



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Kwok Kuen Tsang,
The Education University of Hong Kong,
Hong Kong SAR, China

REVIEWED BY

Hua Lu,
Anhui Polytechnic University, China
Phan Nhật Hào,
Can Tho University, Vietnam

*CORRESPONDENCE

Thanh Thao Le
✉ lethanhthao110294@gmail.com

RECEIVED 29 August 2025

ACCEPTED 30 September 2025

PUBLISHED 17 October 2025

CITATION

Nguyen HT and Le TT (2025) A sociocultural study of identity formation among novice EFL teachers in Vietnamese higher education. *Front. Educ.* 10:1675034. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1675034

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Nguyen and Le. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

A sociocultural study of identity formation among novice EFL teachers in Vietnamese higher education

Huong Tra Nguyen and Thanh Thao Le*

School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Can Tho, Vietnam

Introduction: This study examines how three novice English as a foreign language (EFL) lecturers in Vietnamese higher education construct their professional identities during the probationary period.

Methods: Framed by social constructivism and situated learning, we analyze semi-structured interviews using reflexive thematic analysis. We address a persistent gap in recent EFL identity research: limited attention to probationary novices in Southeast Asia, where globalized pedagogies intersect with Confucian-influenced institutional cultures.

Results: Findings show identity as negotiated across four interlocking trajectories: becoming an authoritative-yet-relational instructor, acting as a cultural mediator between global and local pedagogies, learning through mentorship and collegial participation, and cultivating situated resilience.

Discussion: We argue that identity work emerges from participation in departmental communities and classroom routines rather than from method adoption alone. Implications include structured, dialogic mentoring, culturally responsive pedagogy adaptation, and reflective checkpoints during probation. The study contributes an empirically grounded account of identity-in-practice in a rapidly reforming system and speaks to international debates on early-career teacher support in EFL higher education.

KEYWORDS

novice teachers, professional identity, probationary period, Vietnamese higher education, sociocultural learning

Introduction

The early years of teaching represent a pivotal developmental phase, often marked by uncertainty, adaptation, and profound identity work (Billot, 2010; Henkel, 2005). For novice teachers, this probationary stage is not merely a period of skill acquisition but a crucible in which professional selves are tested, negotiated, and reshaped. The transition from student to teacher entails far more than mastering classroom techniques; it involves recalibrating one's self-concept in response to the social, institutional, and cultural demands of teaching (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Larrivee, 2000). Understanding how early-career teachers navigate this transition is critical to supporting their psychological wellbeing, professional integration, and long-term commitment to the field.

This process of identity formation does not occur in isolation. Rather, it is situated within particular institutional cultures and informed by broader sociocultural expectations (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Many beginning teachers experience a “reality shock”

(Veenman, 1984), a disjunction between the ideals of pre-service preparation and the ambiguities of practice. Recent studies in higher-education and EFL contexts confirm that identity is dynamically negotiated through participation in local routines, mentoring, and classroom interaction, often under conditions of reform and globalization (e.g., Taşdemir and Seferoğlu, 2024; Xu, 2025; Zhou et al., 2025).

Vietnamese higher education (HE) exemplifies this complex landscape. Rooted in Confucian traditions that valorize hierarchy, deference, and teacher authority (London, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2006; Truong et al., 2017), classrooms are increasingly shaped by student-centred reforms and international benchmarks in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Policy initiatives have sustained this push: Decision 2080 extended the National Foreign Language Project to 2025 (Government of Vietnam, 2017), and the new Decree 222 regulates teaching and learning in foreign languages, including English-medium provisions in universities (Government of Vietnam, 2010). Together, these policies heighten expectations for communicative competence and pedagogical innovation while maintaining cultural norms around formality and respect, conditions under which novice teachers' identities are especially fluid.

Despite a growing regional literature on novice EFL teacher identity, recent empirical work in Asia (including China and Southeast Asia) has rarely examined probationary lecturers in Vietnamese HE as a distinct group. Existing studies in Vietnam tend to foreground pre-service or school contexts, or focus on broader teacher identity issues without centring the probationary transition in universities (e.g., Cong-Lem and Nguyen, 2024; Le et al., 2023), leaving limited insight into how institutional induction, mentoring, and departmental participation shape identity-in-practice during this liminal period. Addressing this gap is timely given Vietnam's policy momentum toward expanded English use and quality assurance in tertiary settings.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how novice EFL lecturers at a Vietnamese university experience and reconstruct their professional identities during probation. We take identity not as a fixed status but as a socially mediated, situated process shaped through daily interactions, institutional norms, and reflective sense-making (Beijaard et al., 2004). Drawing on social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), we explore how newcomers negotiate challenges, respond to cultural expectations, and cultivate a sense of professional self within a transitional, and sometimes contradictory, environment.

Accordingly, this study asks:

- 1 How do novice EFL lecturers narrate the construction of their professional identities during the probationary period in Vietnamese HE?
- 2 Through what social interactions and situated practices (e.g., mentoring, departmental participation, classroom routines) do these identities emerge and shift?

