytelling into collective sense-making among participants. They normalized uncertainty and validated experiential learning. Arguably, these shared narratives constructed a moral order in which internal growth, external effort, and self-learning constituted forms of teacher professionalism.

Interactive Positioning in Present Teaching Practices: Negotiating Authority, Affection, and Professional Legitimacy

While participants' past-oriented narratives foregrounded reflexive meaning-making, their present-oriented accounts centered on interactional negotiations occurring within everyday teaching practices. These narratives portrayed professional identity as something continuously accomplished through situated exchanges with stakeholders. In these stories, identity took shape via interactive positioning, whereby participants assigned roles and articulated moral commitments in pedagogical encounters.

Across the dataset, participants recurrently framed current professional selves through tensions between authority and approachability. Tai, for instance, described his struggles to balance emotional closeness with professional distance:

"I want my students to feel safe with me. I want them to talk to me. But sometimes I feel they treat me like a friend too much. Then I start thinking, "Am I still a teacher in their eyes?" (Tai, Interview 2)

Affectively, Tai repositioned himself as a language teacher valuing emotional openness. At the same time, he oriented to a moral order associated with professionalism, authority, and legitimacy. His identity work referred to continuous recalibration rather than stable enactment. The rhetorical question at the end of his account implied as a reflexive device, revealing how present experiences invited ongoing self-evaluation.

Duc's own classroom narratives illustrated a similar process, though articulated through a different positioning trajectory. He described,

"Sometimes they joke a lot in class. I laugh with them too. But then I stop and say, "Okay, now we learn." I feel I am switching roles all the time." (Duc, Trio-session 2)

Duc's account foregrounded role-shifting as a core feature of professional selves. Through interactive other-positioning, he reconstructed himself as both companionable and directive. Such repositioning shed light on identity as a very situational accomplishment with moment-to-moment interaction. Notably, rather than anchoring authority in hierarchical distance, Duc articulated his teacherhood through affective attunement and situational judgment.

Tam's narratives further enriched those of the other two participants. She foregrounded care as an anchor of her present professional identity. She recounted how she responded to students' struggles:

"One student cried after class. She said she felt useless. I sat with her and listened. After that, I realized teaching is also about holding emotions." (Tam, Interview 2)

In this situation, Tam repositioned herself as an affectively responsive teacher. Her use of the phrase "*holding emotions*" reflected a purpose-appropriate orientation toward care as a professional responsibility. This positioning extended teaching beyond curricular delivery into emotional labor and teaching engagement. In such narratives, Tam articulated professionalism as grounded in empathy and presence.

In the trio-sessions, these positions were negotiated collectively. In one other exchange, three participants reflected on what it meant to be “professional”:

Tai: “Sometimes I feel professional means being strict.”

Duc: “I think it means being fair.”

Tam: “For me, it means understanding.” (Trio Session 3)

How moral orders were collaboratively articulated and reinterpreted referred to teacher qualities themselves. Each participant re-positioned their professionalism differently, drawing on personal values and unique lived experiences. They expanded one another’s interpretive repertoires.

Importantly, these present-oriented narratives portrayed identity as temporally active. Participants described teaching not as a role they inhabited but as a practice they continuously shaped. Their stories illustrated how professional selves were crafted through everyday micro-interactions, emotional labor, and pedagogical judgment. As to interactive positioning, the three participants assigned meaning to their actions and re-calibrated their understandings of who they were as teachers.

Future-Oriented Positioning through Imagined Selves and Professional Commitments

Participants’ future prediction was forward-looking spaces in which they articulated their possible selves. These narratives centered on long-term aspirations, desired forms of expertise, and evolving understandings of what it meant to become language teachers. Through future-oriented positioning, participants framed identity as a project of continuous growth which could result in effective learning, reflection, and purposeful engagement with teaching.

