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IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS OF TERTIARY EFL TEACHERS DOING PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

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Identity Constructions of Tertiary EFL Teachers Doing Professional Doctorate

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2025

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

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Abstract

Using identity as a lens, the thesis investigates the experiences of mid-career Chinese tertiary English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers doing professional doctorates for professional development. The study is motived by the increasing number of in-service EFL teachers pursuing doctoral degrees, the upsurge of professional doctoral programs as a means of professional development for mid-career practitioners, and the paucity of extant literature on the experiences of in-service EFL teachers who choose to pursue doctoral studies. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the motives and projected identities these teachers hold for pursuing a professional doctorate, their identity negotiations as they juggle the dual activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies, and the role of pursuing a professional doctorate in reshaping their identity configurations as tertiary EFL teachers.

To explore these issues, I developed an integrated conceptual framework which comprised identity-in-activity and identity-in-discourse, integrating third-generation activity theory with a discourse analytical framework. Guided by the conceptual framework, the study adopted a narrative case study design and collected data from twelve participants, all mid-career EFL teachers pursuing professional doctoral degrees (i.e., Professional Doctorate in Education and Professional Doctorate in Applied Linguistics). Multiple sources of data were collected through narrative frames, semi-structured interviews, informal communications, netnographic observation, and observation of artefacts. The collected data were analyzed thematically and at the discursive level. In parallel, they were subject to activity systems analysis.

Findings showed that EFL teachers' motives of pursuing a professional doctorate were largely instrumental, reflecting a pragmatic trade-off between career advancement, doctoral admission opportunities, and the realities of their professional contexts. Professional doctorate was viewed as a strategic alternative to traditional PhD programs amid multiple contextual

constraints. Instead of aiming to foster the practice-research nexus, teachers' pursuit of professional doctorates was motived by a desire to enhance their research productivity to meet promotion requirements and to establish professional legitimacy within the professional context of higher education. Accordingly, their projected identities were characterized more as credential-seeking researchers than as researching professionals, which stands in contrast to the intended aims of professional doctoral programs. These motives and identity projections reflected systemic shortcomings that can be further traced back to the broader neoliberal higher education landscape.

In teachers' navigation of the dual demands of their professional work and doctoral studies, they encountered challenges arising from multi-level misalignments between activity components both within and across activity systems. To address these challenges and manage their dual roles, they employed agentic strategies, leveraging and adapting tools both across and beyond the dual activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies. Discursive analysis revealed salient identity negotiation patterns at the micro-discursive level. Overall, throughout the process of using tools to address ongoing challenges, teachers reconstructed themselves from *burnout jugglers* to *resilient navigators*, from *passive supervisees* to *autonomous doctoral researchers*, and from *experienced professionals* to *open-minded beginners*.

Despite its challenging nature, pursuing a doctorate provided teachers with a diverse array of tools, including symbolic, conceptual, material, and social tools, to reimagine and reconstruct their professional identities, some of which extended beyond their original projections. The process of boundary crossing between the doctoral and the professional activity systems created opportunities for teachers to address longstanding tensions in their professional development and to re-envision their roles within the professional context of higher education. They leveraged and adapted the tools acquired through their doctoral studies

to establish a foothold in higher education and achieve professional development in terms of both research and teaching. Micro-level discourse analysis revealed their identity transformations from *outsiders* to *(quasi-)legitimate members* in higher education, from *non-researchers* to *researchers in the making*, and from *experienced teachers* to *informed teachers*.

Theoretically, the study proposes an integrated conceptual framework to examine how teachers' identities are dynamically constructed and negotiated through both their practical engagements and their discursive meaning making of these engagements. By bridging two strands of theoretical perspectives in identity research (i.e., identity as experiential and identity as discursive), the study advances the understanding of identity as a practical and linguistic phenomenon closely embedded in sociocultural contexts. The framework proposed in this study can be adapted to investigate various forms of learning and identity development across diverse educational settings. Methodologically, the synergy of case study with narrative inquiry makes a novel approach to qualitative research, which enables contextualized understandings of the phenomenon under study, captures the meanings teachers assign to their experiences, and provides a dialogic space for them to narrate and construct their identities. The multiple methods in data analysis, including thematic analysis, activity systems analysis, and discourse analysis, allow for both nuance and systematicity in interpretation. Empirically, the study generates insights into the under-explored phenomenon of mid-career in-service EFL teachers pursuing further doctoral education. It also enriches existing scholarship on the professional development of teaching-focused academic staff within the current neoliberal climate of higher education, the development of the teaching-research nexus in TESOL and higher education, the doctoral trajectories of non-direct-pathway and mature doctoral students, and the actual impact and role of professional doctoral programs in bridging the practice-research gaps.

Publications arising from the thesis

The thesis contains material from three papers published in the following peer-reviewed journals in which I am listed as an author.

Bao, J. (2025). Claiming Legitimacy in the Academic Field: Chinese University TESOL Lecturers' Investment in Doctoral Learning. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*. https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250627

Bao, J., Hu, G., & Feng, D. (2024). En route to becoming researcher-teachers? Chinese university EFL teachers' boundary crossing in professional doctoral programs. *System*, *127*, Article 103514. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103514

Bao, J., Feng, D., & Hu, G. (2024). 'I view teaching differently': Identity development of university teachers doing professional doctorates. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2024.2400480

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Any flaws or shortcomings in this thesis, of course, remain my own.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The study aims to explore the experiences of mid-career Chinese tertiary English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers doing professional doctorates for professional development through the lens of identity. It is motivated by the increasing number of in-service EFL teachers pursuing doctoral degrees, the upsurge of professional doctoral programs as a means of professional development for mid-career practitioners, and the paucity of extant literature on the experiences of EFL teachers who concurrently do a professional doctorate. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the motives and projections they hold for pursuing a professional doctorate, their identity negotiations as they juggle the dual activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies, and the role of pursuing a professional doctorate in shaping their future identity configurations as tertiary EFL teachers. In this chapter, I present the research background and highlight the relevant gaps in the existing literature. I then introduce the research purpose and research questions guiding the present study, followed by a discussion on the significance of the study from theoretical, methodological, and practical perspectives. This chapter ends with an outline of the organization of the thesis.

1.1 Research background

Widely recognized as change agents in education, teachers' professional lives and professional development have attracted much attention in educational research (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Varghese et al., 2005). In the field of higher education, as early as the 19th century, the German polymath Humboldt proposed the concept of teaching-research duality (Humboldt, 1970), which treats teaching and research as two sides of the same coin. Thus, to become a "holistic academic" (McKinley, 2022, p. 7), university teachers have to incorporate both teaching and research into their professional identity. However, despite this ideal of teaching-research duality, existing literature has problematized the maintenance of this duality

in academic work in various contexts such as US (Dugas et al., 2020), Australia (Brew, 2010), New Zealand (Robertson, 2007), Finland (Arvaja, 2018), China (Bao & Feng, 2023), and UK (McIntosh et al., 2022; McKinley et al., 2021). Findings of these studies point to the increasing weight given to research over teaching as well as the dilemmas facing teaching-focused staff in a research-oriented institutional culture driven by the neoliberal ethos. When universities worldwide are competing for research excellence and places on league tables, teaching in higher education becomes "a Cinderella activity" (Macfarlane, 2011, p. 71) and teaching-focused faculty are becoming less visible and valued (McIntosh et al., 2022). In the performative climate of higher education, they feel a pressing need to address their incompetence in research through in-service education and professional development programs. However, except for a few attempts (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022; Bao et al., 2024), tertiary teachers' professional development and professional identity reconstruction through in-service education and development programs remain an underexplored area. This is *the first research gap* identified.

In mainland Chinese universities, EFL teachers are quintessential representations of teaching-focused faculty. Due to China's huge investments in tertiary-level EFL education for the purpose of internationalization since the Reform and Opening-up in 1978 (Hu & Lei, 2014), a large number of EFL teachers have been hired to teach the foundation English courses in undergraduate programs. Although EFL teachers make the largest cohort of faculty staff in Chinese universities (Yang et al., 2022), a large proportion of them, especially mid-career ones, do not hold a doctoral degree (Wang, 2018; Zhang et al., 2024), which distinguishes them from academic staff in other disciplines, who have mostly obtained their doctorates before commencing their academic careers in higher education. As a result, their research engagement and productivity are greatly hindered by their lack of systematic research training (Xu, 2014). Their research inactivity further impedes their career progression in higher education (Bao &

Feng, 2023). In the past two decades, with the quest to build world-class research universities (Gao & Zheng, 2020; Yang & Welch, 2012), the Chinese government has initiated a series of priority funding schemes, such as Project 211 [211 工程][1], Project 985 [985 工程][2], and Double Top University Plan [双一流计划][3], to galvanize flagship universities to improve their performance metrics and enhance staff qualifications in order to compete for international prestige. The inexorable emphasis on research performance and qualifications, which began in top-tier universities, has soon permeated universities across all tiers (Li & Horta, 2024). At the institutional level, increasing the proportion of doctoral degree holders among faculty staff and turning more staff into competent researchers has become "a technical solution to [the] emerging competitive problem" (Dann et al., 2019, p. 1167). Faculty members who were hired without a doctoral degree due to historical reasons are thus compelled to update their academic qualifications to ensure job security and career advancement (Tian & Lu, 2017).