Literature review

Novice EFL teachers' identity construction

Professional identity in teaching is widely understood as dynamic, relational, and context-sensitive rather than fixed, emerging through

teachers' ongoing meaning-making across roles, relationships, and routines (Beijaard et al., 2004). In the novice phase, identity work intensifies as idealized images of teaching confront institutional realities, what Veenman (1984) termed "reality shock," and as newcomers learn to calibrate authority, care, and competence *in situ* (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Tait, 2008). Alongside these early challenges, scholarship has emphasized that persistence is not merely an individual trait but a socially supported repertoire cultivated through reflection and collegial support (Castro et al., 2010), a view consistent with process-oriented accounts of novice development. Recent empirical studies in higher-education EFL contexts corroborate this processual view: identity shifts are negotiated through participation in mentoring, departmental practices, and classroom interaction, often amid reform pressures. For instance, Xu (2025) traced fluid movements among authority, agency, and vulnerability among Chinese EFL instructors during a teacher-learning programme, highlighting the interplay of identity, emotion, and agency under a sociocultural lens. Narrative and case studies with novice EFL lecturers similarly report tensions and re-positionings across early-career episodes (e.g., Zhang, 2025; Zhou et al., 2025), with situated learning used to interpret movement from peripheral to more legitimate participation. Scoping and review work also underlines the tight coupling of identity with cognition, emotion, and agency in language teachers' professional lives, reinforcing a socio-professional (rather than purely individual) frame for early-career development.

EFL teachers in Vietnam and Southeast Asia

Across Southeast and East Asia, scholarship on EFL teacher identity has expanded but remains uneven across sectors and career stages. Vietnamese studies show identities negotiated at the intersection of institutional reform, internationalisation, and local pedagogical traditions (Do and Hoang, 2024; Tran and Taylor-Leech, 2023; Vu et al., 2024). Regionally, investigations of novices in China and neighbouring systems similarly document tensions tied to accountability regimes, the uptake of new pedagogies, and shifting student expectations, patterns that resonate with Vietnamese HE. Yet probationary lecturers in Vietnamese universities remain under-examined as a distinct group. Much of the Vietnam-based literature focuses on pre-service or school contexts, or it treats early-career identity without centring the formal probation phase that structures induction in universities (e.g., Le et al., 2023). This lacuna motivates the present study's focus on identity-in-practice during probation in a Vietnamese higher-education EFL department.

In EFL settings, novices often navigate a double bind between student-centred pedagogies promoted in training and classroom cultures that prize teacher authority and clarity. Foundational work documents these tensions and their cultural underpinnings in Confucian-heritage contexts (Jackson, 2015; Tsui, 2007) and discusses how "global" communicative methods require adaptation to local expectations (McKay and Brown, 2015). Taken together, this literature positions Vietnamese HE as a site where pedagogical innovation must be rendered culturally legible rather than imported wholesale, an assumption that frames our analysis of how probationary novices translate, sequence, and justify interactive practices within prevailing norms of clarity and responsibility.

Probationary year in Vietnamese HE

Vietnamese universities, especially public institutions, hire novice lecturers as public employees under the Law on Public Employees (Government of Vietnam, 2010). New recruits must complete a probationary period, typically 3–12 months depending on role, during which they are mentored, observed, and formally appraised before confirmation. In practice, departments appoint a mentor/supervisor, assign a teaching load, and conduct periodic evaluations tied to classroom performance, collegial participation, and compliance with unit routines. Confirmation ends the probation and confers full appointment in the relevant professional title track.

Two features make the university probationary year distinctive vis-à-vis other “trial” periods in education. First, it is an employment-based induction rather than a pre-service practicum: novices carry independent course responsibility, are accountable to unit norms and student evaluations, and can be non-confirmed if performance is inadequate. By contrast, teaching practica for pre-service teachers are time-limited, supervised training placements embedded in coursework and assessed primarily for learning rather than employment continuation (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ingersoll and Strong, 2011). Second, university probation is embedded in institutional reform pressures, including English-medium/foreign-language teaching policies, that shape expectations about clarity, assessment, and student engagement (Government of Vietnam, 2017). These policy currents situate probation not merely as individual adjustment but as identity work negotiated within evolving departmental cultures and national mandates.

For non-public (autonomous/private) universities, employment law also allows probationary clauses; however, public-employee probation remains the dominant model in the public sector where our cases are situated. Across settings, the stakes of the probationary year differ markedly from secondary-school probation: HE novices manage curriculum design, assessment policies, and research expectations alongside teaching, with fewer templated scripts and looser classroom surveillance. As our findings show, this context intensifies novice identity work around authority, relationality, and legitimacy in ways not typically captured by practicum-focused language teacher education literature.

Theoretical framework and its application in EFL identity research

We frame identity through social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), viewing becoming a teacher as a socially mediated, participatory process. In EFL identity research, these frameworks are not merely background metaphors; they have been explicitly applied to analyze how participation and interaction re-script teacher selves. Recent studies operationalize sociocultural constructs, such as mediation, dialogue, and tool-use, to show how mentors, peers, and students co-author identity positions over time (e.g., Xu, 2025). Likewise, situated learning and communities of practice (CoP) have been used to interpret novices’ movement from peripheral recognition toward fuller legitimacy through departmental routines, observation, and collaborative planning (e.g., Zhang, 2025). Narrative overviews within Vietnam also document CoP as a valued mechanism for EFL teacher learning and identity formation,

underscoring the relevance of CoP for the Mekong and broader Vietnamese context.

Guided by these lenses, we examine how identity positions (e.g., authoritative-yet-relational instructor; cultural mediator; learning colleague; resilient practitioner) are negotiated through situated practices, such as mentoring talk, departmental participation, and classroom routines, during the probationary period. Our interview prompts and analysis attend to (a) social mediation (who/what interactions trigger re-positioning) and (b) participation structures (what routines confer or withhold legitimacy), aligning the study’s analytic moves with established uses of sociocultural/CoP theory in EFL identity research.