All three participants constructed what can be seen as possible selves projected versions of who they hoped to become in their professional lives. These projections were associated with graduate education. More specifically, they interpreted such projections as a meaningful pathways toward deeper insights, greater confidence, and more intentional teaching practices.

Duc, who did pursue a Master’s degree, described graduate education as an opportunity to connect classroom practices with research-based critical thinking. He narrated his engagement with reading and small-scale research as a transformative experience:

“Now I read studies, I think more about why students react in certain ways. I think everyone who has pursued graduate education should look at their class with a research-based mindset, like a teacher-researcher, not only a teacher-practitioner.”

(Duc, Interview 2)

Duc repositioned his future self as a teacher-researcher. His projected identity integrated instructional practice with inquiry, reflection, and analytical thinking. Teaching, in this account, was practiced as an intellectually grounded activity with curiosity and systematic exploration. Moreover, Duc’s repositioning conveyed a moral orientation toward responsibility expressed through teaching with deeper understanding, evidenced via research, rather than routines.

Tai and Tam similarly articulated future-oriented identities that centered on professional refinement. Tai imagined himself as a teacher who could support students more holistically:

“I want to understand students’ thinking, not only their answers. Studying more helps me see learning from their perspective.” (Tai, Interview 2)

Tai’s narrative repositioned his self as emotionally attuned and pedagogically reflective. His possible self involved a form of professionalism grounded in empathy, patience, and ethical presence. This projection reconceptualized teaching as a practice enhanced by attentiveness to learners’ inner worlds.

Tam’s narrative, informed by ongoing teaching-based training, emphasized how purposive learning reshaped her professional imagination:

“Now I plan lessons with more purpose. I ask myself what kind of teacher I want to become.” (Tam, Interview 2)

Through this reflection, Tam repositioned herself as a teacher engaged in intentional self-formation. Her future-oriented identity involved continuous questioning, reflexive planning, and long-term commitment to growth. This narrative also reframed teaching as a profession of becoming rather than a fixed role that teachers play.

Such future selves were also mentioned in their trio sessions. Participants responded to one another's aspirations, offering affirmations and extending shared meanings:

Duc: “I think we all want to become teachers who matter, not only in terms of results, but in how students feel when they are in our classes. I want my students to feel that someone truly cares about their growth.”

Tai: “Yes, teachers who stay in students' memories. Maybe years later, they will remember how we encouraged them or how we made them believe in themselves. That kind of memory is very powerful.”

Tam: “I also think about that a lot. I want to be someone students can trust. And I want to keep learning, even when it is hard, because students deserve a teacher who grows with them.”

Duc: “Learning helps us see teaching differently. I feel that when I study more, I understand my students more deeply.”

Tai: “It also gives us confidence. When I imagine my future self, I see someone who understands teaching more clearly and makes decisions with purpose.”

Tam: “For me, the future teacher I imagine is someone who reflects a lot, who questions herself, and who always tries to become better.” (Trio Session 4)

The future-oriented positioning hereby revealed how they imagined themselves as future language teachers. Their possible selves were shaped not only by individual reflection but also collective meaning-making. Professional aspirations became shared moral projects rather than isolated ambitions.

DISCUSSION

The current study sought out to examine how Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers construct and negotiate professional identities through collaborative narrative interactions, informed by Positioning Theory. The findings revealed that participants' identity development unfolded across temporal orientations: past, present, and future. Past-oriented narratives functioned as reflexive spaces in which participants made sense of their transition from language majors to teachers, redefining the early struggles as meaningful learning trajectories. Present-oriented accounts highlighted identity as a personal accomplishment, shaped by everyday negotiations of authority, care, and legitimacy in classroom encounters. Future-oriented narratives revealed how imagined selves guided participants' professional commitments, particularly in relation to graduate education, reflective practice, and long-term pedagogical purpose.