Against this backdrop, an escalating number of mid-career tertiary EFL teachers, who did not receive research education at doctoral level, have chosen to pursue a doctorate to hone their research skills, achieve professional development, and gain legitimacy in the higher education marketplace (Hao, 2011). Among a diversity of doctoral programs, Professional Doctoral Programs (PD programs) in Applied Linguistics and Education have brought new options for in-service EFL teachers seeking professional development, especially when traditional PhD programs in Chinese universities prefer full-time students and are turning their back to on-the-job applicants (Zhang & Sun, 2015). Operating on a flexible study mode, PD programs target experienced professionals and aim to facilitate their professional advancement

[1] Project 211 [211 工程] is a priority funding scheme initiated by the Chinese central government in 1995. 112 universities were included in the scheme.
[2] Project 985 [985 工程] is a priority funding scheme initiated by the Chinese central government in 1998. 39 universities were included in the scheme.
[3] Double Top University Plan [双一流计划] is a competitive funding scheme initiated by the Chinese central government in 2017 to instigate internal competition among Chinese universities. Subject to constant assessment and screening, the selected universities are expected to compete in the international higher education market.

by adding a research dimension to their professional identities (Burnard et al., 2018). Unlike PhD programs which aim to produce future *professional researchers*, PD programs are widely acknowledged as an "in-service award for advanced professional development" (Bourner et al., 2001, p. 66), with the rationale of facilitating candidates' "professional renewal" through practitioner research (Wellington & Sikes, 2006, p. 727). However, despite the proliferation of PD programs across the globe, few studies have examined whether and how these programs have fulfilled their stated mission of producing *researching professionals* who can leverage research to inform their professional engagements (Burnard et al., 2018). This is *the second research gap* identified.

For in-service academic staff attending PD programs, gaining professional development through doing the doctorate is "an area of profound struggle" (Dann et al. 2019, p. 1180), as their professional engagements may interact with their doctoral studies in complex ways (Burnard et al., 2018). A lens through which we can examine the complexities, tensions, and contestations of inhabiting both professional work and doctoral studies is PD students' ongoing identity negotiations. As a powerful analytic lens in education and applied linguistics research (Gee, 2000), identity provides a frame through which researchers can examine how people make sense of themselves and their experiences in relation to the multi-layered contexts (Lee, 2013). In the case of PD students who straddle professional work and doctoral studies, examining their ongoing identity negotiations helps to unravel the dynamic interplay between their dual engagements as professionals and doctoral students, as well as the dialectic interplay between their agentic personal sense-making and the social contexts in which their work and studies are situated. As there is a temporal element in identity construction (Wenger, 1998), the continuous constructions of the self are inevitably influenced by people's past experiences and future projections. This further justifies identity as an appropriate lens to study the experiences of PD students, whose past and ongoing professional practices may further

complicate their doctoral studies (Taylor, 2007). However, while identity has been used as an analytic lens in numerous studies on social and educational issues (Yuan, 2015), it is rarely used as a lens to examine the lived experiences of educational professionals pursuing further doctoral studies (Buss, 2022). This is *the third research gap* identified.

1.2 Purpose statement and research questions

To address the above-mentioned gaps, this study uses the lens of identity to explore the experiences of mid-career Chinese tertiary EFL teachers doing Professional Doctorate in Education and Applied Linguistics. The objective is to delineate their motives for pursuing a professional doctorate within their situated contexts, examine their identity negotiations when they engage with the dual activity systems of their professional work and doctoral studies, and explore the impact of doing a professional doctorate on shaping their future identity configurations as tertiary EFL teachers. Specifically, the study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. What are the motives and projected identities of Chinese tertiary EFL teachers who choose to pursue a professional doctorate?

2. How do they negotiate their identities when they juggle the dual activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies?

i What challenges do they encounter?

ii How do they cope with these challenges and move towards their goals?

iii How do they make sense of their experiences and position themselves?

3. How does doing a professional doctorate contribute their identity configurations as tertiary EFL teachers?

i What new tools (conceptual, material, symbolic, or social) have they gained from engaging with the doctoral activity system?

ii How do they use these tools to mediate their practice in their professional activity system?

iii How do they make sense of their experiences and position themselves?

To answer these questions, the study adopts a narrative case study design and employs an integrated theoretical framework comprising identity-in-activity and identity-in-discourse. Multiple-sourced data are collected through narrative frames, semi-structured interviews, informal communications, netnographic observations, and observation of artefacts. The collected data are analyzed thematically and at the discursive level. In parallel, they are subject to activity systems analysis. The results of the analyses are synthesized to generate a comprehensive understanding of tertiary EFL teachers' experiences in pursuing a professional doctorate for professional development, viewed through the lens of their identity constructions.

1.3 Significance of the study

The study, which uses identity as a lens to explore the experiences of tertiary EFL teachers pursuing a professional doctorate for professional development, is expected to have theoretical, methodological, and practical significance.

Theoretically, by integrating the theoretical perspectives of identity-in-activity and identity-in-discourse into its theoretical framework, the study could be seen as one of the emergent attempts to "create a dialogue across [theoretical] paradigms" in identity research (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 24). Through micro-level discourse analysis and macro-level activity systems analysis, the study is expected to generate new insights into the complex process of teachers' identity constructions through their practical engagements across different activity systems and their discursive meaning making of their practical engagement. It is expected to deepen our understanding of identity as a linguistic, practical, and sociocultural construct (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002).

Methodologically, the study adopts a narrative case study design and collects multiple-sourced data, aiming to generate a contextualized and nuanced understanding of the identity negotiations of teachers pursing a doctorate for professional development. The synergy of case study with narrative inquiry enables in-depth interpretations of complex phenomena in naturalistic settings (Duff, 2012), while at the same time captures the meanings teachers give to their experiences and provides a dialogic space for this under-represented group to get their voices heard and thus be empowered (Barkhuizen, 2015). In general, case study and narrative inquiry as merged methodologies make a novel approach to qualitative research and can offer new ways of documenting and understanding people's lived experiences and identity constructions (Sonday et al., 2020). At the analytic level, the multi-approach to data analysis, i.e., thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and activity systems analysis, allows for a comprehensive analysis of the content conveyed in the data, the discursive construction of the content, as well as the broader activity systems and contexts in which the content is conveyed.

Practically, the study is expected to add to the hitherto limited understanding of the experiences of tertiary EFL teachers doing professional doctorate as a way of professional development. It provides insights into whether and how professional doctoral programs in Applied Linguistics and Education may facilitate EFL teachers' identity development as researcher-teachers and generate implications for the professional development of tertiary EFL teachers as well as the crafting of the teaching-research nexus in tertiary-level EFL education. The findings also serve as important reference for policymakers, professional doctoral program designers, and university staff who are interested in achieving professional development through a professional doctorate. In a broader sense, the study is also expected to inform how professional doctoral programs, as a distinct form of doctorate from traditional PhD programs in contemporary higher education, may contribute to the public good through building practice-research nexus.

1.4 Organization of the thesis

This chapter has introduced the background of the study, the purpose statement and research questions, and the significance of study. In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review to situate the study in the practical and theoretical context. Specifically, I review the literature on tertiary EFL teachers' identity tensions and professional development through in-service development programs. I also review the literature on professional doctoral programs (PD programs) and on dual-status academics (i.e., university teachers who concurrently pursue a doctorate). After contextualizing the present study, I explain the rationale of using identity as an analytic lens for the present study. In Chapter 3, I introduce the theoretical foundations informing the present study and propose a tentative conceptual framework for the present study based on these foundations. Specifically, two major theoretical strands (i.e., the experiential view of identity and the discursive view of identity), as well as powerful theoretical frameworks within these two strands, are reviewed and critiqued. Based on these theoretical discussions, I justify the necessity to integrate theories from these two theoretical strands and introduce the integrated conceptual framework guiding the present study. Chapter 4 presents the methodology adopted in the present study. It begins with rationalizing the use of narrative case study within the qualitative research paradigm, followed by a detailed introduction of the participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis protocols. I also explain how trustworthiness and ethical issues are addressed in the study and clarify my researcher positionality during the whole research process.

Chapter 2 Literature review

To situate the present study in the practical and theoretical context, this chapter reviews the concepts and research relevant to the purpose of the present study. It begins by introducing EFL teachers as a special professional group in the context of Chinese higher education, with a focus on their identity tensions in the changing institutional climate and the potential of in-service education and development programs as a pathway for their continuing professional development. It then explains the rationale of professional doctoral programs (PD programs) as a new form of doctorate for experienced professionals and briefly reviews the extant literature on PD programs. Next, the small strand of research on dual-status academics (i.e., university teachers who concurrently pursue a doctorate) is reviewed to identify the affordances and constraints in their dual engagements. Following that, I introduce identity as a widely used analytic lens in educational research, focusing especially on the use of identity as a lens to understand teachers' professional lives and development, as well as the use of identity as a lens in studies of doctoral learning.