Methods

Research design

This study adopts a narrative-informed multiple case study within a constructivist paradigm to examine how novice EFL lecturers in Vietnamese HE construct professional identities during probation. The focus is on meaning-making in context rather than variable prediction or statistical generalization. Guided by social constructivism and situated learning, we treat identity as emergent from participation in social practices and relations; the design therefore privileges depth, context, and interpretation over breadth.

A multiple case design fits our aim to illuminate both common mechanisms and contextual particularities across novices who share institutional conditions but differ in biography (e.g., gender, specialization, regional background). At the same time, identity is experienced and communicated as story. We therefore use a narrative sensibility, attending to temporality (before-during-after probation episodes), sociality (relations with students, mentors, peers), and place (departmental and classroom settings), to elicit and represent participants’ lived accounts. Practically, interviews were designed to prompt storied recollection; analytically, we produced within-case narrative vignettes and then synthesized patterns across cases.

Participants and sampling

We used purposive typical-case sampling to recruit novice EFL lecturers who were undergoing the formal probationary phase at a Vietnamese public university. Inclusion criteria were: (a) full-time appointment in an EFL/English-related unit, (b) ≤ 12 months in post and currently within institutional probation, and (c) willingness to participate in a recorded interview. We excluded part-time tutors and staff beyond probation. Recruitment proceeded via a departmental gatekeeper who distributed an invitation and information sheet; interested lecturers contacted the research team directly. Three lecturers consented and completed the study. The sample was intentionally varied on gender, academic specialization, and regional origin to capture diversity within a shared organizational context (Table 1).

We treat background as identity resources (prior roles, values, and aspirations) that novices brought into the probationary year. Based on interview accounts, all three were new to full-time higher-education teaching, having recently transitioned from student roles into lecturer positions within the same disciplinary community. Each articulated a

TABLE 1 Participant profile.

Pseudonym	Gender	Specialization (primary courses)	Teaching load (hrs/wk)	Notes
Lan	F	Reading	25	N/A
Minh	M	Academic writing, Speaking/Listening	28	N/A
Quyen	F	Speaking/Listening, Reading	30	N/A

pre-existing orientation to “good teaching” that shaped early performances:

- Lan framed herself as conscientious and caring, equating good teaching with predictability and fairness. She valued orderly lessons and explicit expectations, which initially translated into a preference for detailed scripts and tight sequences.
- Minh positioned himself as a dialogic facilitator, aspiring to student voice and interaction. He entered probation valuing spontaneity and rapport, and quickly confronted tensions between friendliness and perceived authority.
- Quyen described a relational ethos, emphasizing warmth and encouragement. She prized emotional attunement and read silence as potential disengagement before learning to see it as culturally inflected participation.

Across cases, these starting positions recalibrated. Lan learned to anchor flexibility in a few non-negotiables (clear rules + freer discussion). Minh re-balanced by front-loading structure (signposted tasks, time cues) to support dialogue without eroding authority. Quyen reframed silence as thoughtful uptake, pairing gentle cold-calling with explicit turn-taking norms. Collectively, they moved from “idealized scripts” toward context-sensitive repertoires that fit local expectations while preserving core values.

Research site and context

The study took place in a public university English department implementing national foreign-language reforms that encourage communicative pedagogy and English-medium practices alongside established norms of classroom formality and teacher authority. Probation typically involves intensified observation and collegial oversight, with expectations around syllabus alignment, assessment consistency, and student feedback. This hybrid environment, globalized instructional aims within Confucian-influenced institutional cultures, provides a fertile setting for examining identity-in-practice during the novice phase.

Data collection and interview protocol

Data comprised one in-depth, semi-structured interview per participant (approximately 60–90 min), conducted in the participant’s preferred language (Vietnamese/English/mixed), audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient to participants (both on campus / online), with conversational prompts designed to elicit storied accounts of becoming a teacher.

Prompts operationalized social constructivism and situated learning by focusing on (a) social mediation: interactions with

mentors, peers, and students that re-positioned the self (e.g., “*Tell me about a conversation or incident that changed how you saw yourself as a teacher*”), and (b) participation structures, such as departmental/classroom routines that conferred or withheld legitimacy (e.g., “*Which routines or practices helped you feel recognized as a ‘real’ lecturer?*”). Additional probes traced temporality (before-during-after probation episodes), sociality (relationships), and place (classroom/department), reflecting our narrative sensibility.

Transcription, translation, and data management

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. When interviews included Vietnamese, transcripts were translated into English by a bilingual research assistant and cross-checked by the second bilingual member of the team for semantic fidelity, idiomatic nuance, and domain terminology. We maintained a secure, de-identified corpus with pseudonyms and removed direct identifiers. An audit trail (interview logs, code iterations, theme memos) was kept to support transparency.

Data analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) with two levels: within-case and cross-case. Analytic steps included (1) familiarization (annotated read-throughs), (2) initial open coding focusing on identity positions, triggers, and participation structures, (3) clustering codes into candidate categories per case, (4) drafting within-case narrative vignettes that preserved temporality and context, and (5) cross-case synthesis to refine themes and articulate convergences/divergences.

