

VIETNAMESE TERTIARY EFL LECTURERS' RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN ANDRAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ngo Huynh Hong Nga^{1*}, Le Cong Tuan², and Nguyen Thi Kim Thanh
School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Can Tho, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: Ngo Huynh Hong Nga, e-mail: nhhnga@ctu.edu.vn

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Abstract. This study employed a phenomenological research approach to explore English as a foreign language (EFL) lecturers' lived experiences of research engagement, particularly their motivations and challenges. Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 18 EFL lecturers at different stages of their careers (*early-career*, *mid-career*, and *late-career*). Grounded in andragogy theory, the findings from this study revealed that EFL lecturers, as adult learners, had internal rather than external motivation for their engagement in research activities. More specifically, institutional policies, improvement of teaching practices, career advancement, and personal interest were four main motivators for EFL lecturers' engagement in research. On the other hand, time constraints, lack of research competence, lack of peer and administrative support, and financial constraints were significant challenges to this engagement. This study highlights the importance of promoting a supportive research culture for lecturers' professional development (PD) that aligns with andragogy theory within the context of higher education reforms in Vietnam.

Keywords: Adult learning, andragogy, English as a foreign language, research engagement, professional development

1. Introduction

In recent years, the education system in Vietnam has experienced significant changes in the economy, politics, society, and knowledge. Besides their teaching duties, lecturers are required to engage in professional development activities, including research. According to Article 55 of the Law on Higher Education, lecturers are mandated to engage in research projects and contribute to the development of applied science and technology transfer (Vietnamese National Assembly, 2012). The amended Law on Higher Education further raised the need for lecturers' engagement in practical activities to enhance both training quality and scientific research (Vietnam National Assembly, 2018). According to Circular No. 47/2014, issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), university lecturers are required to work 40 hours per week, totaling 1,760 compulsory hours per year, including teaching, research, and other PD activities (MOET, 2014). Together, these policies emphasize the importance of research in lecturers' professional responsibilities.

Teacher research has received increasing attention in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2020; Vu, 2021). However, there remains a lack of studies, especially those using a phenomenological approach to explore EFL lecturers' lived experiences of research engagement. This gap is especially significant in the context of higher education reforms in Vietnam. Grounded in andragogy theory, this study aimed to fill this gap by exploring how Vietnamese EFL lecturers experienced research engagement, particularly their motivations and challenges. The following research question was raised: *What motivations and challenges do Vietnamese EFL lecturers experience in engaging in research for their professional development?*

To address this research question, the study employed a phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of Vietnamese EFL lecturers' lived experiences of research engagement for PD. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis to identify the key motivations and challenges emerging from participants' experiences. The findings are interpreted through andragogy to examine lecturers' motivations for research engagement and the challenges they encountered.

2. Literature review

2.1. Empirical studies on EFL teachers' research engagement

As teacher research is an important PD activity, there has been growing interest among researchers in the field of education in general, and in ELT in particular, regarding teachers' research engagement. In Iran, Farsani and Babaii (2019) explored the research engagement of EFL faculty members in educational research. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 140 faculty members. The findings from this study showed that the participants were highly engaged in both reading and conducting research in several areas. This study revealed several institutional, procedural, and instrumental factors that either facilitated or hindered research engagement. Interestingly, the EFL faculty members observed a considerable gap between their expectations for research support and the actual management support they received.

In another study, Alhassan and Ali (2020) examined EFL teachers' views and perceptions of research engagement with the aim of informing practice within a transformative continuing professional development (CPD) model. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 Omani EFL teachers. The findings revealed a lack of consensus on the definition of research engagement, resulting in data that could not be generalized or conclusive. However, the teachers reported several personal and institutional challenges, which provided valuable insights into potential strategies for fostering and sustaining teacher research engagement.