2.1 EFL teachers in Chinese universities

EFL teachers in mainland Chinese universities are those who teach foundation English courses to non-English-major students, and they make a very special professional group in Chinese higher education. Ever since the Reform and Opening-up policy, the Chinese government has made great investments in tertiary-level EFL education for the purpose of internalization (Hu & Lei, 2014). At the National Education Work Conference held in 1978, EFL education was particularly emphasized (Cai, 2012). Recognizing the importance of English proficiency in fostering global communication and enhancing international competitiveness, the government makes a significant shift in the country's educational policy, placing a greater focus on EFL education at all school levels. In universities across mainland

China, English courses are made mandatory for almost all undergraduate students (Liu & Borg, 2014). In the mid-1980s, the first national college English syllabus was officially developed to promote English language education at tertiary level (Lam, 2005). Along with the syllabus, the national College English Tests (CETs) were designed and mandated in the late 1980s to assess the English language proficiency of undergraduate students (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). These tests soon became a high-stakes performance indicator, not only for students' academic success but also for the appraisal of tertiary EFL teachers and the appraisal of undergraduate programs.

The emphasis on EFL education in Chinese universities, together with the exponential increase of student enrolment in higher education institutions ever since the 1990s, leads to the massive recruitment of tertiary EFL teachers (Zhou & Zhang, 2016). Even with the reduction of EFL class hours in recent years, EFL teachers still make the largest cohort in Chinese higher institutions (Yang et al., 2022). Due to the large demand for EFL teaching force and the skill-based nature of EFL courses, a significant number of EFL teachers, especially those in mid-career, were hired upon getting their maser degree and did not receive research education at doctoral level (Wang, 2018; Zhang et al., 2024). As teaching-focused academic staff without a doctoral degree, EFL teachers' professional development and career advancement are severely hindered, especially in the recent climate of research prioritization in Chinese higher institutions. As Zeng and Fickel (2021) lament, EFL teachers "occupy the bottom of academic hierarchy in higher education context" (p. 651). In what follows, I briefly introduce the changing higher education landscape and the identity tensions experienced by mid-career EFL teachers. I also explain how in-service teacher education and development programs can facilitate teachers' continuing professional development.

2.1.1 Changing higher education landscape and mid-career EFL teachers' identity tensions

Although China is not considered as a neoliberal country (Rofel, 2007), Chinese universities are greatly impacted by the global neoliberal ethos, whereby accountability and performance metrics are highly valued. Over the past two decades, universities across tiers have been moving towards a quasi-market mechanism, striving to demonstrate their merits in order to attract the best resources and gain competitive edges in the national and the global higher education market (Gao & Zheng, 2020). In this zeitgeist, faculty qualifications and quantifiable research outputs, among others, become key performance indicators. Teaching, although also included in performance metrics, is to a large extent relegated to the background compared to research. Teaching excellence receives less acknowledgement in staff appraisal (Bao & Feng, 2023), despite the state-mandated re-emphasis on teaching in higher education (Chen, 2018). In this climate, mid-career non-doctoral EFL teachers, who have traditionally been teaching-focused, face significant disadvantages in their career progression (Huang & Guo, 2019). First, even though they were hired before a doctorate was made mandatory for faculty positions, they still feel marginalized and ontologically insecure in the higher education community, where the doctorate is often seen as the dividing line between "qualified citizens at home" and "outsiders" (Billot et al., 2021, p. 438), particularly when research-related qualifications have now become the proxy for academic competence and professional legitimacy. Second, without systematic research training at doctoral level, their research engagement and productivity are greatly undermined (Xu, 2014), as they do not feel confident about either their qualification or their ability to conduct high-quality research (Barkhuizen, 2009). For a considerable number of tertiary EFL teachers, research is seen as the "Sword of Damocles hanging over their heads" (Zhang, 2013, p. 95), the "ivory tower beyond their reach" (Gao et al., 2000), and the "bottleneck in their career development" (Wang & Han, 2011, p. 44). Having difficulties meeting institutional expectations to become productive researchers, tertiary EFL teachers have experienced identity tensions (Bao & Feng, 2023). Third, originally

hired as teaching-focused academic staff, mid-career EFL teachers are expected to reconstruct a holistic professional identity that incorporates both teaching and research (Bao & Feng, 2022), aligning with the nation's emerging agendas on the teaching-research nexus in tertiary-level EFL education (Yang & Li, 2022). However, the road towards a researcher-teacher identity is always a rocky one (Zhang et al., 2022), hindered by a series of pragmatic constraints in the specific context of tertiary-level EFL education in China.

2.1.1.1 The doctorate as proof of legitimacy

Postulated to be to be the "kingdom of knowledge" (Liu, 2018, p. 47), higher education institutions are supposed to be inhabited by "a collective of scholars" (Billot, 2010, p. 172). A doctoral degree is thus often seen as a pre-career qualification for faculty positions (Green, 2005), a "ticket" to career advancement (Eddy & Rao, 2009, p. 7), and a rite of passage to professoriate (Wulff & Austin, 2004). Although universities sometimes do not require a doctorate when hiring teaching-focused academic staff, academics without a doctorate make a vulnerable group who consider themselves as peripheral or even marginal members in the higher education community (Ballamingie & Mikeson, 2011). The prevalence of the neoliberal ethos in higher education in the past two decades has further aggravated non-doctoral staff's feelings of vulnerability and illegitimacy, since faculty staff's doctoral qualifications have been given increasing weight in universities' accountability metrics across the globe (Clouder et al., 2020). In this climate, institutions are gradually closing opportunities for non-doctoral candidates in their staff recruitment exercises while simultaneously pushing their current non-doctoral academic staff to pursue a doctorate. A doctoral title has become a mark of an academic staff member's legitimacy and capacity, not only in research but also in teaching (Clouder et al., 2020; Dann et al., 2019). Academic staff who haven't gained their doctorate

often feel like “second-class citizen” in higher institutions (Billot et al., 2021, p. 441), drifting away from the core academic community.

In the specific Chinese higher education context, due to the paucity of doctoral programs in foreign languages and literature[4] (Bai & Hudson, 2011; Wang, 2018), as well as the great need for EFL teaching force in higher education (Liu & Borg, 2014), a considerable number of EFL teachers do not possess a doctoral degree. In the higher education context where a doctoral title has already become the norm for academic staff in other disciplines, non-doctoral EFL teachers are sometimes positioned as para-academics, providing language training service instead of contributing to knowledge generation (Zeng & Fickel, 2021). This technician view of EFL teachers’ professional identity seriously undermines their professional status. In a review article about Chinese tertiary EFL teachers’ professional development, Wang (2018) poignantly points out that tertiary EFL teachers make an invisible professional group in higher institutions and much fewer EFL teachers are promoted to professorial positions compared with academic staff from other disciplines. One of the primary reasons for their professional quandaries is that a large proportion of them do not receive research education at doctoral level. In another study (Bao & Feng, 2022), it is reported that mid-career EFL teachers without doctoral training may doubt their legitimacy of participation in research activities and consider themselves as “invisible layperson” in higher education (p. 7). This feeling of invisibility is also reported in Hao’s (2014) study on Chinese tertiary EFL teachers’ identity crisis, in which teachers without a doctorate describe their professional status as “dispensable” (p. 65). Overall, doctoral education, together with the symbolic capital

[4] In the discipline structure of Chinese higher education, Foreign Languages and Literature is a first-level discipline [一级学科], below which there are sub-disciplines [二级学科] such as Foreign Language Literature, Translation, Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, English Education, etc.

embedded in the doctoral title, becomes a major impediment for numerous mid-career Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' construction of legitimacy in the higher education community.

2.1.1.2 The 'publish or perish' culture

The research-oriented institutional culture has become a major source of tension for the academic profession on a global scale (McCune, 2021). In the past three decades, with the advent of neoliberalism which endorses a market mentality (Olssen & Peters, 2005), higher education institutions have been in fierce competition for national and international prestige in order to secure more funding and resources from both public and private sectors (Chetty & Lubben, 2010). As places on league tables mainly hinge upon quantifiable research outputs, universities begin to adopt corporate values and put greater emphasis on staff evaluation in terms of research. Stringent requirements on academic staff's research outputs are imposed by universities across different tiers and different types, often concretized in the 'up or out' hiring system and the research-oriented appraisal system. Publication becomes a high-stakes, if not determining, factor for contract renewal, salary increases, and career promotion in higher institutions. This leads to the rise of performativity (Gao & Yuan, 2021), whereby university teachers have to devote significant time and energy to meet the rising institutional expectations in order to survive the relentless research assessment exercises. Teachers who fail to meet the institutional requirements find themselves living a professional life filled with precarity, constantly bothered by fear of demotion and even dismissal.

