

Article

Vietnamese TESOL Professionals' Investment in Research: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Identity, Capital, and Sponsorscales

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Abstract

Amidst rising expectations around research as key to professional survival and advancement in the field of TESOL, this study explores the dynamics of three Vietnamese TESOL professionals' investment in research from an emic perspective. Employing collaborative autoethnography, investment theory, and the notion of sponsorscales, we found that our research investment emerged through the construction of research-oriented ideal identities, with relational experiences serving as sponsorscales of social and cultural capital in support of identity construction. Our acquisition of symbolic capital through the sponsorscales of community recognition further reinforced these identities and thus drove our research investment. Simultaneously, socio-educational and socio-familial ideologies as sponsorscales of influence shaped our pursuit of research-oriented ought-to identities and mobilisation of cultural and economic capital under educational circumstances marked by neoliberal and traditional values. Our study foregrounds relational experiences, community recognition, and ideological forces as sponsorscales that support and sustain research investment, nuancing the theory of investment, while offering practical implications for research-based TESOL professional development and policy-making.

Keywords

TESOL professionals, research investment, identity, capital, ideology, sponsorscales

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1 Introduction

Doing research plays a crucial role in educators' professional development (Barsallo et al., 2025), shaping their engagement in educational reform (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009) and performance-based evaluations (Albaram et al., 2025; Le & Pham, 2025). It fosters agency for transforming professional learning and practice (Bahrami & Hosseini, 2023) and influences research productivity (Albaram et al., 2025) and thus overall professional development (Çomoğlu et al., 2025). In the field of TESOL, beyond their work in teaching, teacher education, and curricular development, TESOL professionals also engage in research, an endeavour which, as Çomoğlu et al. (2025) point out, can shape their professional identities, cultivate their criticality, and help to narrow the persistent gap between theory and practice. However, while considerable attention has been given to TESOL professionals' teaching motivation (Dörnyei, 2009) and classroom-based action research (Borg, 2013), the broader trajectories of their research-based professional development, especially in non-English-dominant contexts, are relatively underexplored (Peng & Gao, 2019; TESOL International Association, 2023; Yuan et al., 2016). Additionally, although TESOL professionals' research practices and the personal and contextual factors influencing these practices have been documented in a modest body of work on research motivation (Bahrami & Hosseini, 2023; Banegas & Romano, 2024; Bi & Liu, 2022; Peng & Gao, 2019; Reyes-Cruz & Perales-Escudero, 2016; Tran et al., 2021; Uyen & Vien, 2021; Yuan et al., 2016) and research engagement (Borg & Liu, 2013; Chau & Pham, 2022; Lu & Yoon, 2022; Mehrani, 2015; Pham et al., 2023; Vu, 2021; Xu, 2014), much less is known about social and cultural resources that shape the ways they invest in research endeavours such as undertaking doctoral studies, engaging in research projects, or publishing their work in scholarly journals. This research investment, in Darwin and Norton's (2015) terms, involves their purposeful commitment of resources into TESOL research and negotiation of research-related professional identities, shaped by perceived value, capital to be gained, and the power relations and social ideologies structuring their socio-professional contexts. Exploring TESOL professionals' research investment is thus crucial for understanding how they claim professional legitimacy and authority in the field (Bao, 2025) and how they sustain their long-term professional development (Abakah, 2023) through research, with their trajectories conditioned by various social and cultural resources.

In non-English-dominant contexts, examining the dynamics underlying TESOL professionals' research investment is increasingly critical. Their research endeavours, while shaping their overall professional development (Çomoğlu et al., 2025), are often abated by various personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors (Banegas & Romano, 2024; Bi & Liu, 2022; Borg & Liu, 2013; Mehrani, 2015; Uyen & Vien, 2021; Xu, 2014). Contextualised inquiry, such as in Vietnam, can yield nuanced insights into how TESOL professionals' research investment is shaped and supported by distinctive local conditions, while providing implications that resonate with comparable settings. Compared to non-English-dominant contexts such as China (e.g., Borg & Liu, 2013; Peng & Gao, 2019; Teng, 2024a, 2024b) and Iran (e.g., Bahrami & Hosseini, 2023; Lu & Yoon, 2022; Mehrani, 2015), Vietnam, however, remains underexplored with respect to TESOL professionals' research-based professional development (Vu, 2021).

Nevertheless, this area of inquiry and professional development in the Vietnamese TESOL context has begun to attract scholarly attention in recent years, especially since the National Foreign Languages Project 2020–2030 emphasised research for professionalism in TESOL (Hashimoto & Nguyen, 2018). Although still limited, a growing body of research has examined TESOL professionals' agency (Chau & Pham, 2022; Pham et al., 2023), inhibitors (Phuong et al., 2017), and dilemmas (Vu, 2021) in relation to how they engage in research, along with their broader research-related perceptions and practices (Uyen & Vien, 2021). This increasing attention to research-based professionalism in TESOL has been driven by rising English demands (Doan & Hamid, 2019), educational internationalisation, and neoliberal logics of performance, credentialism, competition, and visibility (Le & Pham, 2025; Ngo, 2020), with research

positioned at the centre of the shift. Amidst intensifying neoliberal imperatives for research productivity and global rankings (Le & Pham, 2025; Ngo, 2020; Peng & Gao, 2019), there is a pressing need for situated studies that illuminate how TESOL professionals in such a particular context as Vietnam navigate and invest in research for professional development. Understanding their research investment is crucial for grounding professional development in local realities and informing broader socio-professional discourses, especially against the backdrop of shifting demands.

Furthermore, Vietnam's educational landscape is characterised by a dynamic blend of neoliberal imperatives and enduring traditional values, which creates a unique context for examining TESOL professionals' investment in research-driven professional development and its broader implications. The long-standing tradition of valuing education, rooted in Confucianism (Bui & Pham, 2022; Vu & Yamada, 2022), for example, has fostered a persistent emphasis on educational attainment and investment, which is linked to improved educational outcomes and a strong societal commitment to learning (Vu & Yamada, 2022). At the same time, neoliberal practices, including the push for autonomy, internationalisation, and performance metrics, are driving educational institutions to compete for resources, enhance research productivity, and engage in international collaboration (Nguyen, 2020; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Tran, 2025; Tran et al., 2020). The adoption of international publication metrics and competitive funding mechanisms exemplifies this shift, while also introducing new challenges related to resource allocation, equity, and academic culture (Le & Pham, 2025; Nguyen, 2020; Tran et al., 2020; Trinh et al., 2020). The coexistence of traditional values and neoliberal imperatives makes Vietnam a compelling case for studying how such a blend shapes the direction of TESOL professionals' research endeavours, especially in a dynamic context where they often have to navigate shifting demands, institutional pressures, evolving notions of professional identity, while also integrating diverse influences of tradition and modernisation.

Given the unique social and cultural context of Vietnam, in our study, we draw particularly on the sociological concept of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013) to theorise and examine the fluid, context-embedded nature of TESOL professionals' research investment. Despite acknowledging prior literature on research motivation and engagement in illuminating TESOL professionals' developmental trajectories (Barsallo et al., 2025; Bi & Liu, 2022; Borg & Liu, 2013; Lu & Yoon, 2022; Mehrani, 2015; Peng & Gao, 2019), we find the concept of investment particularly crucial for examining their research practices. The extant literature suggests that psychological-affective theory of motivation and engagement, rooted in social psychology, often conceptualises TESOL professionals' learning and development as an individual, internal drive and highlights the role of personal and contextual factors in their research endeavours and research productivity (Bi & Liu, 2022; Borg & Liu, 2013; Chau & Pham, 2022; Mehrani, 2015; Peng & Gao, 2019; Uyen & Vien, 2021; Xu, 2014) as well as in their overall continuous professional development (Çomoğlu et al., 2025). This body of research, however, tends to overlook the dialectics between individual TESOL professionals and context and how broader sociocultural and ideological forces shape their willingness and ability to invest in research. As a result, it insufficiently captures the complexities of their "histories, lived experiences, and social practices" (Darvin & Norton, 2023, p. 29) in relation to TESOL research. In response, we have chosen to adopt investment theory for our study, which aims to address gaps left by the theory of motivation and engagement by accounting for the complex interplay of identity, ideology, and capital (Darvin & Norton, 2015) that influences how Vietnamese TESOL professionals invest in research as a pathway to professional development. At the same time, in employing the investment theory, we aim not only to draw on its existing explanatory power but also to extend its scope by incorporating Wargo and De Costa's (2017) notion of sponsorscapes. This concept brings into focus the often less visible yet influential sociocultural forces, including, but not limited to, ideologies, that shape individuals' academic and professional development. Integrating sponsorscapes with the investment theory enables a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural structures that frame and influence TESOL professionals' research investment (see Subsection 2.4).