Here is an sample illustrative coding chain: Excerpt (P2): “*If I try to be too friendly, some students do not take me seriously.*” → Initial codes: “*performing seriousness*,” “*affect-authority trade-off*,” “*reading student cues*.” → Category: Boundary calibration in Confucian classroom norms → Theme: Authoritative-yet-relational instructor.

A similar chain for each case was preserved in the audit trail. Cross-case matrices compared (a) identity positions enacted, (b) participation opportunities (mentoring talk, meeting routines, classroom practices), and (c) turning points (student pushback, mentor advice, assessment deadlines) that precipitated identity shifts. Final themes were reviewed for internal coherence and distinctiveness and aligned with our theoretical frames (social mediation; legitimate peripheral participation).

Trustworthiness and researcher reflexivity

Credibility was supported through prolonged analytic engagement, reflexive memoing, and bilingual translation checks.

We conducted negative-case analysis during theme review to test counter-examples and avoid over-coherence. Transferability is enhanced by thick description of participants and site; dependability and confirmability are supported by an audit trail (coding files, theme logs, analytic decisions). The first author is an insider to Vietnamese HE; the team treated this positionality as a resource and a risk, documenting assumptions, moments of cultural shorthand, and interpretive shifts in reflexive memos.

Ethics

Participants provided oral informed consent for audio-recording, translation, and anonymized quotation. Data were stored on encrypted drives accessible only to the research team.

Findings

Becoming an authoritative-yet-relational instructor

In the opening weeks of probation, all three lecturers described “*trying on*” versions of teacherhood, firm, friendly, distant, warm, while watching how students and colleagues read those performances. The oscillation was not trivial stage fright; it was identity work conducted in public. Lan captured the sensation succinctly: she felt “*always performing*,” unsure whether to “*stand firm and lead*” or “*sit down next to them and guide quietly*.” That uncertainty trickled into micro-moves, such as voice, stance, where she stood when giving instructions, how long she waited before intervening, that cumulatively signaled who she was in the room.

Minh’s early classes amplified the tension. He prized dialogue, yet sensed an “*unspoken expectation to maintain a certain distance*.” His reflection (“*Students want you to be friendly, but not too friendly. If you laugh too much, they stop taking you seriously*”) shows how authority and approachability were negotiated moment to moment. Attempts to soften the room sometimes invited boundary-testing; attempts to tighten control sometimes produced disconnect. Minh’s turning point came when he reframed authority as clarity rather than strictness: “*Once I wrote the three non-negotiables on the board and stuck to them, I could relax everywhere else*.”

Quyen’s shift hinged on better reading of silence. Initially, quiet groups were interpreted as disengaged. After brief one-to-one check-ins, she realized many were “*cautious, not absent*,” waiting for stronger cues about expectations and acceptable risk. She began to preface tasks with a short modelling move, then used timed checklists and named roles to scaffold talk. The effect was twofold: students participated with fewer social costs, and Quyen felt “*legitimate*” without resorting to a hard persona.

Across cases, authority became less a posture to assert and more a relationship to earn. The route there was practical and iterative: tightening instructions, scripting first turns, making consequences transparent, anchoring feedback in shared criteria, and reserving warmth for moments that did not blur expectations. Each lecturer described a small repertoire of boundary-setting devices, including “*non-negotiables*” on the board, a consistent start-of-class routine, a

calm reset phrase, that reduced ambiguity and freed attention for connection.

These adjustments were not merely technical. They re-positioned the teachers’ identities. Lan began to name her stance as “*clear and kind*,” noticing that students “*tested less when they knew the plan*.” Minh described feeling “*less like an actor and more like myself*,” once rules were predictable and dialogue had a frame. Quyen linked fairness to respect: “*When feedback was specific and the same for everyone, they listened differently*.”

Analytically, the movement is from performing authority to an authoritative-yet-relational presence, a stance students recognize as consistent, fair, and human, achieved through a chain of situated micro-decisions (tone, timing, task setup, visible criteria) continually shaped by classroom feedback. Authority here is co-constructed: students’ responses teach novices which signals confer legitimacy, and novices learn to balance clarity with care without sliding into either severity or over-familiarity. Read through CoP, the shift is a recalibration of belonging across engagement, imagination, and alignment: engagement stabilizes as novices script opening moves and deploy calm resets, imagination sharpens as they project a credible persona (the “*clear-and-kind*” teacher they and their students can recognize), and alignment deepens as routines, criteria, and tone come to fit departmental expectations of fairness and responsibility. Legitimacy, in short, is not asserted but accrued as these modes braid, doing the work with others, seeing oneself as a certain kind of teacher, and coordinating one’s signals with the unit’s moral-pedagogical order.

Acting as a cultural mediator of pedagogies

All three lecturers described the early months as a continuous act of translation, between the interactive, student-centred methods they had been trained to value and the classroom norms their students expected. Quyen’s first attempts at pair work and role play “*looked modern on paper*,” but in practice “*students looked confused, even disappointed, when I did not just explain everything clearly from the front*.” The disappointment was not resistance to learning so much as a different image of what good teaching looks like: clarity delivered authoritatively.

Minh’s turning point came after a peer-review activity where “*many just sat quietly*.” A student later told him, “*We want you to teach us, not each other*.” Rather than abandoning interaction, Minh reframed it: he began each cycle with a short teacher modelling segment and a worked example on the projector, then shifted to tightly scaffolded peer steps with sentence starters and explicit criteria. “*Once I showed how to do the critique and why it mattered*,” he noted, “*they treated it as part of my teaching, not a break from it*.”