This grim reality is vividly captured by the mantra of 'publish or perish' (Lee, 2014). Numerous studies have been conducted in the international contexts to investigate how this 'publish or perish' mantra and its concomitant institutional initiatives have impacted university teachers (e.g., Arvaja, 2018; Dugas et al., 2020; Gao & Yuan, 2021, González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2018; Miller et al., 2011; Tran et al., 2017; Yuan, 2016, 2017, 2020). In general,

these studies reveal that survival within the 'publish or perish' culture is a daunting experience and teachers may suffer from overwork, stress, identity tensions, and professional vulnerability when they attempt to meet the stringent research requirements. For example, both the early-career teacher and the mid-career teacher in Yuan's (2016) study confided that the institutional performance assessments of publications have imposed immerse pressure on them. Similarly, in a study in the Spanish higher education context (González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2018), the participant teacher reported feelings of exhaustion and disappointment within an accreditation system that only values publications in journals with high impact factors. Another consequence widely reported is teachers' re-orientation of their professional purpose, whereby teaching is sometimes sacrificed to win more time for research. For example, in Yuan's (2020) study, one participant teacher described himself as a "ninja" (p. 7), who had to devote more time and energy to research and publishing than teaching in order to survive the publication mania in his university, despite his personal identification with the teaching role. In the same study, another focal participant teacher viewed himself as a "paper generator" (p. 7), who felt detached from his original teacher identity.

The 'publish or perish' sentiment begins to pervade mainland Chinese universities in the late twentieth century (Yan & He, 2015a). In the "good old days" before the publication frenzy (Hao, 2014, p. 58), university teachers in China did not face so much pressure from research audit and their career promotion mainly rests upon seniority and internal criteria made by their affiliated institutions (Bao & Feng, 2022; Li et al., 2013). Holding an academic position in higher institutions signified a predictable career trajectory, which was stable and secure. Within a traditional *Danwei* [单位][5] system, university teachers did not have to worry about

[5] *Danwei* [单位] refers to the organization or institution that people work for. The *Danwei* system is characteristic of the Chinese socialist economy, and it is often used in the context of state-owned enterprises.

termination of contracts (Huang et al., 2018). Their salary system was set by the government without much flexibility, and individual performance did not play a key role in their salary scale (Li et al., 2013). Although research and publication constituted an important part of the academic profession, they did not stand as an overriding factor in staff evaluation. Doing research and writing for publication was more of a matter of personal preference. This allowed university teachers to have varying degrees of identification with teaching or research, particularly in non-elite teaching universities. The institutional ecology back then reflects Tight's (2010) depiction of a "golden age in which academics pursue their own interests" (p. 105).

However, job stability and academic freedom in terms of teaching and research have gradually been displaced by China's zealous quest to build world-class universities (Gao & Zheng, 2020; Wang et al., 2013). As stipulated by the State Council (2015), higher education institutions in China have to actively involve themselves in building disciplines of national and global prominence and enhancing their research capacity in order to gain competitive advantages internationally. To stimulate universities' active involvement in this national quest, aggressive management measures are taken by the government (Tian & Lu, 2017). At the policy level, the *National Medium-and Long-Term Framework for Educational Reform and Development* [国家中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要] (Ministry of Education, 2010) prescribed research as one of the professional obligations of university teachers. Incentive mechanisms such as priority funding schemes to research-active universities were introduced by the government to further encourage quantifiable research outputs (Ma, 2007). In response to the national calls and policies, universities in China have implemented a series of recruitment and appraisal reforms. Central to these reforms is the overriding role of research in staff recruitment and evaluation. Research is no longer a personal preference, but instead has become a professional imperative, a "top-down package" that is institutionally sanctioned (Xu,

2014, p. 252). In place of permanent contracts and fixed salary, contract-based employment and performance-based salary, which hinge upon teachers' research outputs, are implemented by universities nationwide. For teachers who have signed permanent contracts with their institutions before the advent of rigid research audits, failure to meet the research requirements may lead to salary deductions, blocked promotion pathways, demotion, or even transfer from academic to non-academic positions. For early-career teachers employed on short-term contracts and striving for tenured positions, unsatisfactory research performance may result in contract termination. The philosophy of "iron rice bowl" in traditional *Danwei* [单位] system has given way to the philosophy of "creat[ing] your own rice bowl" (Bray, 2005, p. 179).

Against this backdrop, similar to their international counterparts, Chinese university teachers, especially those hired without permanent contracts, experience intensified pressure coming from heightened requirements on research and generate feelings of apprehension and insecurity (Tian & Lu, 2017). As Yu (2009) has described, "Instability is prevalent and there is no guarantee of promotion, or even of employment" (p. 58). While research audits and quantitative performance appraisals pose challenges for nearly all academic staff regardless of their disciplines, it has to be noted that there are variations across disciplines. Compared with faculty from STEM disciplines (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), faculty from HSS (i.e., humanities and social sciences) are more likely to feel vulnerable in this 'research tournament' (Gao & Zheng, 2020; Li et al., 2013; Tian & Lu, 2017; Zheng & Gao, 2016), as HSS academics' contributions to higher education, as well as to the broader social community, cannot be adequately captured by publication metrics and citation statistics. Among the HSS academic staff, tertiary EFL teachers are always represented as the most vulnerable cohort (Zeng & Fickel, 2021), who are severely disadvantaged within the research-oriented institutional ideologies (Huang & Guo, 2019). In research assessment exercises across disciplines, EFL teachers always "take the last seat" (Wang, 2018, p. 16).

In existing studies exploring Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' research engagements and professional development (e.g., Bai & Hudson, 2011; Bao & Feng, 2022, 2023a; Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg & Liu, 2013; Liu & Borg, 2014; Xu, 2014; Wang & Han, 2011; Yan & He, 2015a; Yang et al., 2022), several key factors contributing to EFL teachers' low research productivity are constantly mentioned, including a lack of research competence, time pressure from heavier workloads, and the difficulty of publishing in top-tier journals. First, as a special cohort of faculty who were hired to teach foundation English courses required by nearly all undergraduate programs, EFL teachers, especially mid-career ones hired before a doctorate had become mandatory, have limited research knowledge and research skills due to the missing of systematic research trainings. Even for teachers who project doing research as their career aspirations, they quite often find themselves "strong in will but weak in power" (Xu, 2014, p. 250), as there is much to learn before they could gain competence in conducting research and writing for publication. As mid-career teachers, they often feel it is difficult to learn from scratch (Bao & Feng, 2023).

Second, EFL teacher usually have heavier workloads compared with faculty staff from other disciplines. Due to the role of English as a compulsory course for almost all undergraduate majors, EFL teachers generally have to teach a great number of classes (Li et al., 2013). According to a survey conducted by the Advisory Committee of Foreign Language Teaching in Colleges and Universities [高等学校大学外语教学指导委员会] (Wang, 2009), as many as 95% of EFL teachers lecture more than 9 classes every teaching week (approximately 7.5 hours), and more than 10% of EFL teachers lecture more than 16 classes every teaching week (approximately 13 hours per week). In a more recent survey conducted after the national reduction of English language course hours in tertiary institutions (Zhang et al., 2024), it is reported that over 50% of EFL teachers devote 6 to 20 hours per week to teaching, while almost 30% teach more than 26 hours per week. Besides classroom teaching,

EFL teachers are also overwhelmed by a wide range of professional responsibilities such as tutoring students, doing administrative work and professional service, and even teaching extra classes in fee-producing programs to generate income for their universities (Altbach, 2009). The onerous workloads make it difficult for EFL teachers to allot time to research (Yan & He, 2015a). As identified by Barkhuizen (2009), "Time is a major factor preventing teachers from carrying out research" (p. 121).