As TESOL professionals with shared academic and professional backgrounds in the Vietnamese context, we feel personally compelled to adopt a collaborative autoethnographic approach (Zhu et al., 2022) to offer an emic, situated account of our research-related experiences, particularly how we invest in TESOL research as a means of claiming our professional legitimacy (Bao, 2025) and achieving overall professionalism in TESOL. Insights from this emic perspective, we expect, can offer lessons for similar contexts internationally. Practically, our study seeks to both inform stakeholders in comparable contexts and provoke critical self-reflection around research-informed professional development in TESOL, especially in non-English-dominant contexts. Research in our study refers to conducting, presenting, and publishing a formal research study and/or pursuing doctoral research studies (Vu, 2021) in TESOL, in line with the background and data of the study. We now introduce our research background.

2 Research Background

2.1 A conceptual shift towards research investment

The existing literature on TESOL professionals' research-driven professional development in non-English-dominant contexts has primarily focused on their research motivation (Bahrami & Hosseini, 2023; Banegas & Romano, 2024; Bi & Liu, 2022; Peng & Gao, 2019; Reyes-Cruz & Perales-Escudero, 2016; Tran et al., 2021; Uyen & Vien, 2021; Yuan et al., 2016) and research engagement (Borg & Liu, 2013; Chau & Pham, 2022; Lu & Yoon, 2022; Mehrani, 2015; Pham et al., 2023; Vu, 2021; Xu, 2014). Studies have examined the intrinsic-extrinsic binary, often highlighting the greater significance of intrinsic motivation, which is closely linked to high-quality research output, research productivity (Peng & Gao, 2019; Vu, 2021), and research self-efficacy (Reyes-Cruz & Perales-Escudero, 2016). This literature has also illuminated the dynamics of TESOL professionals' research engagement, showing how it is shaped by personal factors such as individual traits, interests, disciplinary orientation, conceptions of research, and research capacity (Borg & Liu, 2013; Phuong et al., 2017; Uyen & Vien, 2021; Vu, 2021). At the same time, a range of contextual constraints have been shown to diminish research motivation and engagement, including limited institutional support, inadequate training, time pressures, scarce resources, economic hardship, and research-resistant cultures (Banegas & Romano, 2024; Xu, 2014), as well as rigid curricula, student attitudes (Yuan et al., 2016), the marginalisation of non-elite academics (Lu & Yoon, 2022), and gendered domestic responsibilities (Pham et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2021). Overall, this body of work underscores the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of TESOL professionals' research endeavours and research-based professional development.

Despite these insights, much of the prior research predominantly frames motivation and engagement as psychological-affective constructs, often treating them as "unitary, fixed, and ahistorical" (Darvin & Norton, 2017, p. 2). As also mentioned in the Introduction section, this ontologically limited characterisation risks marginalising the intricate interplay between TESOL professionals' individual factors and the sociocultural contexts in which they operate, given that their research perceptions, practices, and agency are not driven simply by internal and external factors (Borg & Liu, 2013; Lu & Yoon, 2022). Existing research, thus, provides a limited understanding of how TESOL professionals' identity dynamics and experiences with social and cultural resources are translated into sustained investment in research and professional development.

Addressing this gap should entail a conceptual shift from the psychological-affective concepts of motivation and engagement to Norton's (2013) sociological concept of investment. Although initially developed to examine language learners' learning and identity negotiation, this concept is equally applicable to language teachers' investment in research projects, pedagogical practices, or professional learning (Bao, 2025). Indeed, its application has been documented in the literature on general teacher education (Abakah, 2023) as well as on language/TESOL professionals (Bao, 2025; Podboj &

Lujić, 2020), attesting to its theoretical adaptability and relevance for TESOL teacher education and professional development. For example, Zhang and Darvin (2025) investigated how gender ideologies in the Chinese context influenced pre-service TESOL teachers' investment in their learning and teaching practices, while Bao (2025) examined TESOL professionals' investment in doctoral research and the impact of doctoral studies on their ongoing professional identity construction. This conceptual shift invites the continued adoption of the investment theory (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013) in studying TESOL professionals' research perceptions and practices, which explains how individual identity and agency as well as sociocultural resources co-construct their research investment. The theory foregrounds the social and cultural dimensions of professional learning and development, emphasising how individuals' investment is shaped by their identities, histories, power relations, and ideologies (Abakah, 2023; Darvin, 2019; Darvin & Norton, 2017; 2021, 2023) within specific TESOL contexts.

Within prior literature on TESOL professionals' research-based professional development, although fragmented accounts of identity (mis)alignments (Yuan et al., 2016), professional roles (Vu, 2021), research identity negotiation (Xu, 2014), and social ideologies (Lu & Yoon, 2022; Pham et al., 2023) that shape their research endeavours and practices have been documented, the intersection of identity and ideology with capital—resources conferring social advantage (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2023)—in shaping research investment remains extremely underexplored. In this scenario, Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment theory offers a comprehensive and robust lens through which to explore TESOL professionals' research investment and professional development. This theory foregrounds individuals' "histories, lived experiences, and social practices" (Darvin & Norton, 2023, p. 29). It situates TESOL professionals' research investment and research-related identity negotiation in broader sociocultural structures, including capital and ideologies, which potentially expand the insights provided by research on motivation and engagement. Its triadic focus on identity, capital, and ideology enables deeper analysis of how dynamic self-perceptions, access to resources, and social structures co-construct TESOL professionals' investment in research, emphasising the need to understand it against the sociocultural backdrop of the TESOL research activity.

2.2 Investment theory

To ground our study theoretically, we draw on Darvin and Norton's (2015) model, which conceptualises investment as unfolding "at the intersection of identity, ideology, and capital" (p. 36).

Identity, as defined by Norton (2013), refers to "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 45). This view considers identity not as a fixed or essential trait, but as a complex, multiple, and fluid construct shaped by social interaction, power relations, and historical context. Identity is also a site of struggle, where an individual negotiates their sense of self in relation to power dynamics, social positioning, and access to resources. Thus, identity is dynamic, shifting across times and spaces, and is informed by the individual's past, present, and future senses of self through their evolving perception of their social relationships, but it is also, as suggested by Liu and Darvin (2024), constantly (re)constructed through personal agency and social interactions. While influenced by sociocultural forces, identity guides individual navigation of social relations and practices as well as elucidates their experiences of privilege or marginalisation (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2023). Importantly, Norton (2001, 2013) emphasises the imagination of identity. This futuristic dimension, envisioned through alternative perspectives and possibilities, motivates efforts towards membership in imagined communities (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Investing in imagined communities allows individuals to envision socially meaningful futures, expand their identity repertoires, and pursue learning trajectories that extend beyond the classroom (Liu et al., 2024). Darvin and Norton (2023) further point out that imagined identities include but extend beyond merely idealisation, encompassing a broader range of identity options tied to various imagined communities.

Capital, as resources for social advantage, exists in economic (wealth), cultural (knowledge, skills, and values), and social (relationships) forms to which individuals seek access (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990). These forms of power point to “questions of “what they have”, “what they know”, and “who they know”, respectively” (Liu, 2025, p. 218). During their socialisation into communities, individuals bring, mobilise, and utilise their capital for social advantage, which can be transformed into symbolic capital if recognised and legitimised (Bourdieu, 1987; Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2023). Through deeper participation, they may also acquire new symbolic capital that strengthens their legitimate membership and influence. This capital accumulation, as Darvin and Norton (2023) posit, shapes their community standing and enables the development and exercise of investment agency.

Ideology provides a window into how individuals’ social practices are shaped by hegemonic belief systems embedded in power structures (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2017, 2023). These hegemonic ideologies are often reproduced at the institutional level and influence which individual practices are embraced or marginalised in communities. Darvin and Norton (2023) argue that such ideologies shape social practices, which in turn reflect the ideologies themselves. Ideology thus sheds light on how individuals experience privilege or marginalisation and navigate their social practices in ideologically charged environments.

Building on prior literature and Darvin and Norton’s (2015) triadic framework, we conceptualise TESOL professionals’ research investment as deliberate acts of pursuing TESOL research as a major part of their professional development, entailing the commitment of time, effort, and resources, as well as a sense of responsibility towards research (Borg & Liu, 2013; Edwards, 2017). Such investment, from Darvin and Norton’s (2015) perspective, is mediated by the value they attach to research in negotiating their professional identities, the forms of capital they anticipate mobilising, and the ideological and power structures that organise their socio-professional contexts. It involves navigating hegemonic ideologies and generating capital to establish authority, legitimacy, and power within professional communities (Bao, 2025). Crucially, this investment is underpinned by agency that arises from the dynamic interplay between individuals and their socio-professional contexts (Edwards, 2017). This agency reflects the individuals’ capacity to navigate the material and symbolic conditions of particular contexts, which in turn shapes their decisions of investment or disinvestment (Darvin, 2025). In this sense, TESOL professionals’ research investment can essentially be understood as a form of “identity work” (Darvin & Norton, 2023, p. 37), wherein identity and agency are both constituted by, and constitutive of, the investment process.