Lan offered the metaphor that anchored this theme: blending “*Western methods and Vietnamese values without ending up muddy*.” For her, the blend meant sequencing and translation. She front-loaded brief, high-clarity explanations and demonstration, then moved into guided practice with clearly assigned roles (timekeeper, summariser, spokesperson) and low-risk response formats (rapid writes, think-pair-share before public talk). She also “*translated*” the rationale into local moral logics (e.g., fairness, effort, respect), so participation felt legitimate rather than trendy.

Across cases, participants learned to introduce change through rather than against the grain of local expectations. They adopted a hybrid repertoire: model → guided practice → structured

collaboration; teacher-led clarity followed by tightly bounded student work; rationales that tied participation to fairness (*“everyone gets a voice”*), diligence (*“we practise before we perform”*), and respect (*“I prepare you before I ask you”*). Small design moves, such as naming roles, scripting first turns, using checklists, rotating public speakership, reduced social risk and reframed interaction as teacher-sanctioned learning, not abdicated authority.

These adaptations mark a turn from would-be reformers to cultural mediators of pedagogy, teachers who keep faith with their training while rendering it culturally legible. The identity that emerges is hybrid and recognizably responsible in this context, achieved through situated negotiation: reading student cues, sequencing methods to honor clarity and hierarchy, and translating the “why” of interaction into locally resonant values. Seen through CoP, this mediation pivots on imagination, recasting what “good teaching” looks like here, and is secured by alignment as interactive routines are reframed with rationales of fairness, effort, and respect and enacted in sequences that make sense locally (model → guided practice → structured collaboration). These translations then thicken engagement by lowering social risk and making participation teacher-sanctioned rather than teacher-abdicated. In this way, pedagogical innovation gains legitimacy not as a performance of the “modern,” nor as a retreat to tradition, but as a situated membership sustained by the braided work of imagination, alignment, and engagement.

Becoming a learning colleague through mentorship and collaboration

While the first months often felt solitary, participants repeatedly located their turning points in conversations, with mentors who normalized uncertainty and with peers who made struggle shareable. Lan framed her mentor as an interpretive companion rather than a supervisor: *“She did not tell me what to do; she helped me hear myself think.”* Practical work, e.g., co-reading syllabi, comparing sample feedback, rehearsing first-five-minutes routines, translated ambiguity into actionable choices. *“Once we aligned what clarity looked like in our department, my grading and instructions started to feel consistent,”* Lan noted.

Minh’s growth hinged on lateral ties. A small after-class circle (*“three or four of us in the canteen”*) became a space for low-stakes debriefs: what tanked, what worked, and why. Out of these chats came small but durable practices: a shared bank of opener prompts, a one-page *“non-negotiables”* list for each course, and a habit of swapping one graded script per week for calibration. *“It was not about copying methods,”* Minh said. *“It was seeing how others decide and borrowing that thinking.”*

For Quyen, the blend mattered. Mentor meetings provided horizon, how to pace a semester, anticipate bottlenecks, prepare for observation, while peers offered immediacy: *“What do you do tomorrow when half the class is silent?”* She began initiating micro-observations (10 min at the start of colleagues’ classes) and inviting the same in hers, followed by five-minute corridor debriefs. *“Those tiny cycles,”* she reflected, *“made me feel part of something. Not just surviving, but belonging.”*

Across cases, these ties did more than transfer techniques; they redistributed legitimacy. Through mentors, novices learned department tacit knowledge, including what *“fair grading”* means here, how attendance is interpreted, when to escalate an issue.

Through peers, they trialed and iterated moves without fear of judgment. The classroom stopped being a private stage and became a shared workshop.

Participation in mentoring and peer routines repositioned novices from isolated performers to learning colleagues, a shift anchored in belonging and shared standards and achieved through situated participation (syllabus co-design, feedback swaps, micro-observations, debrief talk) that converts uncertainty into communal practice. These ties furnished both discourses of *“what counts here”* and practical heuristics for daily decisions. Read through CoP, engagement is unmistakable as micro-observations, script swaps, and corridor debriefs fold novices into everyday collegial labor. Alignment becomes speakable and shared as tacit departmental norms, what counts as fair grading, how we open classes, are articulated and jointly upheld. Imagination expands as novices come to see themselves not as solitary performers but as colleagues with licence to iterate. This is why technique transfer alone misses the point: it is belonging, enacted through the braided work of engagement, alignment, and imagination, that redistributes legitimacy.

Cultivating resilience as a practitioner

Threaded through each case was a gradual shift from bracing against difficulty to working with it. Early wobbles, such as quiet rooms, activities that fell flat, conflicting feedback, were first read as verdicts on competence. Over time, participants learned to translate those moments into data for improvement and stories that sustained effort.

Quyen’s account is the clearest arc. On days she left class *“thinking maybe I am not meant for this,”* she began a small after-class ritual: 10 min to annotate her plan with what actually happened and one change for next time. *“It did not make the feeling disappear,”* she noted, *“but it gave it somewhere to go.”* That practice, paired with a quick check-in message to a peer or mentor, turned discouragement into a cue for action rather than withdrawal.

Minh reframed failure by redefining success. *“At first, a good class meant no mistakes,”* he said. *“Now, it means I noticed the moment things slipped and tried one thing to recover.”* He kept a running list of *“recovery moves,”* such as writing the task on the board, resetting with a 60-s individual draft, and modelling one more example, and treated their use as professional judgement, not admission of defeat. The list functioned as a personal safety net, reducing the cognitive load of improvisation.