Third, it is difficult for EFL teachers to publish in the limited number of institutionally accredited journals. The 'publish or perish' ideology is not only concerned with 'publish' but also with 'where to publish' (Lee, 2014). Universities usually set rigorous criteria according to journal index metrics to gauge teachers' publication outputs. In mainland China, although with variations across universities, teachers in HSS are generally encouraged to publish in journals listed in CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) and SSCI (Social Sciences Citation Index) (Yan & He, 2015a). Publications through other venues, for example in less prestigious journals, gradually become unrecognized in staff appraisals (Bao & Feng, 2023). However, publishing in these indexed journals has proven to be an arduous task for EFL teachers. For one thing, publishing in CSSCI journals is highly competitive for EFL teachers. According to the latest statistics released by the Institute for Chinese Social Sciences Research and Assessment [中国社会科学研究评价中心], the number of CSSCI journals which publish research articles in foreign language studies and language education is no more than ten. This limited number is in stark contrast with the vast number of tertiary EFL teachers who are expected to publish. Getting an acceptance in these journals is thus a rather difficult undertaking. Moreover, in the Chinese cultural context, journal editors' decision-making is complicated by a string of intricate non-academic considerations, such as collegiality, friendship, and power dynamics (Shi et al., 2005; Tam & Chen, 2010; Yuan et al., 2022). While preference is given to big names and acquaintances, journal editors often hold potential, albeit

hidden, bias against teachers without a doctoral degree or professorial title (Dai et al., 2021). For another thing, although internationally indexed high-quality journals such as SSCI journals have brought more venues for teachers to publish and disseminate their works, publishing in such journals is by no means an easy task for Chinese academics, as shown in the wealth of literature discussing the tensions and challenges facing Chinese academics when they try to thrust into the territory of international publishing (e.g., Lei & Hu, 2019; Li & Flowerdew, 2007; Luo & Hyland, 2016; Ren & Hu, 2023; Yuan et al., 2022; Zheng & Guo, 2019). Compared with their Anglophone counterparts, EAL (English as an additional language) scholarly writers, including Chinese EAL academics, are at a disadvantage due to their lack of advanced academic literacy to write in English (Hyland, 2016). For example, it may take a long time for EAL scholarly writers to socialize themselves into the discourse style and language features of writing academic articles in English (Ren & Hu, 2023; Yuan et al., 2022). For EFL teachers, although they are generally considered as having a vantage in terms of English language proficiency, they have to deal with other discipline-specific difficulties. For example, compared with those from STEM disciplines, EFL teachers may encounter more severe linguistic challenges, since the presentation of research findings in foreign language studies and language education studies (and HSS disciplines in general) require more exquisite and complex language use (Bao & Feng, 2025; Tian & Lu, 2017). Issues such as "ideologies, paradigms and discourses" (Yang, 2014, p. 49) may also add layers of complexity in their international publishing endeavors, as what counts as legitimate and publishable knowledge in HSS may vary from the local context to the international context.

Taken together, the pervasive 'publish or perish' culture has especially taken its toll on the vast number of EFL teachers in Chinese higher institutions. Unable to contribute to the universities' quest for research excellence and places on league tables, EFL teachers feel that

they are gradually losing status in higher education and are experiencing a process of "proletarianization" (Murphy, 2011, p. 509).

2.1.1.3 The teaching-research duality

Although the place of teaching and research in higher institutions is widely discussed and contested in the international literature (Lee, 2014), scholars almost unanimously agree that the teaching-research duality is what characterizes the academic profession in higher education (Robertson, 2007). University teachers are expected to take on a professional identity that incorporates both teaching and research (Billot, 2010), in accordance with higher education's responsibility for "educating the future workforce" and "generating knowledge" (Shams, 2019, p. 621). As commented by Baker (1986), an ideal university teacher is perhaps a "Nobel Prize winner who can enthral an undergraduate class" (p. 52-53). While recognizing this duality, universities used to give spaces for academic staff to choose either teaching or research as their cardinal professional identity, premised on the traditional institutional ethos of academic freedom (Fulton, 2002). For example, while teachers working at research universities tend to align themselves more closely with their researcher role (Nevgi & Löfström, 2015), teachers working at teaching universities or regional non-elite universities may maintain a palatable teaching-dominated professional identity (Sutton, 2015).

However, university teachers' personal autonomy of foregrounding teaching or research and the institutional accommodation of pluralistic professional identities are greatly challenged by the systemic prioritization of research in the neoliberal higher education landscape. When various quantitative metrics are introduced to evaluate the performance of a university, the prestige of a university mainly rests upon quantifiable research outputs, with the unquantifiable "social, emotional and moral" dimensions of academic work related to teaching largely ignored (Ball, 2012, p. 32). Compared with research, teaching appears to have become

an ancillary activity of the academic profession, receiving lower prominence in higher education (Parker, 2008; Young, 2006). University teachers who focus on and excel at teaching are gradually marginalized and are hardly given any "material recognition" (Strauss, 2020, p. 1018), such as tenure and promotion. In recent years, the identity crisis of the under-represented teaching-focused academic staff in a variety of contexts has begun to attract research attention. For example, situating in the New Zealand higher education context, Strauss (2020) explicated how academics teaching on foundation studies programs (FS programs) experienced neglect by their institutions and generated feelings of "not quite university people" (p. 1013). She then explained how these teachers' ability to positively impact the second-chance students in FS programs was curbed by their lowly professional status. In another survey-based study conducted in US regional universities, it was found that teaching-focused academic staff experienced more distress compared with research-focused staff (Dugas et al., 2020). Overall, research prioritization and the deemphasis on teaching may seriously undermine the self-esteem and professional wellbeing of traditionally teaching-focused academic staff, which does not "bode well for students and higher education as a whole" in the long run (Bao & Feng, 2023, p. 9).

Chinese tertiary EFL teachers are typical teaching-focused staff (Borg & Liu, 2013). Before the advent of neoliberalism and research-oriented performative culture, EFL teachers used to lead "a good life" (Li et al., 2013, p. 290), as their devotion to teaching was acknowledged and rewarded. With rising institutional expectations for them to conduct research and publish articles in high-quality journals, as mentioned in the previous section, EFL teachers are pushed to a crossroad, where they are urged to reconstruct a professional identity that incorporates both teaching and research (Bao & Feng, 2022). However, maintaining a dual focus on teaching and research proves to be a daunting task for tertiary EFL teachers. A number of studies have revealed that while they are competent in teaching, they

struggle with research (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2023; Borg & Liu, 2013; Yang et al., 2022), as vividly captured by the quote: "Teaching, my passion; publishing, my pain" (Yang et al., 2022, p. 235). Besides the pragmatic constraints such as research knowledge and skills, workload and time, and venues for publication, as mentioned in the previous section, another key impediment to EFL teachers' participation in research is the teaching-research bifurcation in Chinese EFL teachers' professional work.

In line with the teaching-research bifurcation identified in international TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) community (e.g., Medgyes, 2017; Rose, 2019), studies in the context of Chinese tertiary EFL education have also pointed out the misalignment between EFL teaching and EFL research (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2023; Zeng & Fickel, 2021). The paradox lies in the low publishing chances of pedagogical research that may actually inform teaching and the low practical value of published articles within the orientation of intellectualization and "scientific objectivity" in applied linguistics research (Kramsch, 2015, p. 455). For one thing, due to the academia's bias towards the 'messy' practitioner research done in real-world classrooms (Rose & McKinley, 2022; Yuan, 2017), EFL teachers find it difficult to publish their "experienced-based writing" originating from their classroom reflections (Zeng & Fickel, 2021, p. 660), especially in prestigious journals. Without recognition from mainstream academia, EFL teachers doubt the legitimacy of their research, and position themselves as marginal or non-researchers (Zeng & Fickel, 2021). For another thing, publishable research that is theoretically situated within well-established disciplines may not inform skill-based foundation EFL courses (Bao & Feng, 2023), which rely a lot on teachers' "experience and intuition" developed out of years of frontline classroom practices (Medgyes, 2017, p. 509). As revealed by McKinley (2019), well-published researchers in TESOL are "becoming increasingly isolated, far removed from real-world classroom practices" (p. 879).

In such a paradoxical situation, EFL teachers find it difficult to maintain the teaching-research duality, as teaching and research represent "two systems of meaning" (Shams, 2019, p. 627), which are equally consuming yet share little relevance. Managing the duality becomes a "tug of war" (Yuan, 2015, p. 33), or even a "devil's bargain" (Goodson, 1999, p. 285). This incompatibility leads to two consequences observed among some tertiary EFL teachers: complete withdrawal from research and the compromise on teaching for the sake of research out of instrumental considerations. For example, the participant teacher in Bao and Feng's (2023) study relinquished research in her professional work to resolve her identity tensions and schism, when she found herself unable to align teaching with research. Such withdrawal put her in a marginalized position in the professional context of higher education and made her feel like an "academic outcast" (p. 5). Similarly, in Xu's study (2014), one of the focal participants devoted his limited time and energy to teaching and identified himself as a "disheartened non-researcher" (p. 253), disengaged from his institution and the broader higher education community. In contrast, there are also teachers who diverted their efforts from the less valued work of teaching and conducted research in a utilitarian manner. For example, as observed by Zhou (2019), some EFL teachers shifted their focus from teaching and conducting EFL-related research to conducting research in other established disciplines for the sake of career promotion. Relatedly, as reported in Zeng and Fickel's (2021) study, instead of sticking to pedagogical research, some EFL teachers switched to literature or linguistics research in order to align themselves with established disciplines and seek career progression. Teaching foundation English courses became dispensable once they had accumulated enough academic capital to move forward from the "lower status" EFL community to the "more influential" disciplinary community (p. 662). Although such a strategy may enhance EFL teachers' research profile and afford them with competitive edges in staff appraisals (Zhou, 2019), their research may have little effect on addressing the practical issues in their EFL classrooms, and their sacrifice of

teaching in favor of research is an exchange of “intrinsic rewards” for “extrinsic honors” (McIntosh et al., 2022, p. 1062).