2.3. Prior research informed by investment theory

Prior applications of Darvin and Norton’s (2015) investment model in language/TESOL teacher education have demonstrated that teachers’ professional growth is shaped by the negotiation of multiple identities, the value attached to diverse forms of capital—linguistic, cultural, and symbolic—and the ideologies circulating in their teaching contexts. For instance, foreign language teachers’ investment in professional practice while working abroad is mediated by host institutions’ ideological orientations and the recognition, or lack thereof, of their linguistic and cultural capital, which directly influences their sense of belonging and agency as educators (Podboj & Lujić, 2020). Similarly, opportunities for identity exploration and dialogic reassessment of professional capital in mixed-reality environments can foster teachers’ agency and facilitate the formation of their new professional identities (Liaw & Wu, 2021). In the Chinese context, Zhang and Darvin (2025) illustrated how gender ideologies shape pre-service TESOL teachers’ investment in both learning and teaching practices. Other work has examined TESOL teachers’ investment and professional identity negotiation in digital pedagogies, such as generative artificial intelligence in writing instruction (Teng & Yip, 2025), digital multimodal composing (Jiang et al., 2020), or digital initiatives advancing multilingual literacy (Stranger-Johannessen & Norton, 2017). TESOL professionals also invest in developing identities as proficient language users, experts, and digital

practitioners, often motivated by the desire to join or be recognised in professional communities (Quiroz & González, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). Collectively, these studies underscore the explanatory power of the investment model in illuminating the complex, context-dependent dynamics of language/TESOL professionals' investment, learning, and development.

Despite these advances, important gaps remain in the literature. Firstly, almost no research has applied the investment model to examine TESOL professionals' investment in research itself, a perspective that could move the field beyond a predominantly psychological–affective framing of research endeavours (see Subsection 2.1). Although Bao (2025) looked into TESOL professionals' investment in doctoral learning, which inherently involves research, their investment in research beyond the doctoral context remains largely underexplored. Secondly, existing studies have drawn on the model's emphasis on identity, ideology, and capital, yet they have not extended it to account for various social forces of influence beyond ideology, such as social relationships and the academic and professional cultures that shape TESOL professionals' work. Addressing these gaps would enrich our understanding of how TESOL professionals invest in research and how wider social structures mediate their investment in research-based learning and development. To this end, we introduce the notion of sponsorscales as a critical complement to the investment theory, which we integrate into the present study.

2.4 Sponsorscales

As discussed above, Darwin and Norton's (2015) investment theory underscores agentive identity work, capital, ideologies, and how these all interact to construct individuals' investment. Its focus on sociocultural resources and spaces resonates with Wargo and De Costa's (2017) notion of sponsorscales. These refer to dynamic, interconnected networks of less visible yet influential sociocultural forces, including people, institutions, and (non)material resources, that sponsor individuals' academic practices and development. These sponsorscales emphasise the dynamic, reciprocal, and human-material dimensions of sponsorship; move beyond fixed, individual sponsors to consider broader, lifewide learning pathways; and recognise individuals as active agents who invest in themselves socially, academically, and professionally (Smith et al, 2020).

The notion of sponsorscales offers a productive way to nuance the investment theory. Firstly, sponsorscales foreground the diverse sources of capital individuals can access through dynamic sponsorship networks, resonating with the investment model's focus on capital. Secondly, they highlight individuals' agentive roles in navigating and negotiating various forms of sponsorship, which complements the model's emphasis on identity and agency. Thirdly, mapping sponsorscales can enhance understanding of how different social structures unfold and shape investment. Crucially, however, sponsorscales extend beyond ideologies to encompass a range of sociocultural forces that structure individuals' personal, academic, and professional trajectories. They include not only institutional sponsors but also fluid and intersecting networks of social relationships, academic cultures, cultural discourses, sociolinguistic spaces, technologies, and international mobilities (Smith et al, 2020; Wargo & De Costa, 2017) that collectively mediate access to resources, opportunities, and recognition.

These sponsorscales, when combined with the investment theory in our study, can help to reveal how TESOL professionals develop personally, academically, and professionally in diverse contexts by navigating and engaging in dynamic sponsorscales, rather than passively conforming to established norms, in their agentive identity work. In addition, the investment theory posits that individuals' investment is shaped by their perceived value of the activity, the capital they can mobilise, and the power relations and ideologies within their socio-professional communities. Sponsorscales extend this framework by highlighting how sponsorship is not static or unidirectional; rather, it is a fluid process where professionals actively seek and leverage various forms of sponsorship to enhance their legitimacy and authority. This integration allows for a more dynamic understanding of TESOL professionals'

research investment, where agency is exercised within, and sometimes against, the constraints and affordances of sponsorscales.

As agentic individuals (Edwards, 2017), TESOL professionals are able to navigate the dynamic sponsorscales of influence (Smith et al., 2020; Wargo & De Costa, 2017), strategically channelling their intentions, decisions, actions, engagement, and commitment into research, and in doing so, they enact their investment agency (Darvin & Norton, 2015) in research as a key pathway to professional development. Given the integral role of research in TESOL professional development (Barsallo et al., 2025), we argue that such investment agency has the potential to transform both the TESOL professional and their socio-professional practices (Bahrami & Hosseini, 2023; Stetsenko, 2020), as mediated by sponsorscales of personal, academic, and professional development.

For the present study, we draw on the investment theory (Darvin & Norton, 2015), the concept of sponsorscales (Wargo & De Costa, 2017), and prior research informed by these frameworks to address one central question: How is Vietnamese TESOL professionals' research investment shaped by the interplay of identity, capital, and sponsorscales of influence? Our aim is to illuminate the sociocultural dynamics that underpin their research investment and professional identity negotiation and to highlight how these dynamics inform their professional development trajectories. In what follows, we introduce our research methodology.

3 Methodology

3.1 Collaborative autoethnography

This study explores our lived experiences of research investment as Vietnamese TESOL professionals through collaborative autoethnography (CAE), which merged our autobiographical reflection with an analysis of our socio-professional context (Chang et al., 2016). Our emic, dialogic approach aligned with CAE's multivocal inquiry, enabling critical examination of insider perspectives. CAE also helped us to "unpack the authoritative voice that [we] researchers have strived to cultivate" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 595) within Vietnam's TESOL research and educational landscape.

In this CAE, as we shared personal narratives and co-interpreted our pooled data, we balanced individual voices with collective experience (Lapadat, 2017) to deepen the study's depth and relevance to TESOL professionals' research investment. Through "mutual scrutiny, interrogation, and probing" (Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p. 388) and dialogic tensions among our perspectives (Guyotte & Sochacka, 2016), we developed richer interpretations of ourselves and the socio-professional contexts enveloping our research practices (Chang et al., 2016). Also, for early-career researchers like us, those without yet an impactful voice in academia, CAE proved especially meaningful, cultivating our sense of empowerment and resilience (Chang et al., 2016; Roy & Uekusa, 2020) and allowing our engagement with personal and community concerns about TESOL research. Ultimately, this process enabled "a shift from individual to collective agency" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 589) through multivocality and a critical examination of TESOL professionals' research investment in our socio-professional context.

While CAE provides rich emic insights, we carefully considered ethical concerns about non-accountability and non-generalisability in view of potential self-indulgence and conflated subjectivity (Roy & Uekusa, 2020; Dauphinee, 2010). To address this, we practised sustained self-reflexivity, distinguishing between the researcher-self (subjectivity and personal biases) and research-self (TESOL professionals' research investment) when recounting and analysing our experiences (Coffey, 2004). The multi-voiced CAE approach additionally helped to flatten power dynamics and foster trust, honesty, and openness to critique (Lapadat, 2017). Also mindful of the ethical implications of referencing others, we anonymised them and omitted all identifying details, while replacing their direct speech with our interpretive representations to maintain ethical integrity.

3.2 Participants

As Vietnamese TESOL professionals with shared cultural and professional backgrounds, we were personally motivated to undertake this emic exploration of research investment, especially in Vietnam's current educational context, where research is increasingly framed as a neoliberal metric of professional survival and advancement (Le & Pham, 2025; Ngo, 2020).

Henry, the first author, began as an instructor at Gardens, a large English language school in southern Vietnam. Later, after earning an MA in TESOL from a U.S. university, he returned as an internal TESOL trainer at Gardens and a part-time lecturer at a local university. As part of his service at Gardens, he participated regularly in inter-institutional research and gained qualitative research experience. He also conducted independent studies and published internationally before embarking on his doctoral research at an Australian university in 2023. This transition marked the formal start of his professional TESOL research career.

Maxi, the second author, started off as a lecturer at Sky, a private university in southern Vietnam, teaching English for general and academic purposes. Initially dedicated to teaching, he later developed a research interest through mentoring, conferences, and reflection. He obtained an MA in TESOL in Australia, through which he acquired professional knowledge of TESOL education and published his first research on silence in language learning. After graduating in 2022, he returned to teaching in Vietnam and began integrating research into his professional identity. He is now in his second year of doctoral study at an Australian university, deepening his engagement with TESOL research.