In Cambodia, Heng et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative case study to explore how EFL teachers perceived and engaged in research. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 16 EFL teachers from two universities (private, metropolitan, and provincial). The findings showed that, although university EFL teachers valued research, their conceptions of it were mixed and contested. Their engagement in research was significantly limited, primarily focused on degree-related research, participation in academic events, and supervision of student projects. They were almost entirely absent from academic publishing, facing various challenges in their research efforts, such as time constraints, insufficient research knowledge, inadequate funding and support, limited social recognition of research and insufficient motivation for research engagement.

Within the Vietnamese context, Pham et al. (2023) explored the challenges faced by female English teachers, focusing on their resilience and personal efforts in pursuing research. The study collected data through critical reflection and timeline interviews with two female language teachers at a public university. The findings highlighted important factors that influenced the teachers' engagement with research including complex roles, socio-cultural norms, and gender expectations across different settings and time periods.

The empirical evidence from the studies reviewed above highlights the role of institutional, individual, and systemic factors in shaping teachers' research across different contexts. These findings provide valuable insights for EFL lecturers' research engagement in the Vietnamese higher education context.

2.2. Andragogy theory

Andragogy, an adult learning theory, was the main theoretical framework guiding this study. Andragogy is explained as "the art and science of helping adults learn", in contrast to pedagogy, which is "the art and science of teaching children" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Initially, Knowles (1980) outlined four core assumptions of andragogy. However, he later revised and expanded these ideas,

increasing the number of assumptions to six, which became the foundation for planning adult learning experiences: (1) Adults need to know why they need to learn something before learning it; (2) The self-concept of adults is heavily dependent upon a move toward self-direction; (3) Prior experiences of the learner provide a rich resource for learning; (4) Adults typically become ready to learn when they experience a need to cope with a life situation or perform a task; (5) Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered, and they see education as a process of developing increased competency levels to achieve their full potential; (6) The motivation for adult learners is internal rather than external (Knowles, 1984).

Andragogy highlights that adult learners are self-directed, goal-oriented, and motivated by practical relevance. In this study, lecturers are regarded as adult learners; therefore, this framework is appropriate for explaining their research engagement for professional development. By applying the principles of andragogy, this study aimed to provide insights into EFL lecturers' research engagement for PD in the context of a Vietnamese higher education. Drawing on andragogy theory, this study may also provide practical suggestions for designing more effective PD activities for EFL lecturers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a phenomenological research approach to explore the experiences of Vietnamese tertiary EFL lecturers in research engagement, focusing on their motivations and challenges. Creswell (2013) stated that “a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 75). This approach is appropriate to capture data on unobservable aspects such as participants' thoughts and experiences (Islam & Akhter, 2022).

3.2. Participants

This study was carried out at Flower University (pseudonym), a large public university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. According to Robinson (2023), purposive sampling is the intentional selection of individuals who can offer valuable insights into a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon. In this study, all participants were purposively recruited to represent a range of experiences of their research engagement.

In this study, there was a total of 14 EFL lecturers and four academic managers who agreed to participate. The participation of the four academic managers was important in providing different perspectives on the research engagement experiences. Besides managing duties, these managers were responsible for planning and organizing research activities and teaching different EFL courses. Among the participants, twelve held a master's degree and six had a doctoral degree. The participants' years of teaching experience were categorized into three main groups: *early-career* lecturers (1–7 years of teaching experience), *mid-career* lecturers (8–22 years), and *late-career* lecturers (23+ years). To maintain anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym and their job positions were not mentioned.

3.3. Data collection

First of all, the pilot interview was carried out with two Vietnamese EFL lecturers who were not included in the main study. After that, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Each interview was recorded and lasted from fifty to seventy minutes. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and subsequently translated into English, with the translations checked by another senior English lecturer. During the interviews, notes were taken, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim afterwards.

Document analysis was used as a second source to collect further information from national and institutional documents (e.g., laws, circulars, decisions, and reports). Kutsyuruba (2023) explained

that “document analysis involves a systematic process of reviewing and evaluating documents by finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesizing the data contained within them” (p. 139). The key objective of the document analysis in this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the context in which EFL lecturers experienced research engagement for their PD.