In response to this paradox caused by the competing instead of complementary nature of teaching and research, the ideal pathway to valorize teaching and research is through constructing reciprocity between them. When research can be used to generate evidence for classroom practices, teachers’ internal motivation of doing research is likely to be enhanced (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016). In recent years, along with the international clarion call of rebuilding the teaching-research nexus in TESOL (e.g., McKinley, 2022; Sato & Loewen, 2022), scholars in China have also been canvassing for the symbiotic and reciprocal relationship between teaching and research in tertiary-level EFL education (e.g., Xu & Lei, 2020; Yang & Li, 2022; Zeng & Fickel, 2021). EFL teachers are encouraged to conduct inquiry-based teaching and teaching-inspired research. As Xu (2017) has delineated: “In fact, becoming a researcher does not inhibit one from becoming a better teacher; rather, it provides teachers with an endless muse for exploring the possible ways for achieving teaching and learning effectiveness within their classrooms” (p. 121).

Notwithstanding this ideal projection, tertiary EFL teachers who want to craft a researcher-teacher identity need to put “down-to-earth efforts” to actualize this “envisioned identity” (Bao & Feng, 2022, p. 6). A way to achieve this end is through in-service teacher education and development programs, which are designed to facilitate teachers’ continuing professional development.

2.1.2 In-service programs as a way for continuing professional development

As Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe (1994) note: “Teachers’ professional behavior develops during a career” (p. 45). Thus, the development of teachers’ beliefs and practices does not stop at the end of their pre-service education but is a career-long process in the changing

educational and sociocultural milieu. To facilitate teachers' continuing professional development, in-service teacher education and development programs play a key role. These programs are expected to provide external support for teachers to internalize new knowledge and skills, arrive at new understandings of themselves and their profession, and thereby achieve professional growth both cognitively and emotionally. Existing literature has investigated how various types of in-service programs have impacted the professional trajectories of teachers, which include action research programs (e.g., Trent, 2010; Yuan & Burns, 2017), short-term training workshops (e.g., Borg, 2011; Yan & He, 2015b), visiting study programs (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022; Biraimah & Jotia, 2013; Garner & Kaplan, 2019), and degree programs (e.g., Biraimah & Jotia, 2013; Hao, 2011; Trent, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022).

Of particular relevance to the present study is the limited yet emerging line of literature on Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' reconstruction of a researcher-teacher identity through in-service programs. For example, using an ethnographic case study approach, Bao and Feng (2022) explored how a group of tertiary EFL teachers managed to add a research dimension into their teaching-oriented professional identities through participating in a one-year visiting study program. It was found that the visiting program rendered a range of contextual affordances, including institutional resources (i.e., course modules and seminars) as well as research literacy brokers (i.e., supervisors, senior doctoral researchers, and peer visiting teachers), for the focal visiting teachers to project and craft a research identity. In another study examining the longitudinal professional development trajectories of a focal participant teacher, Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrated how doctoral studies made "a marked change" in the teacher's research identity construction (p. 7). The in-service doctoral studies provided the focal participant teacher with systematic research training and a role model to emulate (i.e., his doctoral supervisor), shaping his new understanding of research as question-driven and teaching as research-based. In general, these studies indicate that teachers' professional

development arises out of the interplay between their agency and the contextual mediations afforded by the in-service education and development programs. However, despite the sporadic evidence of the genesis of researcher-teacher identities through in-service programs, as reported in these studies, we still lack a focused understanding of Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' professional development through doing in-service professional doctorate programs—a type of doctoral program that especially emphasizes the research-practice nexus.

2.2 Professional doctorate programs

Even since the inception of the first professional doctorate program at Harvard University in 1921 (Bourner et al., 2001), professional doctorate (PD) programs have been proliferating in higher education institutions worldwide (Neumann, 2005). Although once conceived as a pre-service degree in the US (Bourner et al., 2001), PD programs nowadays are globally recognized as a form of in-service professional development program (Wildy et al., 2015), which facilitate the advancement of in-service skills and qualifications (Taylor, 2007). The mission statements of PD programs assert that the research interests and research areas of PD candidates are expected to align with their workplace concerns (Boud & Lee, 2009). In terms of the objectives of PD programs, compared with traditional PhD programs which aim to produce *professional researchers* who contribute to knowledge alone, PD programs aim to produce *researching professionals* who investigate their own professional practice and produce "knowledge in context" (Maxwell & Shanahan, 1997, p. 142). This focus on professional practice is premised to be the most significant difference between PD programs and PhD programs (Bourner et al., 2001). Specifically, PD students are expected to transform from "the practitioner (the insider identity)" through "the researcher (the outsider identity)" to "the researching professional (the in-betweener)" (Burnard et al., 2018, p. 43). The capstone thesis projects by PD candidates are expected to contribute to the development of their professional practices and have a positive impact on their organizations and professional communities in a

broader sense (Bao et al., 2018; Boud et al., 2021). By turning *professionals* into *researching professionals* and making the workplace "a site of significant knowledge-generation" (Lester, 2012, p. 12), the program-providing universities are expected to fulfil their mission of contributing to the public good (Boud et al., 2021). The tripartite relationship among the university, the workplace, and the profession is schematized in Figure 2.1.

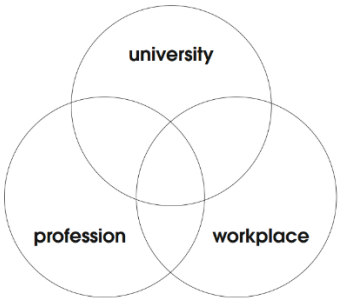

Figure 2.1 The Professional Doctorate (reproduced from Lee et al., 2000, p. 127)

However, despite the proclaimed uniqueness and distinctiveness, PD programs are constantly questioned and experience "identity crisis" (Buss et al., 2014, p. 138). The underlying assumption that PD programs are *equal to* but *different from* PhD programs are contested both conceptually and empirically. For one thing, although studies drawing upon prospectuses, program leaflets, and degree regulation documents have reported the distinctive features of PD programs in terms of their dual focus on practice and research (e.g., Bourner et al., 2001), very few empirical evidence has been gained about whether the claimed distinctiveness is actualized in PD programs. On the contrary, a number of studies have pointed out that PD programs are a homogeneous approach to doctoral studies that overlaps with PhD programs and that the proposed practice-link link is rarely achieved (e.g., Levine, 2005; Neumann, 2005; Rip, 2000; Thorne & Francis, 2001). For example, drawing upon interview data and document data, Neumann (2005) observed that the scope and nature of research in PD programs and PhD programs are very similar, and few PD candidates have conducted practice-oriented research that addresses their workplace concerns, which challenges the rationale of PD programs. She therefore concluded that "the benefit of a professional doctorate for career

advancement is negative in some cases and at best marginal in others" (p. 185). Similar arguments were also made by Thorne and Francis (2001), who pointed out the lack of differences between PD programs and PhD programs. In light of this, there is an urgent need to further explore whether and how PD programs have impacted program-takers' professional practice and brought changes to the workplace (Boud et al., 2021; Burnard et al., 2018), especially through in-depth qualitative investigations.

For another thing, although PD programs are positioned as equal to PhD programs in terms of prestige, many scholars remain doubtful about this positioning (e.g., Perry, 2012). PD programs are sometimes perceived to lack the "international currency and status of the PhD" with fewer requirements and less rigor (Neumann, 2005, p. 186). Using the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) as an example, Shulman and his co-authors (2006) poignantly stated that EdD programs are too often defined by subtraction compared with PhD programs and are thus only "PhD-lite" (p. 27). This statement is corroborated by empirical studies on PD programs in the international contexts. For example, participants in a study of Australian EdD programs lamented that they were doing a second-rate doctorate compared with traditional PhD (Neumann, 2005). In another study comparing the accreditation of the PD degree in the UK context and the Indian context (Moran & Misra, 2018), the participant from India recounted the difficulties he encountered when trying to secure a faculty position with a PD degree in the Indian higher education context. As PD programs are less recognized in the Indian higher education context, the participant had to put in extra effort to demonstrate that he possessed the same research competence through publishing articles and applying for research grants during his professional doctoral candidature. Overall, in the academic job market, a PD degree is sometimes regarded as a second-class doctorate and faces pressure for legitimation (Bao et al., 2018). For PD candidates, with a somewhat marginalized status compared with traditional PhD

students, how they maintain a sense of validation and construct their identities to "explain, justify and make sense of themselves" (MacLure, 1993, p. 311) worth more scholarly attention.