Mary, the third author, embarked on her academic career as a lecturer at River, a public university in southern Vietnam, where a shift from a focus on teaching towards research-based professional development intensified post-2020. During her tenure, she engaged in international research collaborations, presented at conferences, and published in some international outlets. Her formal research trajectory solidified with doctoral research on flipped learning at an Australian university, completed in 2024. She has since returned to River as a lecturer, striving towards associate professorship in TESOL.

Throughout the stages of conceptualisation, data generation and analysis, and authorship, we were aware of potential power asymmetries from differing research experience, and we therefore consistently positioned ourselves as equal co-narrators (Lapadat, 2017). This stance, supported by open, ongoing communication, fostered mutual respect and productive collaboration, ensuring intersubjective interpretations and balanced representation of our voices in the CAE.

3.3 Data generation

Our CAE data were generated using a digital conversational method (Sullivan, 2012) via Zalo, a Vietnam-based messaging and video application, which served as both the platform for communication and a dynamic space for shared meaning-making. Over four months, we engaged in weekly professional conversations, sharing experiences in teaching, training, and research. As early-career TESOL professionals, we viewed this Zalo-based group as a third space (Bhabha, 1994), where we could comfortably engage with hegemonic TESOL discourses and support one another's professional growth through critical shared experiences in both teaching and research. As Maxi, the second author, noted, such a space enabled us to "discuss things that wouldn't normally be discussed elsewhere" (Maxi, Zoom).

Considering this digital space as a site of collaborative inquiry and professional development, we structured our discussions around a flexible conversation framework. The framework began with guiding questions (see Appendix 1) informed by Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment theory, which we adapted to explore how TESOL professionals negotiate their research investment in relation to identity, capital, and sponsorscares of influence. These questions served as prompts rather than rigid directives, allowing us to initiate dialogue while still leaving room for the conversation to unfold organically in real

time. In doing so, the framework captured not only our responses to the guiding questions but also the spontaneous connections, tensions, and reflections that emerged through interaction. Our conversations, indeed, encompassed mutual questioning and intentional self-reflection, a deliberate mental activity premised on thoughtful contemplation of our own perspectives, emotions, and assumptions (Gläser-Zikuda, 2012). This approach dovetails with CAE's purpose to foster agency through intentional self-reflection (Zhu et al., 2022), allowing for our critical examination of underlying social assumptions about TESOL research and TESOL professionals' research investment. Through this approach, we were able to document authentic accounts of how we, TESOL professionals in Vietnam, made sense of and navigated our research trajectories.

In the next stage, we exported our Zalo-based conversations, reread them iteratively, and documented our impressions, using Google Docs' comments to pose probing questions for mutual scrutiny. We then held two self-recorded Zoom discussions (2 and 1.5 hours) to probe further into each other's lived experiences and stimulate oral reflection through critical questioning. These conversations fostered dialogic tensions among and deeper engagement with our diverse perspectives, thus enhancing the depth, quality, and impact of our CAE inquiry (Guyotte & Sochacka, 2016). The Zoom sessions also served as a complementary data source, enabling triangulation to strengthen our analysis and address concerns of self-indulgence and subjectivity often associated with CAE.

3.4 Data analysis

To examine our data with a total of 20,295 words, we employed directed qualitative content analysis, which allowed for a structured and theory-informed interpretation of the data (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Specifically, our analysis was guided by the triadic framework of identity, capital, and ideology, and the notion of sponsorscapes. This theoretical integration informed both the initial coding and thematic development, enabling us to examine how our research investment was shaped by intersecting sociocultural, structural, and personal factors. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) note, this approach facilitates not only the validation of existing theory but also its potential conceptual extension.

Our analysis followed three key stages. Firstly, we conducted repeated, line-by-line readings of our Zalo conversations and Zoom transcripts to immerse ourselves in the data. Next, we applied three broad theory-informed codes—identity, capital, ideology—based on Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment theory as well as Wargo and De Costa's (2017) notion of sponsorscapes. These were further refined into subcategories grounded in the integrated framework, while new (sub)categories were allowed to emerge inductively. In coding the data, we extracted and categorised relevant data segments (phrases to full paragraphs) that illustrated or reflected these categories. The coding scheme is presented in Appendix 2. In the third stage, we thematised our coded data to trace how identity, capital, and sponsorscapes of influence interconnected and co-constructed our research investment. Through constant comparison, we identified patterns and developed conceptual links that surfaced in the data, aligning our analysis with the theoretical frameworks (Assarroudi et al., 2018).

Initial coding and thematisation were carried out by the first author. These were then reviewed and cross-checked by the other two authors to enhance analytical rigor. Iterative discussions were held throughout the process to resolve disagreements, clarify conceptual links, and refine theme construction. This collaborative process culminated in the identification of three overarching themes, which are reported in Section 4.

4 Findings

In this section, despite the autoethnographic nature of our data, we intentionally adopted third-person narration to enhance the analytical distance and objectivity of our thematic presentation.

4.1 Theme 1: Relational experiences as sponorscapes of social and cultural capital for research-oriented ideal identity construction

Data analysis shows that the three authors' research investment was driven by an internal aspiration to pursue an imagined, ideal professional identity with TESOL research, rooted in their internal aspiration and belief in research as a defining element of professionalism. Inspiring relational experiences with significant others, such as peers, trainees, students, and professors, acted as sponorscapes that promoted their shift from practice-based roles to those marked by research-informed TESOL professionalism. Their investment in ideal self-construction, catalysed by these experiences, also provided social capital as well as visions and exemplars of cultural capital that were crucial for professional authority and career advancement in the field.

Although initially identifying as practice-based teachers, Maxi and Henry's exposure to research and the scholarly influence of inspiring role models during and after their research-oriented MA in Australia and the USA respectively reoriented them towards a more academic trajectory while cultivating their research-oriented aspirations:

Seeing friends and colleagues advance in academic research lit a fire under me. I've felt driven to follow suit, realising how research can spark real change in education. (Maxi, Zalo)

They [MA professors] sparked my curiosity about research... I felt like carving out a niche for myself, not just as someone with an MA but with others' respect for solid research knowledge. (Maxi, Zoom)

I was impressed by their [doctoral candidates'] expertise and the sheer energy they exuded as researchers... I've been drawn to presenting my work to an academic audience. (Henry, Zalo)

I often wondered how my former MA professor, once a non-native ESL teacher, excelled in teaching and SLA research and advanced to such academic seniority. He's become the gold standard I aspired to follow. (Henry, Zalo)

These relational experiences situated in professional learning contexts provided Maxi and Henry with sponorscapes offering access to social capital through knowledge-rich relationships and scholarly role-modelling that served as a significant source of scholarly inspiration and represented an ideal identity for which they aspired: a successful TESOL academic thriving through research investment. Also embodied by these role models in the sponorscapes were cultural capital, including research expertise and accomplishments, academic excellence, pedagogical authority, and scholarly disposition and vitality, that all became a roadmap for Maxi and Henry's imagination of scholarly ideals. This inspirational influence anchored their inner drive and resultant investment in emulating the ideals in pursuit of their research-oriented ideal identities and research-driven transformation in their pedagogical and professional practice:

It lets me put my learning into practice, enhancing both my teaching and academic growth... I'm aiming to wear two hats: teacher and researcher at university, and have tried to collaborate on projects and publishing. (Maxi, Zoom)

I really want to do research and use it in my training. Even with no support, a heavy workload, and colleagues' inertia against research, I've still managed to publish a bit. That gives me the wind beneath my wings as a confident, research-savvy trainer. (Henry, Zalo)

Maxi viewed research investment as key to his ideal identity as a university-based TESOL teacher-researcher, internally driven by his "desire to have better knowledge of educational processes" (Maxi, Zalo). Inspired by role models and their embodied cultural capital in the sponorscape, he shifted from intuitive to evidence-based teaching while teaching at Sky, deepening his pedagogical authority and sophistication, research-mindedness, and passion-driven engagement in collaborative scholarship. For

Henry, his research investment was similarly intertwined with the realisation of his ideal identity as a research-informed TESOL teacher educator, which was nourished in the sponsorscape of relational inspiration. By embedding research, which he positioned as central to professionalism, into his teacher training at Gardens, he bridged theory and practice and demonstrated his investment in this research-derived professionalism. For both, research became a pathway to acquiring embodied cultural capital, such as professional competence, self-assurance, and research-savviness, and affirming their scholarly identities in TESOL academia.