3.4. Data analysis

In this study, all interviews were coded using NVivo 12 and analyzed in English to create emerging themes and patterns. The data analysis followed the steps proposed in Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological approach. To analyze the relevance of document data, the researchers evaluated the authority, content, currency, purpose, and intended audience of each document. Then, they selected the most relevant information for inclusion in their research findings.

3.5. Trustworthiness

This study employed five strategies to enhance its trustworthiness. These strategies included: (1) member checking, where interview transcripts were sent to interviewees for clarification; (2) method triangulation, using both semi-structured interviews and document analysis for data collection; (3) data triangulation, recruiting EFL lecturers and academic managers at three stages of their careers (*early-career*, *mid-career*, and *late-career*) with diverse research backgrounds; (4) using direct quotes to highlight the participants’ opinions; and (5) providing a rich and thick description by detailing the research engagement experiences of EFL lecturers.

This study adhered to Flower University’s Human Ethics Guidelines, including informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Although the Ethics Committee approval was not required at the research site, the study followed institutional research policies. Before collecting data, participants received an invitation letter, an information sheet, and a consent form explaining the study’s purpose, procedures, audio recording, and right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the university and EFL lecturers. All data were stored securely, with interview transcripts kept on a password-protected computer.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

This section reports the findings regarding the motivations and challenges EFL lecturers faced in research engagement. Although the interview questions differed slightly between lecturers and academic managers, their accounts are presented together to protect participants’ confidentiality.

4.1.1. EFL lecturers’ motivations for research engagement

In terms of motivations for engaging in research, the participants indicated four main motivators: institutional policies, improvement of teaching practices, career advancement, and personal interest.

Institutional policies

Fifteen of the 18 participants identified institutional policies as a significant motivator for their research engagement. For example, Thinh (*early-career*) commented, “*As per university policies, lecturers are expected to take responsibilities for teaching, research, and community service. Therefore, I frequently engage in research by reading journal articles and conducting small action research projects*” [Interview 4].

Huong (*late-career*) explained: “*The growth of research activities not only contributes to the university’s ranking but also plays a crucial role in the professional development of individual lecturers. The active participation of lecturers in research activities reflects their dedication to the university’s policies and their commitment to advancing their professional careers*” [Interview 15].

Improvement of teaching practices

Fourteen of the 18 participants reported that engaging in research had helped them improve their

teaching practices. For example, Minh (mid-career) stated, *"Through conducting several research projects, I have gained higher professional expertise and can offer my students up-to-date knowledge. Without engaging in research, I would not be able to provide this level of expertise"* [Interview 7]. Trung (early-career) explained, *"I can acquire a lot of professional knowledge through engaging in many research activities. Because teaching and research have a close connection, I'm able to adjust my lectures accordingly, which in turn enhances my teaching practice"* [Interview 2].

Career advancement

Twelve of the 18 participants identified career advancement as a major motivation for engaging in research. Anh (late-career) reported, *"Engaging in research can promote teachers' professional prestige and enhance their status within the academic community. Thanks to my diverse publications, I was promoted to associate professor by the MOET three years ago"* [Interview 17]. Truc (mid-career) revealed, *"I was awarded a doctoral scholarship to study in a European university due to my strong CV, which highlights numerous research contributions"* [Interview 12].

Personal interest

Personal interest was reported by 9 of the 18 participants as a significant motivator for their research engagement. For example, Linh (early-career) reported, *"As a beginning lecturer, I have always been enthusiastic about exploring new teaching methods and enlarging my understanding of English language teaching. This passion encourages me to enthusiastically engage in research activities"* [Interview 6]. Nam (mid-career) said, *"I only take part in research activities that fit my interest. This leads to impactful research, as I personally invest in the findings and insights"* [Interview 10].