Lan grounded resilience in purpose. On difficult days she deliberately recalled specific student progress (e.g., *“the quiet one who spoke up,”* *“the group that finally asked a question”*) and placed those examples at the top of the next lesson plan. *“When I could see why the work mattered, I had more patience with how messy it felt,”* she reflected. She also adopted a calm reset phrase (*“Let us pause and look together”*) that signalled steadiness to students and to herself.

Across cases, resilience emerged as a repertoire rather than a trait: brief reflective notes, one peer contact after tough lessons, a small set of pedagogical “reset” moves, and purpose cues embedded in planning. These practices were social and situated, enabled by mentors’ normalization of uncertainty and peers’ reciprocal witnessing, so that returning after a setback felt like rejoining a shared endeavour, not starting over alone.

Through these micro-practices, novices consolidated a resilient practitioner identity, an orientation that treats difficulty

as workable material, by enacting situated routines that keep participation going (reframing, resetting, reaching out, re-anchoring purpose). Resilience here is not stoicism but continued membership: the willingness and capacity to remain engaged in classroom and departmental life after imperfect moments. Read through CoP, this is engagement that persists (turning discouragement into small next moves), supported by alignment with institutional repertoires for recovery (calm reset phrases, audit-friendly notes, peer check-ins), and animated by imagination of durable professional selves (“*not starting over alone*,” “*part of a shared endeavour*”). Framed this way, resilience is not a personal trait but a membership practice, staying in the community and making difficulty usable for participation.

Discussion

This study traced how novice EFL lecturers in Vietnamese HE calibrated professional identities during probation, consolidating four interlocking positions, including authoritative-yet-relational instructor, cultural mediator of pedagogy, learning colleague, and resilient practitioner, through daily participation in classrooms and departments. Rather than re-state results, we interpret these trajectories through sociocultural and situated lenses and locate them within current EFL identity scholarship.

Participants’ movement from “*performing*” to “*authoritative-yet-relational*” echoes long-standing claims that teacher identity is dynamic, relational, and context-bound (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Beijgaard et al., 2004). In our data, authority stabilized when clarity practices (non-negotiables, visible criteria, predictable openings) made warmth safe. This complements early accounts of “reality shock” (Veenman, 1984) and novice concerns with classroom management (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Tait, 2008) by specifying how signals of authority are recalibrated in Confucian-influenced settings through dialogic routines that students recognize as fair and consistent. In sociocultural terms (Vygotsky, 1978), students’ responses to clearer framing re-positioned teachers’ sense of legitimacy.

Having stabilized authority through clarity-with-care, novices then faced the question of making interactional pedagogies legible locally. Tensions between student-centred training and local expectations are well documented in EFL contexts (Jackson, 2015; McKay and Brown, 2015; Tsui, 2007). Our cases extend this by showing how translation moves, including brief modelling → guided practice → structured collaboration, reframed rationales in values that resonate (fairness, effort, respect). Rather than a “*traditional vs. modern*” binary, novices enacted a hybrid pedagogy aligned with recent accounts of identity negotiated across global and local demands in Asian HE (e.g., Xu, 2025), while grounding the negotiation in Vietnamese norms of clarity and teacher responsibility.

The fit of these practices was learned in community. Consistent with situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), legitimacy accrued through participation in departmental routines (co-reading syllabi, swapping graded scripts, micro-observations). The shift to “*learning colleague*” is best specified as a CoP engagement-alignment nexus in which micro-participation and access to shared artefacts coordinated

practice with unit standards while enlarging novices’ imagination of self as a colleague (Zhang, 2025). This aligns with regional case/narrative work locating growth in collegial participation rather than individual resilience alone (e.g., Taşdemir and Seferoğlu, 2024).

While prior work often treats resilience as an attribute or outcome (Castro et al., 2010), participants framed it as routines that keep participation going: quick reflective notes, calm reset moves, purpose cues, and low-stakes peer check-ins. These converted difficult moments into workable material. Read socioculturally, resilience here is dialogically mediated; read situationally, it indexes increasing legitimate participation. In short, resilience is less “coping” than remaining in the work after imperfect episodes.

Across paragraphs, the four positions braid into an identity-in-calibration process: boundary calibration in the classroom (authority-care) becomes viable when innovation is made culturally legible; both are enabled by collegial belonging. Resilience consolidates across this participation. Calibration is not capitulation but the mechanism by which novel practices acquire local legitimacy. This specification deepens sociocultural claims (identity as socially mediated) and situated claims (identity as participation) by naming the micro-routines through which calibration proceeds during probation.

During the probation year, teaching identity was foregrounded (workloading, observation, student feedback), while research identity appeared only in thin traces (e.g., reading to prepare lessons, interest in classroom inquiry). This pattern accords with evidence that early-career academics’ identity trajectories consolidate around immediate teaching demands when institutional signals privilege classroom performance (Billot, 2010; Henkel, 2005). In Vietnam, policies on internationalization and English-medium instruction raise expectations for quality teaching and language-policy compliance even as probation concentrates observation and accountability. Set against national ambitions for English proficiency and the expansion/regulation of English-medium instruction (Government of Vietnam, 2017, 2025), novices are expected to be both innovative and recognizably responsible. The relative thinness of research-identity talk is best read as temporal sequencing: legitimacy is first negotiated through teaching-led routines and alignment with unit norms, with research identity thickening post-confirmation as workload autonomy and publication mentorship become more accessible.