Mary's experience also highlighted the role of relational experiences at River as sponsorscales that granted her bonding social capital, as she said: "sometimes, when I'm slow or passive, those energetic and capable peers [co-researchers] kind of pull me along" (Mary, Zoom). This bonding functioned as a social conduit that cultivated her scholarly spirit and resilience and engagement in research pursuits, all of which represented the embodied cultural capital she would need to develop an ideal identity oriented towards research. Also shaping Mary's ideal identity construction were her experiences in supervising undergraduate students, a source of social capital embedded in her role-based professional network. Her investment in becoming a TESOL research supervisor was strongly linked to her desire to offer her students rigorous, high-quality mentorship:

I knew I needed to build stronger research capacity to really support my students with high-quality mentorship. It gave me a real leg up in self-esteem, confidence, and professional fulfillment. (Mary, Zalo)

I chose SWB University for my PhD in 2020 to reach a higher academic level. I think doing research constantly helps me grow and become a better supervisor. (Mary, Zoom)

At the core of Mary's research investment, including pursuing her doctorate, was a dual ambition: enhancing supervisory professionalism and gaining both embodied (e.g., research capacity, confidence, and self-esteem) and institutionalised (e.g., doctoral degree) cultural capital. Bringing this capital into her work could, she expected, empower her to meet supervisory demands, transforming her professionally, but it also boosted her scholarly authority in the capital-driven economy of TESOL academia.

Overall, the authors' research investment was a dual process of constructing research-oriented ideal identities and accessing social and cultural capital, notably shaped by relational experiences. These experiences served as sponsorscales that facilitated their identity formation and research-related capital mobilisation. Along this trajectory, they envisioned transformations in their professionalism through research, which emerged as a key driver of their sustained scholarly engagement and commitment, academic responsibility fulfilment, and research-informed practices in teaching, training, and supervision.

4.2 Theme 2: Research-oriented ideal identities reinforced by symbolic capital from the sponsorscales of community recognition

The analysis further shows that conducting and publishing research not only enhanced the authors' pedagogical professionalism, but this endeavour, which was facilitated by sponsorscales of community recognition, also converted cultural capital into symbolic capital. This capital affirmed their research-oriented ideal identities and further nourished their aspirations for scholarly inquiry as central to their evolving professional identities and legitimacy in socio-professional communities, which in turn promoted their research investment.

For Henry and Mary, embedding published and personal research into pedagogical and professional practice earned enthusiastic responses from stakeholders, which served as sponsorscales of community recognition that boosted the value of their research-driven practice and provided a strong sense of being valued:

I demonstrated activities based on motivation theory and my HOTS paper. Though unsure if they would apply, their real enthusiasm and requests for more gave me a real shot in the arm to make research more accessible and useful for them. (Henry, Zalo)

Using it [flipped learning] made my classes livelier and enjoyable. Student feedback was the icing on the cake. They were better prepared, more engaged, and showed real improvement. (Mary, Zalo)

Through his research-driven practice, Henry accrued symbolic capital and elevated his symbolic standing as an innovative research-informed TESOL teacher educator. Likewise, Mary's use of flipped learning, her main research interest, transformed her classroom dynamics. Positive student feedback affirmed her research-informed pedagogy and amplified her ideal identity as a progressive TESOL educator whose symbolic capital was derived from research. This recognition fuelled Henry and Mary's aspirations and ongoing commitment to aligning with research-driven professionalism and deepened their investment in research as a pathway to continued professional development and scholarly growth.

Also highlighted is how sponsorscapes that promoted symbolic capital extended beyond local contexts through international community recognition, via peer reviews, publications, download and citation counts, and conferences, strengthening the scholarly legitimacy the authors envisioned:

Getting published felt daunting, and I doubted myself. But as my paper [task-based learning motivation] was accepted, it proved my potential. Seeing downloads, I felt like it really recharged my research battery. (Henry, Zalo)

And each compliment like 'this article was written in impeccable English' drove me to write more... I began to see myself as a budding researcher. (Henry, Zoom)

Despite the lower ranking, my paper [flipped learning] received many citations, and I knew it struck a chord with the community. (Mary, Zalo)

Seeing my work [silence in language education] cited in Scopus papers made me feel it's making waves. Even a few citations give me a real push to keep going. (Maxi, Zoom)

Henry's thesis-based publication became a turning point, turning initial self-doubt into scholarly confidence. Its acceptance, readership, and reviewer praise validated his ideal identity as a TESOL researcher and deepened his research passion. In like manner, Mary and Maxi accumulated symbolic capital through their publications being consumed by the international academic community, which affirmed their scholarly voices and reshaped their view of research from a performance task to tick off to a meaningful, motivating scholarly pursuit. This recognition consolidated their ideal identities as emerging, credible TESOL researchers and sparked their continued investment in undertaking and publishing quality research in search of greater scholarly legitimacy.

Overall, symbolic capital, whether obtained peer recognition, student feedback, or publication metrics, powerfully fortified the authors' research investment. These forms of recognition acted as sponsorscapes conducive to symbolic capital mobilisation, which was indeed a motivational boost for their ideal identity work. It affirmed their scholarly competence, legitimised their evolving ideal identities as research-oriented TESOL academics, and fuelled their long-term scholarly engagement and meaningful contribution to the field through sustained research investment.

4.3 Theme 3: Social ideologies as sponsorscapes shaping research-oriented ought-to identity construction and capital mobilisation

Emerging from the data was evidence that social ideologies, when interpreted at institutional and personal levels, became sponsorscapes that orchestrated the formation of the authors' ought-to identities—

who they felt they should become to meet expectations—which were desirably aligned with their ideal identities (see Sections 4.1 and 4.2), as both were oriented towards a professional TESOL research career. These externally imposed identities were closely tied to their pursuits of cultural and economic capital as a mechanism for professional survival and development in an increasingly meritocratic, neoliberal environment enveloped by socio-educational and socio-familial ideologies.

Henry, for example, noted how the growing ‘publish or perish’ culture, part of the neoliberal, socio-educational ideology, has increasingly shifted Vietnamese TESOL academia away from a teaching-focused model towards research productivity:

Seems like the publish or perish culture is really kicking in... Publishing now feels like the name of the game for competition, university prestige, academic stature and more. (Henry, Zalo)

Here, the neoliberal ethos of competition, performance, and visibility embedded in the socio-educational sponsorscape positioned research as a symbolic determinant of academic legitimacy, compelling Henry to invest in doctoral research in Australia to build the scholarly cultural capital (e.g., strong research ability) needed for his ought-to TESOL researcher identity construction, driven by socio-educational expectations:

I don’t know where I’ll land. But I knew I would need strong research ability... And I bit the bullet and started my PhD research in Australia, like a door to academia. (Henry, Zoom)

Maxi echoed this sentiment, pointing to how credential inflation in Vietnam’s increasingly stratified TESOL context, where qualifications signal legitimacy, pushed young professionals like him to invest in higher degree research and developing scholarly cultural capital to remain competitive:

An MA is no longer enough as most people now hold it. PhD helps you stand out... That really forced me to raise the bar. (Maxi, Zoom)

Similarly, Mary’s account showed how a tangible institutional structure, driven by logics of credentialism and measurable research productivity, functioned in the capacity of sponsorscares that shaped her commitment to investing in research and developing sufficient cultural capital (e.g., research capacity and advanced degrees). This investment would, she expected, enable her to construct her institutionally imposed identity as associate professor in TESOL:

The university’s KPIs now include research performance and advanced degrees, so I’ve participated more in research activities. They expect us to move up post-PhD, like becoming associate professors. I’m keeping my eye on that. (Mary, Zalo)

Furthermore, the neoliberal, institutional ideology around financial incentives tied to research performance engineered the shaping of the authors’ research-oriented ought-to identities. Mary commented:

Many universities have paid more money for high-ranking research papers to enhance their reputation and student recruitment. (Mary, Zalo)

This sponsorscape of influence also cemented research as economic capital, driving Henry and Maxi’s investment in TESOL research. They saw it as both duty and financial strategy in a neoliberal academic economy, where institutional pressures, incentives, and future prospects fuelled their performative ought-to identities—seeing research as a utilitarian route to financial stability and academic inclusion.

As I chase a research career, I need to juggle teaching and research to feed my passion, meet duties, and keep the wolf from the door. (Henry, Zalo)

I published my thesis to boost my chances of landing a PhD scholarship. It was all part of playing the game to win that opportunity. (Maxi, Zoom)

Notably, Vietnam's Confucian-rooted socio-familial ideologies, where educational attainment carries intergenerational meaning, family honour, upward mobility, and social legitimacy, stood as sponsorscapes in which the authors' commitment was promoted to pursuing cultural capital for research-oriented ought-to identity construction. Mary described how her child's pride and her role-model duty were entangled with her push towards associate professorship, which necessitated her research investment:

The expectation from my family as a role model for my son... As he goes to school, he wears his pride on his sleeve when he talks about me. (Mary, Zoom)

For Henry, pursuing a research-oriented ought-to identity and scholarly cultural capital was deeply entwined with a familial narrative of sacrifice and aspiration. He felt morally and emotionally committed to succeeding academically, not just for himself, but as a fulfillment of his parents' unachieved dreams:

I want to live out my parents' dreams... Seeing me earn a doctorate would be the icing on the cake, honouring their sacrifice and faith in transformative education. (Henry, Zalo)

In sum, the authors' research investment was shaped by socio-educational and socio-familial ideologies reproduced at institutional and personal levels and coalesced into sponsorscapes—a web of socially, educationally, and familially embedded expectations, that guided the internalisation of their ought-to identities with research as a defining element. More than a strategic response to neoliberal, socio-professional demands, their research investment emerged as a deep expression of personal emotions and morality anchored in kinship obligations. These expectations compelled them to pursue scholarly cultural capital (e.g., research capacity, educational success, advanced credentials) as a means of professional survival and legitimacy, while allowing for economic capital acquisition as an additional booster to their research investment.