2.3 In-service university teachers' further doctoral studies

The existing literature has paid scant attention to the lived experiences of in-service university teachers doing a doctorate. Notable exceptions include an autoethnography by a university science lecturer doing an EdD to construct an educational researcher identity (Smith, 2022), a collaborative autoethnography by a group of university lecturers pursuing a doctorate to legitimize their lecturer role (Dann et al., 2019), and a series of studies arising from a larger research project on the lived experiences of dual-status academics (i.e., university teachers who concurrently pursue a doctorate) (Billot et al., 2021; Clouder et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). As these studies indicate, compared with traditional full-time doctoral students who inhabit a single purpose of completing the doctoral studies and follow a relatively linear development trajectory (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024), on-the-job doctoral students inhabit a form of "bilingualism" (Andzaldúa, 1987), and have to constantly "oscillate between their professional and student selves" (Billot et al., 2021, p. 441). In this "reassembling" process (Zukas & Malcolm, 2019, p. 259), the dual role of being an in-service academic staff member and a doctoral student is found to bring both challenges and affordances.

On the one hand, their professional engagement and doctoral studies may involve competing perspectives. To transition from experienced practitioners to novice researchers, they have to reconstruct their pre-existing expertise developed out of years of work experience and change their ways of thinking, for example, from normative and experiential thinking to analytical and theoretical thinking (Buss, 2022; Labaree, 2003). This could be a demanding task, as a work mindset is not easily translated into a research mindset (Billot et al., 2021). The norms and knowledge in the professional world may "contrast with or even contradict literacy practice in academia" (Li et al., 2017, p. 53). What further complicates the situation is that this

transition is not a one-way process but involves constant shuttling between the practitioner ethos and the researcher ethos. For practicing teachers doing doctorates, this means that they have to grapple with the nitty-gritty and practicality of their classroom teaching while at the same time tuning in to the world of research that values scientific rigor and theoretical contribution. Considering the much-debated teaching-research nexus in higher education (Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Marsh & Hattie, 2002), they may be caught in a Janus-faced situation, being pulled in contrasting directions and having to negotiate different positionalities. Another challenge is time deprivation. On-the-job doctoral students are generally time-poor because of their professional workloads (Wildy et al., 2015). A frequently reported challenge is their lack of time to engage in doctoral studies alongside their daily job commitments, and vice versa (Clouder et al., 2020). Juggling dual roles, they need to find extra time beyond their contracted workweek for their doctoral studies and are thus more likely to suffer from burnout (Smith et al., 2020). Furthermore, the part-time and often long-distance study mode makes them feel "separate from the language of established research culture" (Dann et al., 2019, p. 1180).

On the other hand, shuttling between the systems of practice and research can also create "spaces of possibility rather than confinement" (Billot et al., 2021, p. 451). For example, informed by their concurrent student role, dual-status teachers can better relate to students in their own classrooms and become better teachers (Dann et al., 2019). Conversely, their insider positions in higher education advantage them in accessing available tools and human resources for their doctoral studies (Smith et al., 2020). Familiarity with the higher education system makes them more capable to "enhance the doctoral space" (Billot et al., 2021, p. 451), and look for support beyond their situated doctoral programs. Although not the focus of this study, juggling the professional world of teaching and the academic world of research is also found to bring new understandings of both teaching and research and trigger deep learning (Tsui &

Law, 2007). Overall, crossing the research-practice boundary enables the constructions of new identities that encompass and move beyond both systems (Smith, 2022).

2.4 Identity as an analytic lens

In the field of humanities and social sciences, including education and applied linguistics, it is no overstatement to claim that identity has become a key analytic lens (Gee, 2001). This is manifested in the steady stream of publications on this topic over the past three decades (Block, 2022). As cogently argued by Bucholtz and Hall (2010, p. 27), "The age of identity is upon us". As a key construct in philosophy dating back from the 14th century, identity "is concerned with the truth and meaning of human existence and experience" (Yuan, 2015, p. 41), and is an ongoing process of interpreting and reinterpreting the experiences (Beijaard et al., 2004; Castells, 1997). It is "a prism" through which "topical aspects of contemporary life are spotted, grasped and examined" (Bauman, 2001, p. 140). The advantage of using identity to study the lived experiences of social actors lies in its potential to delineate the series of "passages" constituting individuals' "life course" (Giddens, 1991, p. 79), and unravel the ongoing dialectic between individuals and their environments. Conceptualized as dynamic, multifaceted, and "a site of struggle" (Norton & Early, 2011, p. 416), identities reflect how social actors make sense of themselves in relation to the multi-layered and ever-changing contexts (Canagarajah, 2004; Lee, 2013). The examination of individuals' ongoing identity negotiations thus enables a holistic understanding of their experiences-in-contexts. As identity connects the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present across time and spaces (Wenger, 1998), it also allows for an understanding of the trajectories of individuals' experiences. In what follows, I explicate and review how identity has been used as an analytic lens to study teachers' professional lives and doctoral students' learning experiences.

2.4.1 Identity as lens to understand teachers' professional lives and development

The field of teacher research has witnessed a turn towards identity (Gao, 2017). The various identities teachers construct indicate their ongoing interpretation and re-interpretation of their professional roles and practices in relation to the institutional and sociocultural contexts, and thus provide a crucial lens to understand teachers' professional lives, development, and wellbeing in the ever-changing sociocultural and institutional environments (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2015). As noted by Day et al. (2006), teacher identities are "a shifting amalgam of personal biography, culture, social influence and institutional values which may change according to role and circumstance" (p. 613). It thus could be argued that teachers' beliefs, practices, and professional learning in the changing institutional and sociocultural milieu could all be conceptualized as teachers' identity work (Yazan & Lindahl, 2020).

Responding to the clarion call of putting "more overt attention" to "identity development" in teacher research (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 185), a multitude of studies have used identity as a lens to explore teachers' professional lives and development in various contexts, which include the tangle of race, gender, and nationality with teachers' identity constructions (Ilieva, 2010; Pavlenko, 2003; Ruan & Zheng, 2019; Simon-Maeda, 2004; Trent, 2912; Wolff & De Costa, 2017), teachers' coping strategies towards the conflicts and challenges they face in their transnational teaching/learning experiences (Lee & Jang, 2023; Leigh, 2019), teachers' identity tensions and renegotiations in the climate of audit culture, managerialism, and research prioritization (Arvaja, 2018; Bao & Feng, 2023; Buchanan, 2015; Guenther, 2021; Huang & Guo, 2019; Shams, 2019; Sikes, 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Tran et al., 2017; Xu, 2014; Yang et al., 2022; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013; Yuan et al., 2022; Zeng & Fickel, 2021), teachers' development of a research identity (Taylor, 2017; Yuan, 2017; Zhang et al., 2022), teachers' responses to curriculum reforms (Liu & Xu 2011; Rong, 2014; Tao & Gao, 2017; Tsui, 2007; Yip et al., 2022), pre-service/student teachers' experiences of

learning to teach (Chang, 2018; Clarke, 2008; Dang, 2013; Flores & Day, 2006; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Smagorinsky et al., 2004; Trent, 2013), non-traditional teachers' negotiations of identity in their professional contexts (Benchetrit & Katz, 2019; Burns & Bell, 2011; Trent & Gao, 2009; Xiong et al., 2022; Yuan, 2020; Yung & Yuan, 2020), teachers' commitment and attrition (Day et al., 2005; Hong, 2010), and teachers' continuing professional development through in-service teacher education and professional development programs (Bao & Feng, 2022; Trent, 2010, 2020; Yuan & Burns, 2017). However, despite this proliferation, conspicuously rare from the current literature is the exploration of university teachers' professional development through degree studies, especially in the Chinese higher education context.

2.4.2 Identity as a lens to understand doctoral studies

Forming new identities is a recurring theme in doctoral studies (Goodall, et al., 2017; Green, 2005). As Barnacle and Mewburn (2010, p. 433) have succinctly pointed out, "Doing a doctorate changes you". The doctoral journey is a threshold to new understandings and a phase of transition (Meyer & Land, 2006). Externally, doctoral studies provide "structured mediational spaces" (Johnson & Golombek, 2020, p. 117) for students to reconsider and reconstruct themselves. In their doctoral studies, students are provided with opportunities to meet new people, construct new knowledge, and engage in new practices, all of which are essential in creating new layers of identity. Internally, doctoral students make sense of and respond to external contextualities in individualized ways, leading to disparate identifications accordingly.

Following this line of thinking, an upsurge of literature has foregrounded identity construction when researching doctoral students' learning experiences. Efforts have been made to examine doctoral students' identity work in scholarly writing and publishing (Lei & Hu,

2019; Xu & Grant, 2020), the role of supervision in doctoral students' academic literacy development and identity construction (Bao & Feng, 2025; Bao et al., 2025; Belcher, 1994; Leshem, 2020; Ma, 2019; Schulze, 2014; Tian & Singhasiri, 2016), the benefits of peer mentoring and informal learning for doctoral students' acculturation to new academic settings (Boud & Lee, 2005; Elliot et al., 2016; Gardner, 2008; Rhoads et al., 2017; Seloni, 2012; Wang & Byram, 2019), and the affordances of social networks and relationships in doctoral students' transition into independent researchers (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Sweitzer, 2009). These studies are situated in a variety of contexts and disciplines. In general, findings of these studies reveal the challenges of doing a doctorate as well as the contextual affordances that could be leveraged by the doctoral students to cope with the challenges in their doctoral journeys. On the one hand, doctoral students are faced with an array of difficulties such as the gap between their inadequate research skills and the institutions' expectations for doctoral students to publish before graduation (Lei & Hu, 2019), the impact of unsatisfactory supervisory relationship on students' doctoral progress (Schulze, 2014), and the lone researcher syndrome (Boud & Lee, 2005). On the other hand, doctoral students can leverage multiple resources both within and beyond their doctoral context to resolve the tensions and construct their academic identities. For example, doctoral peers are found to play a facilitative role in doctoral students' socialization into the academic community (Gardner, 2008). Social company beyond the doctoral community could counteract students' feelings of isolation and pressure (Elliot et al., 2020).