Participants’ identity moves repeatedly invoked values associated with Confucian heritage cultures. Novices sought legitimacy by signaling clarity, consistency, and moral responsibility; authority became predictable care that enabled warmth without loss of status (Truong et al., 2017). Hesitancy to confront publicly and preference for gentle steering preserved student dignity; silence was read as affiliative rather than defiant, with private feedback and collective norms used to avoid embarrassment (Nguyen et al., 2006). These value constellations did not enforce rigid teacher-centredness; they reframed student-centred practices (pair-work, guided questioning) as teacher-sanctioned participation compatible with local expectations of order and care.

Empirically, we foreground probationary lecturers in Vietnamese HE, an under-documented group in the EFL identity literature, and show, with precision, how identities move through small, repeatable

routines that render authority credible, make innovation legible, and are sustained by belonging. Conceptually, we propose identity-in-calibration to name the ongoing alignment of signals (tone, task framing, routines) with locally shared meanings of authority, fairness, and participation, an account that travels to other reforming, tradition-rich EFL systems while keeping context in view. Together, these contributions reframe early-career identity not as a linear passage from “novice” to “expert,” but as the acquisition of repertoires that make participation intelligible and sustainable in a particular moral-cultural ecology.

Implications

For departments and induction programs, the findings indicate that mentoring should be designed to support identity work rather than merely procedural compliance. Mentor-novice meetings ought to include a brief reflective “*identity prompt*” that invites discussion of moments of legitimacy and uncertainty alongside routine topics such as grading or observation preparation. Department-wide clarity practices, including non-negotiables, visible criteria, predictable openings, and calm reset phrases, should be treated as shared repertoires, modelled in micro-workshops and observed in practice, so that novices acquire stable cues for balancing authority and care. Pedagogical innovation will travel more effectively when it is rendered culturally legible: brief teacher modelling should precede guided practice and structured collaboration, and the rationale for participation should be expressed in values that resonate locally (fairness, effort, respect). Belonging functions as infrastructure for judgement; thus, light-touch routines such as 10-minute micro-observations, weekly script swaps for calibration, and brief corridor debriefs should be institutionalized to surface tacit standards and normalize uncertainty. Finally, resilience is best cultivated as a repertoire rather than a trait. Novices should be coached to maintain a concise list of recovery moves (e.g., writing tasks on the board, inserting a 60-second individual draft, modelling one further example) and a two-line after-class note that records what happened and one revision for next time, with these practices recognized as indicators of professional judgement rather than weakness.

At the level of Vietnamese HE policy and quality assurance, probation checkpoints should be explicitly aligned with national priorities for communicative competence and regulated English-medium provision. Mid-probation reviews would be strengthened by documenting how course design advances interactive learning while preserving culturally valued clarity and responsibility, thereby making innovation auditable within local norms. Recognition and workload credit for mentors who facilitate calibration activities, such as co-grading, micro-observations, and iterative debriefs, would help embed these practices in departmental quality systems. Programs expanding English-medium instruction or interactive pedagogy should require concrete artefacts (e.g., model-then-guide lesson plans, student role cards, and participation rationales) as evidence that imported methods have been translated into the institution’s moral-cultural vocabulary.

Theoretically, the study refines sociocultural and situated accounts by specifying identity-in-calibration as a mechanism that links micro-interactive work to legitimate participation. Calibration names the

ongoing alignment of signals, such as tone, task framing, routines, with locally shared meanings of authority, fairness, and participation; it is the practical labour through which pedagogical ideals acquire cultural legitimacy. Future scholarship should model calibration as an interactional routine unfolding across classrooms and departments, examine how it accumulates into durable repertoires, and trace how policy shifts accelerate or hinder its trajectory in early-career EFL contexts.

Conclusion

This study traced how novice EFL lecturers in Vietnamese HE constructed professional identities during probation. Identity moved from performing to participating selves through four interlocking positions: authoritative-yet-relational instructor, cultural mediator of pedagogies, learning colleague, and resilient practitioner. These positions were not traits but situated accomplishments, made possible by clarity routines in classrooms, culturally legible translations of innovation, collegial participation, and micro-practices that turned difficulty into continued membership.

What is new here is the focus on probationary lecturers in Vietnam and the articulation of identity-in-calibration as the engine of early-career change. We show, concretely, how authority becomes credible without harshness, how interactive methods gain legitimacy through modelling and rationale translation, and how belonging supplies the licence to keep experimenting. These insights speak beyond Vietnam to systems where tradition and reform coexist.

Limitations include a single-site sample and reliance on interviews without observational triangulation; member checking was not conducted due to time constraints. Future research should follow novices longitudinally across multiple institutions, add classroom/departmental observations, and examine how policy shifts shape calibration over time.

In sum, becoming a teacher in this context is not a passage from novice to expert but an ongoing practice of calibration, aligning signals and routines so that students, colleagues, and institutions can recognize one’s participation as legitimate. That is the everyday craft through which identities are built and sustained.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors upon reasonable request.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication

of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article because oral informed consent was well-received.