5 Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Research-oriented ideal identity, relational experiences, and social and cultural capital

Our first finding (theme 1) highlights the transformative power of ideal identities, rooted in internal drive, relational experiences, and access to social and cultural capital, in shaping TESOL professionals' research investment. While echoing prior studies emphasising the internal drive of TESOL professionals' research practices (Bi & Liu, 2022; Peng & Gao, 2019; Reyes-Cruz & Perales-Escudero, 2016; Vu, 2021) and investment in professional identity development (Bao, 2025; Liaw & Wu, 2021; Quiroz & González, 2023; Teng & Yip, 2025), our CAE study extends this literature by foregrounding the aspirational, imaginary dimension of identity (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2017, 2023; Dörnyei, 2009; Norton, 2013). These identities—university-based teacher-researcher (Maxi), research-informed teacher educator (Henry), or supervisor (Mary)—encompass both research and praxis, suggesting that research investment is embedded in ideal identity visions for intellectual growth, scholarly dispositions, pedagogical authority, and professionalism. Though potentially conflicting with institutional structures (Vu, 2021), these visions' intrinsic constitution can sustain research investment, manifested in the study as our deliberate decisions and actions, responsibility fulfillment, engagement and commitment (Edwards, 2017) during our pursuit of research-oriented ideal identities and cultural capital for enhancing our professionalism with local relevance (Bi & Liu, 2022). Notably, unlike studies emphasising leadership or peer pressure (Nguyen et al., 2021), our study underscores the notable influence of positive relational experiences in professional learning contexts (Pham et al., 2023;; Yuan et al., 2016) which constitute sponsorscapes (Wargo & De Costa, 2017) conducive to ideal identity work and social and cultural

capital mobilisation in relation to research. Where TESOL professionals' research-oriented identities are often fragmented throughout their professional lives (Xu, 2014), we argue that these sponsorscales can provide a tangible roadmap for ideal identity realisation and thus foster their research investment.

Crucially, the finding reveals that research investment extends beyond the pursuit of titles; it is a socially situated process of relationally inspired self-fashioning through the strategic accumulation and deployment of cultural capital for TESOL professionalism. This capital includes embodied forms (e.g., research knowledge, academic writing, scholarly dispositions and vitality) and institutionalised forms (e.g., doctoral credentials) (Bourdieu, 1986). Driven by internal aspirations and relational inspiration, TESOL professionals in challenging contexts like us (Banegas & Romano, 2024; Bao, 2025; Borg & Liu, 2013; Xu, 2014) can actively strive to internalise cultural capital, especially as exemplified by significant others. This internalisation can lead to the enhancement of social and cultural capital, which in turn promotes professional identity shifts (Jiang et al., 2020). Our study also resonates with Bao (2025), who demonstrated that TESOL professionals' investment in research, such as pursuing doctoral studies, opened up avenues for them to generate diverse forms of cultural capital, thereby strengthening their claims to legitimacy within their socio-professional contexts. This capital, as our findings illuminate, empowers their transition from practice-based roles to identities marked by scholarly authority and enhanced research-derived professionalism across teaching, teacher education, and supervision. This insight invites a reconceptualisation of research not merely as a tool for knowledge production or productivity evaluation (Albaram et al., 2025; Peng & Gao, 2019), but as a vehicle for claiming professional legitimacy (Bao, 2025) as well as for enacting transformative agency (Yang, 2025). Following Stetsenko (2020), we argue that such investment agency can enable "ongoing, ceaseless social-individual transformations" (p. 5), which, as our finding suggests, emerge at the intersection of ideal identity, relational influence, and capital mobilisation, and reshape both the individual TESOL professional and their pedagogical and professional practices.

5.2 Community recognition, symbolic capital, and research-oriented aspirations

Another key insight (theme 2) highlights the power of symbolic capital in reinforcing research-oriented ideal identities and shaping sustained research investment. Our finding shows that, as we TESOL professionals brought our internalised research-derived cultural capital into practice, we gained symbolic capital through sponsorscales (Wargo & De Costa, 2017) such as peer validation, student feedback, and scholarly recognition such as publications, citations, and compliments. This echoes existing research (Albaram et al., 2025; Banegas & Romano, 2024; Barsallo et al., 2025; Quiroz & González, 2023; Vega et al., 2023) that underscores how public recognition of scholarly contribution and impact supports psychological needs for self-direction, competence, and socio-professional belonging (Vega et al., 2023). Our study, however, extends this scholarship by illustrating how symbolic capital functions as a feedback loop: recognition bolsters confidence, legitimacy, and professional self-worth, which in turn fuels deeper engagement in and commitment to (Edwards, 2017) TESOL research. Research investment is, in this sense, a means of accruing symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990), enabling personal and socio-professional transformation (Bahrami & Hosseini, 2023; Stetsenko, 2020) in TESOL research and pedagogical practices. This dynamic affirms Darvin and Norton's (2015, 2023) claim that symbolic capital fosters investment within evolving identities, a form of agentive work that entails a critical examination and successful navigation of not only various identities but also material and symbolic resources (Darvin, 2025) in specific TESOL contexts.

Yet, our finding nuances this feedback loop by showing it is not only externally bestowed but also internalised as an imagined scholarly identity, where TESOL professionals begin to see themselves as legitimate members of the field. Our narrative showed that, as our research-informed practices gained visibility and acceptance, we exhibited heightened intentionality (Edwards, 2017) towards scholarly goals. This turns the spotlight on the symbolic power of recognition and intrinsic professional

satisfaction, which drives the transformation of professional identities with research at the core. We feel that accumulating symbolic capital can enable TESOL professionals, particularly from non-elite institutional contexts, to navigate entrenched power dynamics (Lu & Yoon, 2022) and sustain their research investment. Investment agency, therefore, is not isolated intent but is entangled with social structures and membership validation in scholarly communities.

5.3 Ideology, research-oriented ought-to identity, and cultural and economic capital

Our final finding (theme 3) reveals how socio-educational ideologies, particularly neoliberal logics of performance, competition, and credentialism (Le & Pham, 2025; Ngo, 2020; Nguyen, 2020; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Tran et al., 2020; Tran, 2025), when reproduced at institutional and personal levels, can strongly influence TESOL professionals' ought-to research-oriented identities and their pursuit of cultural capital for identity formation. In Vietnam's educational context, the rise of a 'publish or perish' culture, rooted in Western academic traditions, has reframed research investment as not only aspirational (see themes 1 and 2) but also essential for meeting socio-educational expectations tied to professional survival and advancement, such as becoming university-level research academics (Henry and Maxi) or attaining professorship (Mary). This underscores the entanglement of personal aspirations and ideological imperatives in research investment, echoing Darvin and Norton's (2015, 2023) view of ideology as a structuring force in identity construction and investment agency and Wargo and De Costa's (2017) view of ideologies as sponsorscapes of individual academic development. Importantly, extending the literature merely critiquing neoliberalism's impacts on institutional and individual practices (Le & Pham, 2025; Ngo, 2020; Tran et al., 2020), our study highlights TESOL professionals' agency, unfolding as our responsibility for fulfilling ideological demands and deliberate efforts (Edwards, 2017) to invest in ought-to identity formation and cultural capital accumulation (e.g., doctoral credentials, research KPIs, and institutionally sanctioned titles). Thus, research investment emerges not as passive conformity but as purposeful acts of engaging in and pursuing research (Borg & Liu, 2013), which as our study further illuminates, embody both compliance and agentive identity work towards capital acquisition in sponsorscapes marked by neoliberal educational conditions.

Interestingly, and unlike previous studies highlighting identity tensions (Vu, 2021; Teng, 2024a; Yuan et al., 2016) and identity crisis (Teng, 2024b), our study revealed a consistent convergence between our ideal and ought-to identities, both oriented towards TESOL research and academic careers. This fortunate alignment, where personal aspirations intersect with external demands, produced a dual motivational force fuelling our research investment. It stemmed partly from our intrinsic interest in TESOL research and our perception of research as integral to professionalism (Uyen & Vien, 2021; Vu, 2021) that desirably match ideological expectations. While identity misalignment due to, for instance, limited research competence, exists and requires professional support (Yuan et al., 2016), we argue that alignment between ideal and ought-to identities, albeit not typical for all contexts and individuals, is a desirable potent driver of long-term investment. Such harmony can reduce cognitive dissonance, reinforce affective commitment, and enable agentive identity work towards research in neoliberal contexts, even amidst structural constraints.