These patterns resonate strongly with the theoretical assumptions of Positioning Theory. Davies and Harré (1990) conceptualized identity as a discursive phenomenon that develops through the ways individuals locate themselves and others within culturally available storylines. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) further emphasized that positioning occurs through reflexive and interactive acts, embedded within moral orders that regulate what is considered appropriate, responsible, and meaningful. In this study, participants' narratives reflected these processes in concrete ways. Through reflexive positioning, they revisited earlier experiences and reframed them as resources for professional growth. Through interactive positioning, they negotiated their roles and relationships in situated pedagogical contexts, assigning meanings to their own actions and those of others. More significantly, their future-oriented projections functioned as discursive anchors which reoriented present actions toward

desired forms of professional being. In this sense, identity appeared as a temporally layered practice, shaped through emotional interpretation and moral evaluation. To this regard, it aligned well with Positioning Theory's emphasis on agency, relationality, and discursive meaning-making.

The findings also spoke to, and extended, existing research on EFL teacher professional identity. Prior studies have emphasized identity as dynamic, emotionally charged, and socially situated (Beijaard et al., 2004). Narrative inquiries, in particular, have shown how teachers construct meaning through personal stories, tensions, and turning points (Bao & Feng, 2023; Nguyen & Ngo, 2025). The current study contributed to this literature by foregrounding the collaborative and affective dimensions of identity work. While previous studies have focused on individual trajectories, the trio-narrative format in this research illuminated how identities are co-authored through shared storytelling and collective reflection. This interactional focus also deepens recent work on imagined possible selves (Phan & Tran, 2025; Trinh et al., 2025) by showing how future projections are negotiated, affirmed, and expanded through dialogue. Furthermore, by adopting a positioning-theoretical lens, the study offers a more fine-grained account of how Gen-Z teachers discursively locate themselves within moral landscapes of care, professionalism, and responsibility. In doing so, it enriches current understandings of teacher identity in Vietnam, where generational changes may converge with rapid transformation.

CONCLUSION

The current study substantially explored how Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers construct and negotiate professional identities with collaborative interactions, drawing on Positioning Theory. Adopting a trio-narrative inquiry design, the study illuminated identity as temporally situated and shaped through shared storytelling and co-meaning-making. The findings of this study carried several implications for teacher education, professional learning, and ELT policy, particularly in relation to Gen-Z EFL teachers. First, the findings suggest that professional identity development benefits from the narrative pedagogical practices. Teacher education programs may consider integrating collaborative storytelling, peer co-reflection, and guided narrative inquiry as components of pre-service and in-service training. These practices may support teachers in articulating lived experiences, interpreting challenges, and constructing professional self-understandings. Next, the current study portrayed the centrality of emotional engagement in contemporary teaching. This suggests that mentoring and induction programs could explicitly address the affective dimensions of teaching, encouraging teachers to regard emotional labor as a critical form of professional expertise rather than a peripheral concern. Third, future repositionings observed in participants' narratives highlighted the importance of long-term professional imagination. Their aspirations toward graduate education, research engagement, and growth functioned as guiding frameworks for present practices. Institutions may support such identity trajectories by providing access to research-informed professional development, reflective opportunities, and flexible career pathways that align with teachers' personal aspirations.

This study examined the professional identity construction of a small cohort of early-career Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers working within broadly similar institutional contexts, a focus that enabled narrative depth and close relational engagement but also shaped the range of social ecologies and professional trajectories represented. The study relied on self-narrated accounts, directing analytical attention to the teachers' reflective sense-making and discursive positioning of professional selves rather than to pedagogical enactments or material practices. In addition, the cross-sectional design captured identity (re)positioning at a particular moment in participants' early professional trajectories. Future research can bridge these dimensions by expanding participant diversity across regions, teaching sectors, and career stages; integrating narrative inquiry with classroom observation, cross-institutional contexts, and pedagogical

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artifacts; and adopting longitudinal designs to trace how imagined and enacted professional selves evolve across transitions (e.g., graduate education and curriculum reforms)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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