4.1.2. EFL lecturers' challenges in research engagement

Through the interviews, the participants reported four main challenges they faced during their research engagement, including heavy workload, lack of research competence, lack of peer and administrative support, and financial constraints.

Time constraints

In the interviews, all participants (18) revealed time constraints resulting from heavy workloads as a barrier to research engagement. For instance, Khanh (early-career) reflected, *"I am unable to engage in research activities because I have been assigned to teach more than 400 hours each semester"* [Interview 3]. Hoa (late-career) stated, *"I find it challenging to balance time between teaching and research, as female lecturers often face greater pressure than their male colleagues due to the need to manage both work and family duties"* [Interview 18].

Lack of research competence

Eleven participants reported that they were unable to conduct their own research projects because they lacked research knowledge and skills. For example, Mai (early-career) shared, *"I have never conducted any research projects because I am not confident in doing research. I hope that I will have more opportunities to attend some training sessions on research methodology and skills"* [Interview 1]. Nam (mid-career) revealed, *"I sometimes read journal articles and learn from other studies. I recognize that my research knowledge and skills are not sufficient to conduct research projects"* [Interview 10].

Lack of peer and administrative support

Nine participants identified the lack of peer and administrative support as another challenge affecting their research engagement. For instance, Thinh (early-career) indicated, *"I must collaborate with lecturers from other departments to conduct research projects because some senior lecturers in my department are unwilling to share their research experiences"* [Interview 4]. Anh (late-career) reported, *"My department established research groups based on lecturers' interests three years ago. However, to date, these groups have not conducted any research due to a lack of collaboration among lecturers"* [Interview 17].

Financial constraints

Through the interviews, seven of the 18 participants stated that the financial benefits received from research activities are limited. Cuc (*mid-career*) reported, “*When conducting a research project or supervising students’ theses, lecturers must invest a significant amount of time and energy. However, they could not earn high incomes from these research activities*” [Interview 9]. Tin (*late-career*) said, “*As my university does not offer significant financial rewards or incentives, I spend more time on teaching than conducting research and writing for publication*” [Interview 14].

4.2. Discussion

Drawing on the literature related to lecturers’ research engagement and andragogy theory (Knowles, 1980), this section discusses the findings to gain insights into tertiary EFL lecturers’ lived experiences of research engagement for PD amid Vietnamese higher education reforms.

4.2.1. EFL lecturers’ motivations for research engagement

Through the interviews, 15 out of 18 participants reported that institutional policies played a key role in enabling their research engagement. These findings suggest that institutional expectations helped shape participants’ research engagement. As a public institution administered by the MOET, Flower University follows national professional regulations—such as the Law on Higher Education (MOET, 2014) and its amendments (Vietnam National Assembly, 2018)—which mandate research as a core duty alongside teaching. The evidence from this study is consistent with Vu’s (2021) account of research as a professional requirement for lecturers. From an andragogical perspective (Knowles, 1980), it is evident that lecturers may be more willing to engage in research when they understand its crucial role to their professional responsibilities. The evidence from this study suggests that institutional requirements are not only regarded as EFL lecturers’ responsibilities but also opportunities for their professional growth. By aligning research activities with the institutional policies, lecturers demonstrate their commitment to both institutional priorities and their own career development.

Additionally, 14 out of 18 participants reported a positive impact on their teaching practices due to research engagement. This finding is consistent with existing literature demonstrating the relationship between teaching and research in higher education. Particularly, Xerri (2021) explained that research engagement not only contributes to knowledge creation but also enhances practical applications in educational settings. These accounts are consistent with the research-related expectations set out in Joint Circular No. 36/2014, titled “Regulations on codes and criteria for professional titles of lecturers at public tertiary institutions”. The circular stipulates that lecturers should possess research skills, coordinate research activities for students, and integrate the outcomes of scientific and technological projects into education, training, industry, and everyday life (MOET & MOHA, 2014). Drawing on the fifth principle of andragogy theory (Knowles, 1980), EFL lecturers view research engagement as a means of developing their professional skills. The findings from this study demonstrate that lecturers’ engagement in research is a crucial factor in their professional achievement. It is important for EFL lecturers to view research engagement as an on-going process throughout their careers to enhance professional expertise and teaching quality.