The synergy between ideal and ought-to identities is reinforced by the intersection of neoliberal institutional ideologies as sponsorscapes (Wargo & De Costa, 2017) and TESOL professionals' personal economic considerations. Specifically, the visibility-oriented logic of academic productivity, materialised through financial incentives, aligned with our need for economic capital for financial security. When perceived as supportive, such incentives can enhance research performance (Kim & Bak, 2020), especially in resource-constrained contexts where material rewards become extrinsic motivators for investing in research. This identity work is, we posit, a trajectory navigated in light of ideological expectations, available financial affordances, and personal economic circumstances.

Additionally, this alignment is tied to socio-familial ideologies that prioritise upward mobility and educational attainment as markers of intergenerational honour and social legitimacy. For instance, Mary's investment was fuelled by her responsibility (Edwards, 2017) for modelling educational success for her son, while Henry was committed (Edwards, 2017) to living out his parents' unrealised dreams. Diverging from the observation that Vietnamese academics' domestic obligations can constrain research motivation and agency (Pham et al., 2023, Tran et al., 2021), our study suggests that socio-familial responsibilities and commitments rooted in Confucian-inflected values of educational reverence (Bui & Pham, 2022) can instead establish sponsorscapes (Wargo & De Costa, 2017) that accommodate TESOL professionals' investment in research-oriented ought-to identity realisation. This is particularly true, especially when these ought-to identities, as surfaced in our study, resonate with aspirational ideals and pursuit of cultural capital.

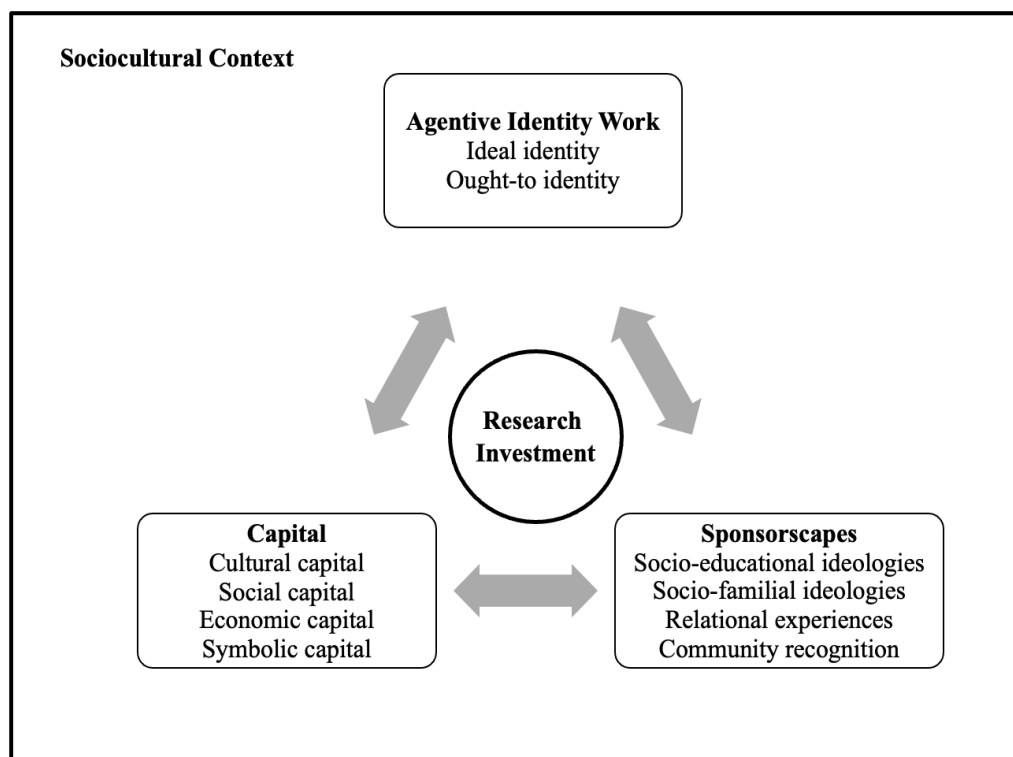
Last but not least, our study highlights the distinctive coexistence of tradition and modernisation in shaping TESOL professionals' research investment. Our finding suggests that Confucian values and neoliberal ideologies jointly contribute to the formation of sponsorscapes, which sustain research-oriented ought-to identity construction and the mobilisation of capital. This stands in contrast to earlier research in Vietnam (e.g., Tran et al., 2020), which documented tensions between Confucian heritage and imported foreign practices such as student-centred pedagogy, equitable treatment of students, and closer alignment of teaching and research with societal needs. In our accounts, however, Confucian values surfaced not as constraints but as resources, particularly through educational reverence and the pursuit of intergenerational honour achieved via academic attainment. We therefore argue that such values serve as a vital reservoir of resilience, enabling TESOL professionals to navigate the long trajectories of capital accumulation and identity construction demanded by both neoliberal expectations and familial obligations. In this sense, tradition and modernisation need not be in opposition; rather, they can operate in concert, especially when refracted through agentic identity work with shared objectives.

5.4 Theoretical contributions

Theoretically, the insights gleaned from our study point to the role of relational experiences, community recognition, and ideologies as what we consider sponsorscapes, drawing on Wargo and De Costa's (2017) notion of sponsorscapes as a complex, dynamic network of invisible yet influential forces that mediate access, legitimacy, learning and development in sociocultural milieus. As such, they contribute to understanding how TESOL professionals navigate and invest in various forms of sponsorship for personal and professional development across different settings, rather than simply adapting to fixed conventions. These sponsorscapes, as shown in our study, comprise sociocultural forces such as relational experiences, culture of recognition, socio-educational ideologies associated with neoliberalism, and socio-familial ideologies rooted in Confucianism. Although broad sociocultural factors, including hegemonic ideologies, can constrain research practices (Banegas & Romano, 2024; Lu & Yoon, 2022; Pham et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2016), the literature has also established that these factors can catalyse cognitive reflection, emotional resilience, agentic action, and identity (re)construction (Truong et al., 2025). Following the latter perspective, our study appears to paint a more optimistic picture in which relational inspiration, community recognition, socio-educational expectations, and socio-familial obligations can instead become sponsorscapes that facilitate agentic identity work and capital mobilisation and in turn shape the continuous unfolding of TESOL professionals' research investment. This potential is, in light of our study, can be realised particularly when internal aspirations intersect with inspirational role-modelling, symbolic values, and external expectations, all aligned towards a professional trajectory in TESOL research.

Figure 1

TESOL Professionals' Research Investment as Informed by the CAE Study



In this regard, our study's use of Wargo and De Costa's (2017) concept of sponsors adds nuance to Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment theory. While the investment theory foregrounds the role of hegemonic ideologies in shaping individuals' social practices and their experiences of privilege or marginalisation, our study suggests a broader terrain. Specifically, we show how socio-educational and socio-familial ideologies operate as sponsors of influence which scaffold TESOL professionals' research investment as a vehicle for both personal and professional transformation through agentive identity work and capital mobilisation in response to external expectations. Yet, sponsors of influence extend beyond ideologies that govern access to resources and opportunities; they also encompass networks of socio-professional relations and the academic culture of recognition in socio-professional communities of practice as well as in academia at large that mediate TESOL professionals' endeavours and practices in relation to research. In this sense, the notion of sponsors complements the investment theory by foregrounding the multiplicity of less visible but influential forces that contour individuals' academic and professional development trajectories. Taken together, sponsors and the investment theory illuminate how TESOL professionals develop across contexts by negotiating and engaging with a variety of sociocultural structures as part of their agentive identity work. Furthermore, the notion of sponsors extends the investment theory by underscoring that sponsorship is neither fixed nor unidirectional; rather, it is a fluid and negotiated process in which individuals actively pursue and harness diverse forms of sponsorship to consolidate their legitimacy and authority. This dynamic is especially visible in our CAE account of research investment, where socio-professional relationships, community recognition, and external expectations were strategically engaged to support and sustain our scholarly trajectories as TESOL professionals. Integrating sponsors into the investment theory thus provides a more dynamic lens on TESOL professionals' research investment, one that foregrounds how agency is enacted within, and through, the affordances of sponsors. Figure 1 visualises the interaction of sponsors, capital, and agentive identity work as the sociocultural scaffolding of research investment.

Importantly, the integration of the investment theory and the notion of sponsorscales in our study has contributed to extending current understandings of professional identity development in TESOL by foregrounding the dynamic interplay of identity, capital, and sponsorscales of influence. This approach moves beyond static or individualistic models of motivation and engagement, emphasising how professional identities are shaped and reshaped through investment in research-oriented professional growth, imagined communities, and responses to sociocultural contexts with embedded sponsorscales. The relevant literature has shown, for example, that language professionals invest in professional identity development when motivated by the desire to join or be valued in their professional communities (Quiroz & González, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). This literature has also documented TESOL professionals' ongoing professional identity development based on their capacity to claim professional legitimacy, which was enhanced through their investment in doctoral research and cultural capital generation (Bao, 2025). Through this lens, our study indicates that professional identities are not only constructed through personal aspirations but also through access to resources, participation in imagined communities of practice (Quiroz & González, 2023; Dafouz, 2018; Darvin & Norton, 2021), as well as engagement with and leverage of various sponsorscales (Wargo & De Costa, 2017), including relational experiences, academic culture of recognition, and social ideologies reproduced across institutional and personal levels.