Author contributions

HTN: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TTL: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

References

- Beauchamp, C., and Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: an overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Camb. J. Educ.* 39, 175–189. doi: 10.1080/03057640902902252
- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., and Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* 20, 107–128. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2003.07.001
- Billot, J. (2010). The imagined and the real: identifying the tensions for academic identity. *High. Educ. Res. Dev.* 29, 709–721. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2010.487201
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. London: SAGE.
- Castro, A. J., Kelly, J., and Shih, M. (2010). Resilience strategies for new teachers in high-needs areas. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* 26, 622–629. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2009.09.010
- Cong-Lem, N., and Nguyen, M. H. (2024). Perezhivanie-agency dialectic: examining Vietnamese EFL educators' experiences and negotiation of dramatic classroom events. *System* 123:103347. doi: 10.1016/j.system.2024.103347
- Do, Q., and Hoang, H. T. (2024). The construction of language teacher identity among graduates from non-English language teaching majors in Vietnam. *Engl. Teach. Learn.* 48, 485–502. doi: 10.1007/s42321-023-00142-z
- Feiman-Nemser, S. (2001). From preparation to practice: designing a continuum to strengthen and sustain teaching. *Teach. Coll. Rec.* 103, 1013–1055. doi: 10.1111/0161-4681.00141
- Government of Vietnam (2010). LAW ON PUBLIC EMPLOYEES: pursuant to the 1992 constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which was amended and supplemented under resolution no. 51/2001/QH10: The National Assembly promulgates the law on public employees. Vietnam: National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.
- Government of Vietnam (2017). DECISION on approving adjustments and supplements to the project on teaching and learning foreign languages in the national education system for the 2017–2025 period. Vietnam: National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.
- Government of Vietnam (2025). DECREE on teaching and learning in foreign languages in education institutions. Vietnam: National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.
- Henkel, M. (2005). Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment. *High. Educ.* 49, 155–176. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-2919-1
- Ingersoll, R. M., and Strong, M. (2011). The impact of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers: a critical review of the research. *Rev. Educ. Res.* 81, 201–233. doi: 10.3102/0034654311403323
- Jackson, L. (2015). Challenges to the global concept of student-centered learning with special reference to the United Arab Emirates: 'never fail a Nahayan'. *Educ. Philos. Theory* 47, 760–773. doi: 10.1080/00131857.2014.901161
- Larrievée, B. (2000). Transforming teaching practice: becoming the critically reflective teacher. *Ref. Pract.* 1, 293–307. doi: 10.1080/713693162

The reviewer PN declared a shared affiliation with the authors to the handling editor at the time of review.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. For language quality, specifically to enhance clarity, coherence, and academic tone during the revision process. No intellectual content, analysis, and interpretation was used in this paper.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

- Lave, J., and Wenger, E. (1991). Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Le, T. T., Phuong, H. Y., Nguyen, A. T., Pham, T. T., Huynh Thi, A. T., and Nguyen, H. T. (2023). Illuminating the English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching odyssey: unveiling the professional identities of pre-service teachers. *F1000Res* 12:1086. doi: 10.12688/f1000research.139547.1
- London, J. D. (2011). Education in Vietnam. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- McKay, S. L., and Brown, J. D. (2015). Teaching and assessing EIL in local contexts around the world. London: Routledge.
- Nguyen, P. M., Terlouw, C., and Pilot, A. (2006). Culturally appropriate pedagogy: the case of group learning in a Confucian heritage culture context. *Intercult. Educ.* 17, 1–19. doi: 10.1080/14675980500502172
- Tait, M. (2008). Resilience as a contributor to novice teacher success, commitment, and retention. *Teach. Educ. Q.* 35, 57–75. Available online at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23479174>
- Taşdemir, H., and Seferoğlu, G. (2024). Language teacher identities and identity tensions of early career English teachers. *TESOL J.* 15:e794. doi: 10.1002/tesj.794
- Tran, H., and Taylor-Leech, K. (2023). Constructing professional identities in new figured worlds: foreign language teachers transitioning to English teaching in Vietnam. *Asia Pac. J. Teach. Educ.* 51, 76–89. doi: 10.1080/1359866X.2022.2151414
- Truong, T. D., Hallinger, P., and Sanga, K. (2017). Confucian values and school leadership in Vietnam: exploring the influence of culture on principal decision making. *Educ. Manage. Adm. Leadersh.* 45, 77–100. doi: 10.1177/1741143215607877
- Tsui, A. B. (2007). Complexities of identity formation: a narrative inquiry of an EFL teacher. *TESOL Q.* 41, 657–680. doi: 10.1002/j.1545-7249.2007.tb00098.x
- Veenman, S. (1984). Perceived problems of beginning teachers. *Rev. Educ. Res.* 54, 143–178. doi: 10.3102/00346543054002143
- Vu, N. T., Ta, T. M. H., and Le, T. T. H. (2024). Teacher returnees from overseas programs in the west: a narrative study in Vietnam. *Front. Commun.* 9:1311179. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2024.1311179
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Xu, J. (2025). Exploring language teacher identity development in a teacher professional learning programme. *Asia-Pac. J. Second Foreign Lang. Educ.* 10, 1–21. doi: 10.1186/s40862-025-00327-y
- Zhang, X. (2025). Leave or stay? A narrative inquiry of tensions in novice English teachers' professional identity construction at China's private universities. *Front. Psychol.* 16:1485747. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1485747
- Zhou, J., Li, C., and Cheng, Y. (2025). Transforming pedagogical practices and teacher identity through multimodal (inter) action analysis: a case study of novice EFL teachers in China. *Behavioral Sci.* 15:1050. doi: 10.3390/bs15081050