Moreover, career advancement was identified by 12 out of the 18 participants as a primary motivator for their research engagement. This finding is consistent with that from Goel and Göktepe-Hultén’s (2020) study indicating that publications and research contributions are connected to promotions and professional acknowledgment. Kwiek and Roszka (2024) indicated professional status and recognition as two main factors affecting research productivity. According to the fourth principle of andragogy theory (Knowles, 1980), it can be explained that adults are ready to learn when they recognize a practical and immediate need for learning. These findings suggest that the university should support research activities by providing sufficient resources and recognition to promote the professional growth of lecturers at all career stages.

In this study, half of the participants reported that personal interest plays a crucial role in fostering intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and high-quality research. The evidence from this study aligns with Hood's (2022) project, which indicated that effective research engagement occurs when it encourages teachers to reflect on and decide how to apply research findings, while addressing their specific needs and individually relevant topics. The second principle of andragogy theory (Knowles, 1980) suggests that EFL lecturers are more self-directed in their learning. Therefore, they are likely to engage in research with a high degree of autonomy. It is important for the university to provide EFL lecturers with opportunities to engage in research activities directly relevant to their teaching context. PD planners and policymakers should focus on EFL lecturers' needs for research when designing and implementing PD initiatives.

4.2.2. EFL lecturers' challenges in research engagement

The findings showed that time constraints, lack of research competence, lack of support and collaboration, and financial constraints were the main challenges hindered EFL lecturers' research engagement.

All participants (n=18) identified time constraints due to heavy workloads as a significant demotivator hindering their research engagement. The data from document analysis also revealed that the high number of required teaching hours EFL lecturers must complete each academic year was a main barrier preventing many lecturers from participating in research activities (School A, 2024). The evidence from this study is aligned with those from international research. Specifically, Alhassan and Ali (2020) stated that EFL teachers in Oman viewed their workload due to many teaching hours as a significant barrier to their research engagement. Similarly, in the Vietnamese education context, Vu (2021) reported that EFL lecturers faced heavy teaching demands and limited support for research despite their interest. Furthermore, female lecturers may face additional challenges in balancing professional and personal responsibilities. In Vietnam, it can be explained that female lecturers are often expected to manage both motherhood and household duties together with their career duties. As a result, they may face time constraints for their research activities compared to their male colleagues. The sixth principle of andragogy theory helps to explain that EFL lecturers' motivation to engage in research activities is internal rather than external. However, their aspirations are hindered by heavy teaching loads and personal responsibilities. The findings suggest that the university should consider reducing teaching loads or providing flexible schedules.

Through the interviews, 11 out of 18 participants reported that they were unable to conduct their own research projects because they lacked research competence. This finding is consistent with Heng et al.'s (2020) project, which found that many lecturers faced challenges in conducting research due to insufficient training in research methods and a lack of confidence in their skills. According to the third principle of andragogy theory (Knowles, 1980), prior experiences of adults provide a rich resource for their research engagement. Even though EFL lecturers may have limited experience with conducting research, their exposure to research articles and academic work may provide a starting point for developing research skills. The evidence from this study suggests that, in addition to language skills and teaching methods, EFL lecturers should take advantage of PD opportunities to enhance their research knowledge and skills to improve their professional qualifications and teaching quality.