Our study also brings attention to the ways TESOL professionals exercise agency in navigating sponsorscales of privilege and capital sources in their socio-professional environments (Darvin & Norton, 2021; Yang, 2025). Their investment is, as our findings indicate, shaped by their ability to claim legitimacy, negotiate their roles, and align their practices with personal aspirations as well as institutional and societal values (Bao, 2025; Bowen et al., 2021; Darvin & Norton, 2021). This perspective not only foregrounds the significance of access to various forms of capital—linguistic, social, cultural, and symbolic—and the sponsorscales that shape professional identity trajectories (Dafouz, 2018; Darvin & Norton, 2021), but it also emphasises the agentive capacity through which professionals in the field of TESOL and beyond can strategically mobilise these resources from various sponsorscales in pursuit of research-based professional growth.

6 Conclusion

Our study highlights how TESOL professionals' research investment is deeply embedded in the dynamic interplay of identity, capital, and sponsorscales of influence such as ideology, socio-professional relations, and academic culture of recognition. Research-oriented ideal identities are shaped through inspirational relational influences that act as sponsorscales of social and cultural capital for achieving professionalism (theme 1), while symbolic capital acquired through community recognition as sponsorscales further reinforces these ideals (theme 2). Concurrently, the sponsorscales constituted by socio-educational and socio-familial ideologies underpin research-oriented ought-to identities and drive the pursuit of both cultural and economic capital (theme 3). These insights position research investment as not only purposeful acts of engagement and pursuit, but it is essentially a form of agentive identity work. This work, we posit, is strategically oriented towards the accumulation and utilisation of various forms of capital through engagement with different sponsorscales, ultimately leading to personal, pedagogical, and professional transformation.

Based on these insights, our study provides some practical implications. We suggest based on our findings that TESOL professional development programmes should move beyond knowledge and skills and address the identity-related and ideological dimensions of TESOL professional development (Dafouz, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2024), particularly in relation to research. TESOL teacher educators need to prioritise supporting research-oriented identity formation, both ideal and ought-to, as drivers of research investment and pedagogical and professional transformation. This could involve cultivating an identity-affirming research culture that can nurture positive perception of research and agency (Mehrani, 2015;

Nguyen et al., 2022; Vu, 2021) and research literacy (Wang et al., 2025), supporting vision-building, and creating opportunities to imagine and enact diverse professional identities (Quiroz & González, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024) associated with research as part of TESOL professionalism. To this end, support needs to be given for the mobilisation of social, cultural, and symbolic capital as essential materials to construct imagined identities. Moreover, consideration should also be given to leveraging identity alignment to foster sustained research investment, as well as addressing identity misalignment, if any, through targeted training and mentorship (Yuan et al., 2016).

In the realm of TESOL policy-making, where research has increasingly become a cornerstone of professional development under neoliberal conditions (Le & Pham, 2025; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Tran et al., 2020), it is crucial to envision pathways through which TESOL professionals can advance their careers by investing in research. Drawing on our findings, we contend that such investment can be supported by widening access to relational experiences that model inspirational ideals, recognition of research performance and impact, provision of research incentives, guidance in navigating socio-educational ideologies, and sensitivity to domestic responsibilities connected with traditional values of educational reverence and attainment. TESOL policies that embed these practices, we argue, can broaden the sponsorscales that sustain professionals' long-term investment in research.

Despite its contributions, our CAE study is not without limitations. Our findings, which are based on our qualitative, autoethnographic accounts, are not intended to be generalisable across all contexts. Still, they offer a reflective lens for stakeholders whose trajectories resonate with ours. While our self-reflections collectively provide rich emic insights, they inherently lack longitudinal scope. Future research could trace TESOL professionals' identity and agency development across different career stages to examine how identity, capital, and various sponsorscales interact over time to influence their research investment. Additionally, further inquiry into diverse sponsorscales, including artificial intelligence technologies (Darvin, 2025) and international mobilities (Wargo & De Costa, 2017), is warranted to better understand dynamic sociocultural structures shaping TESOL professionals' research investment and research-derived professional development.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Guiding Questions

1. How does doing research fit into who you are as a TESOL teacher or trainer?
2. When you think about your future, how do you see research playing a role in the kind of TESOL professional you want to become?
3. What kinds of skills, knowledge, or connections have helped you with your research so far?
4. What do you feel you're missing that makes research harder for you?
5. How do your school or institution's rules and expectations shape the kind of research you do?
6. What bigger ideas or beliefs about TESOL teaching and research influence the way you approach your work?
7. Have you ever felt a clash between what you want to research and what your institution or funders expect? How do you handle that?
8. Does doing research make you feel more connected to other TESOL teachers or researchers, locally or globally?
9. How has being part of this group chat affected your motivation and confidence to do research?
10. Thinking about your future in relation to TESOL, where do you hope your research will take you, and what support do you think you'll need along the way?

Appendix 2. Coding Scheme

Codes	Categories	Subcategories	Subcategories from the dataset
Identity	Past identity: the past self based on our prior experiences and roles	x	- TESOL instructor - Teacher of general and academic English
	Present-day identity: the self perceived in the present	x	- ‘Baby’ TESOL researcher - Early-career TESOL professionals - Internal TESOL trainer - Doctoral student researcher - Early-career TESOL lecturer without much research success - Early-career TESOL lecturer striving for professorship
	Imagined identity: the self constructed through imagination	Ideal identity: the self rooted in personal aspirations, desires, and goals	- Research-oriented TESOL teacher educator - University TESOL teacher-researcher - Competent supervisor of student research - Progressive TESOL educator
		Ought-to identity: the self shaped by perceived duties, obligations, and external expectations	- TESOL educator-researcher as expected by ideological demands - Associate professor of TESOL as pride for children - Doctoral degree holder expected by parents - High academic achievers expected by family - Contributors to TESOL society and beyond
Capital	Economic	Material resources such as income, assets, or funding that can be directly exchanged or used to access opportunities	- Financial rewards for research publications - Institutional funding resources - External funding resources - Higher salary with advanced qualifications
	Social	Resources derived from social networks, relationships, and group memberships that provide support, access, and influence	- Peers from graduate studies representing research accomplishments - Professors offering inspiration - Colleagues in need of professional support - Colleagues willing to provide professional support - Scholarly journal editors and reviewers

Codes	Categories	Subcategories	Subcategories from the dataset
Capital	Cultural	Knowledge, skills, educational credentials, and cultural dispositions that confer advantage in specific contexts	- Advanced research expertise and skills - International publications - Scholarly dispositions - Scholarly vitality - Doctoral credentials - Academic writing capacity - Institutionally sanctioned titles
	Symbolic	Prestige, recognition, and honour that give authority or status, derived from the acknowledged value of other forms of capital	- Research integrated training practices accepted by colleagues - Positive feedback and reactions from students - Scholarly journal acceptances - Praise and compliments from experts - Research metrics such as download counts and citations
Sponsorscape of relational experiences	x	Experiences with inspiring people in personal or professional relationships	- Inspiration from MA and PhD peers - Impression on MA professors as role models - Interactions with students in need of support
Sponsorscape of community recognition	x	Academic/professional cultures where symbolic resources are conferred	- Applications of research in teacher training valued by trainees - Acceptance and positive feedback from students - Recognition from academia, including compliments - Research impact, including citations, and downloads
Sponsorscape of ideologies	Socio-educational	Hegemonic beliefs and values about education, knowledge production, meritocracy, and academic success	- Research as a metric of academic and professional performance - Research as a measure of institutional visibility - Research performance inspired by material incentives - KPIs for research productivity - Embracing ‘publish or perish’ culture - Research as a pathway to economic security and stability - Mandates on professional titles such as professorship
Sponsorscape of ideologies	Socio-familial	Family-driven expectations, cultural norms, and inherited values regarding education, success, and duty	- Intergenerational pride in academic achievements - Following parents’ unrealised dreams of higher education - Repaying parents’ sacrifices for education

Codes	Categories	Subcategories	Subcategories from the dataset
Investment	Research-related engagement	Undertaking and disseminating research, and using research for professional practice	- Engaging effortfully in collaborative research projects and publications - Pursuing doctoral research opportunities - Presenting research at conferences - Participating in inter-institutional research training activities - Using research to enhance pedagogical decisions and practices - Integrating research into teacher training practices - Using research in support of research supervision
	Research-related commitment	Dedication to pursuing goals and meeting expectations related to research	- Being committed to doing high-quality research - Trying to contribute research insights to the field - Being dedicated to fulfilling familial expectations related to educational attainment
	Research-related responsibilities	Obligations to conduct research	- Fulfilling research responsibilities imposed by university - Taking responsibility for offering high-quality supervision

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