In addition, half of the participants (n=9) reported the lack of peer and administrative support as a significant de-motivator influencing their research engagement. This finding is consistent with previous works from international literature which have highlighted the importance of collegial support in teacher research (Heng & Khan, 2020; Zoe & Glykeria, 2018). The second principle of andragogy theory (Knowles, 1980) emphasizes that adults prefer self-directed learning. Despite their proactive efforts to seek out or create research opportunities, EFL lecturers faced increased difficulties in self-directed learning due to the lack of a supportive environment. Consequently, for self-directed learning to be truly successful, it needs to be supported by a network that offers guidance, feedback,

and opportunities for collaboration. This study suggests that the university should foster such environments to enhance the success of EFL lecturers, particularly in research activities.

Finally, financial constraints were identified by 7 participants as a demotivator. The evidence from this study is congruent with international literature. Particularly, Heng et al. (2024) stated that insufficient funding was regarded as an inhibiting factor for teachers' research engagement. Within the Vietnamese education context, Mai and Brundrett's project (2022) found that teachers required support and encouragement, especially financial and other incentives, to engage in research activities. It is evident that addressing this challenge could promote the research productivity and career development of EFL lecturers. Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy helps to explain that lecturers' motivation to participate in research activities would be a main factor influencing their professional growth. However, due to the lack of financial incentives at the institutional level, EFL lecturers felt demotivated to take part in research activities. This study emphasizes the crucial impact of institutional policies on lecturers' career development.

Overall, Vietnamese EFL lecturers' experiences of research engagement can be effectively understood through the lens of Knowles (1980) andragogy theory. It is evident that EFL lecturers, as adult learners with diverse personal and professional experiences, are autonomous, self-motivated, and self-directed. Lecturers highly value the role of research in their career growth because research activities are important for fulfilling their institutional expectations, enhancing their professional practices, contributing to their career growth, and meeting their individual needs. However, lecturers faced several challenges, including time constraints, lack of research competence, lack of peer and administrative support, and financial constraints. This study highlights the importance of framing the national policies specifically relevant to the institutional and individual contexts, so that these policies may fulfil the national education reform objectives and enhance EFL lecturers' individual motivation for engaging in research activities.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings from this study highlight that although Vietnamese tertiary EFL lecturers' research activities are driven by top-down institutional policies that reflect and enact the national education reforms, the actual engagement is rooted in lecturers' individual motivation. Drawing on andragogy theory (Knowles, 1980), this study suggests that EFL lecturers, as adult learners, have internal rather than external motivation for their involvement in research activities, and their lived experiences for research engagement are influenced by both motivators and challenges. The findings from this study highlight the vital role of understanding the factors influencing EFL lecturers' research engagement at different career stages. Therefore, it is important for academic managers and PD planners to organize and implement diverse types of research activities for diverse groups of EFL lecturers in order to fulfil lecturers' diverse needs.

Through a phenomenological approach, this study has sought to address a gap in the literature, specifically to understand the lived experiences of Vietnamese tertiary EFL lecturers regarding their research engagement. The findings have highlighted some potential areas for further research. First, the evidence from this study reveals that lecturers' engagement in research activities significantly impacted on their teaching practices and career advancement. However, as there has been a shortage of empirical studies investigating the influences of lecturer research on these aspects under the setting of education reforms in Vietnam, more research will in fact be necessary to refine and further elaborate the new findings of this study. Second, the data from this study highlight the significant influence of institutional policies on lecturers' research engagement; more research needs to be conducted to explore if institutional policies should be customized to address the diverse needs and motivations of EFL lecturers at different career stages to enhance their research productivity and satisfaction within the Vietnamese education setting. Finally, the findings from this study suggest that national language reforms have led to increased

exposure of EFL lecturers to different research activities. To further improve the quality of these activities, additional research is necessary to explore the impact of these activities on the research experiences of Vietnamese EFL lecturers.

This is a small-scale study involving 18 EFL lecturers. While this design enabled an in-depth understanding of the context, the findings regarding lecturers' experiences of research engagement could be further validated through studies with larger sample sizes. Moreover, focusing on a single public institution limits the applicability of the results to the broader Vietnamese higher education context, including private universities and regional colleges, where institutional policies and financial incentives may differ significantly.

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