However, most studies in this line focus on traditional PhD students and less attention has been paid to PD students. Compared with PhD students, PD students are more prone to identity dissonance because of the multiple and often competing roles they take before and during their doctoral studies (Taylor, 2007). As illustrated by Smith's (2022) metaphor, "wearing a range of different hats" will result in "tensions and issues of identity" (p. 354). Being experienced practitioners before the commencement of their doctoral studies, PD

students' ways of thinking and being are inevitably shaped by their prior and ongoing professional experiences (Burnard et al, 2018). Whether the "identity capital" (Leshem, 2020, p. 181) they bring with them is valued in the doctoral system, and how it interacts with their ongoing doctoral studies, remains nebulous and warrants further exploration.

Chapter 3 Theoretical foundations

In this chapter, I provide a detailed review of the theoretical foundations informing the present study and propose a tentative conceptual framework for the present study based on these foundations. I first revisit the notion of identity through a short historical review, explicating how the conceptualization of identity has shifted from focusing on individuals to including the social environments, and from focusing on innate attributes to focusing on fluidity and multiplicity. I then introduce mainstream theoretical strands in identity studies: the experiential view of identity construction and the discursive view of identity construction. Major theoretical frameworks within these two strands are reviewed and critiqued, which include the social theory of learning and activity theory within the experiential strand as well as the identity building tools in critical discourse analysis and the sociocultural linguistic framework on identity within the discursive strand. I further justify the necessity to integrate theories from these two theoretical strands before I present a tentative conceptual framework guiding the present study.

3.1 Conceptualizing identity: A historical review

Derived from the Latin word "identitas", which means sameness, identity is a construct widely used in social sciences and humanities (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). A perusal of the literature in the past four decades suggests a dramatic increase of publications about identity. As a complex construct, very little consensus has been reached among scholars about the definition of identity. As Elliott and Gay (2009) have observed, defining identity "has proved to be one of the most vexing and vexed topics in the social sciences and humanities" (p. viii). From a historical perspective, the conceptualization of identity has witnessed two major shifts: from focusing on individuals to including the social environments, and from focusing on innate attributes to focusing on fluidity and multiplicity.

Starting from the early twentieth century, the construct of identity makes its way into the field of psychology (Yuan, 2015). Earlier scholars, such as Cooley (1902), view identity as "a singular, unified, stable essence that was little affected by context or biography" (Day et al., 2005, p. 602). The focus on individuals' innate attributes is expanded by social psychology scholars who "reached beyond psychology to the social realm" (Block, 2022, p. 9). An influential figure is Eric Erikson (1968), who believes that individuals' constant pursuit of a coherent and consistent identity rests upon the double prongs of individuals' efforts and societal expectations and responses, which is seen in his famous quote, "no ego is an island to itself" (Erikson, 1975, p. 19). Although recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals and their social contexts, Erikson's approach gives more primacy to individuals' psychodynamics. In parallel with social psychologists, sociologists tend to put more emphasis on the "sociogenetic formation of self" (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 105). For example, Mead (1934) refers to identity as individuals' self-understanding of their social roles, which evolves through social interactions. Carrying Mead's (1934) work forward, Blumer (1969) creates the term *symbolic interactionism* to conceptualize identity as both socially conditioned and self-constructed, mediated by the use of symbols. Also building upon Mead's (1934) work, Goffman (1959) introduces the idea of the *performative self*, suggesting that individual identity is a form of self-presentation in social interactions through repeated acts. Highlighting people's participation in multiple discourse communities as the basis of their 'sense of being', Gergen (1994) explains the social nature of identity by saying that "communicamus ergo sum [I communicate, therefore, I am]" (p. viii).

Besides the social nature, the fluid, multiple, and ongoing nature of identity is also well documented in the literature, suggesting that there is no such thing as an absolute and essential self (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). For example, Erikson's (1968) argument on people's constant quest for a coherent sense of the self suggests that identity is "never gained nor maintained

once and for all" (Sikes et al., 1985, p. 155). Similarly, Giddens (1991) and Hall (1996) define identity as "fluid trajectories unfolding over one's lifetime" (Block, 2022, p. 15). Focusing on the multiplicity of identity, Mead (1934) believes that people switch between their multiple identities according to the social contexts. In line with this, Goffman's (1959) and MacLure's (1993) works further emphasize the intentionality and deliberateness of identity, arguing that identity is people's multiple self-presentations in front of different people and in different contexts. The varied identities people curate and manage in social interactions thus serve as a resource and an argument that people use to "justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate" (MacLure, 1993, p. 312). These varied identities "can change from moment to moment in the interaction" and "from context to context" (Gee, 1990, p. 99). The multiplicity and dynamism of identity can also be seen from the array of metaphors saturating the notion of identity. For example, Lasch (1984) refers to identity as "costume" that "can be adopted and discarded" by people (p. 38). Gergen (1991) describes identity as "a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation" (p. 150).

Overall, despite the kaleidoscopic theorizations of identity, contemporary scholarship has almost unanimously arrived at a sociocultural and post-structuralist view of identity (Morgan, 2007). While post-structuralist perspectives emphasize the constructed nature of identity, sociocultural perspectives further highlight the role of sociocultural forces in identity constructions, focusing on identity formation "within the co-evolution of agency and structure" (Varghese, 2017). A sociocultural and post-structuralist view rejects the primordial and essentialist view of identity and embraces its fragmentation, fluidity, constructability, and social nature. As succinctly summarized by Hall (1996, p. 4):

> Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourse, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation.

3.2 Multiple theoretical approaches in identity research

Due to the elusive and complex nature of identity, researchers have been canvassing for multiple theoretical approaches in identity research (e.g., Varghese et al. 2005). As Clarke (2009) comments, identity is "a complex matter of the social and the individual, of discourse and practice, of reification and participation, of similarity and difference, of agency and structure, of fixity and transgression, of singular and multiple, and of the synoptic and the dynamic" (p. 189). Thus, it is "only by understanding our diverse theories and methods as complementary, not competing, that we can meaningfully interpret this crucial dimension of contemporary social life" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010, p. 27). In the current literature, different theoretical approaches across disciplines have been used in identity research, which brings a rich picture of the macro- and micro-mechanisms in identity formation and propels the role of identity as a powerful analytic lens in studying people's lived experiences in various educational settings. The theoretical underpinnings of identity research can be grouped into two major strands: the experiential view of identity construction and the discursive view of identity construction. While the former puts its analytical focus on identity construction through participation in social activities (Wenger, 1998), the latter is concerned with identity construction through the discursive and semiotic process in the workings of culture and society (Gee, 2001). In what follows, I explain these two theoretical strands by introducing the state-of-art theories within these two stands and empirical studies that draw upon these theories. I also explicate and justify the need to combine these two theoretical strands in identity research.

3.2.1 The experiential view of identity construction

As Vygotsky (1998) insists, thinking and conceiving without concrete actions is futile. The experiential view of identity construction or identity-in-practice foregrounds an action-oriented approach to understand identity (Trent, 2010). Identities are understood as "shaped by and shaping forms of action, involving a complex interplay among cultural tools employed in the action, the sociocultural and institutional context of the action" (Penuel & Wersch, 1995, p. 84). In other words, people's identities are not only concerned with their self-definitions and reified social categories but are also manifested through their concrete engagements within their situated and the broader sociocultural contexts. As succinctly stated by Wenger (1998), identity construction "takes place in the doing" (p. 193).

In the context of the present study, the experiential view brings to the fore the materiality in the identity formation of tertiary EFL teachers who concurrently pursue a doctoral degree. How they negotiate their identities out of their dual engagements in their workplace community and their doctoral study community is "very much a real-world phenomenon" (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 39), which is closely interconnected with and reified by their access to the two communities as well as their participation in the enterprises valued by the two communities. As noted by many scholars (e.g., Ricento, 2005; Trent, 2012; Tsui, 2007), the forming and reforming of identities is largely concerned with people's access to social resources and their legitimacy of participation in social practices. The material conditions and normative practices frame the range of possibilities in identity construction (Cohen, 2010). Seen in this light, on the one hand, with admission to doctoral programs, tertiary EFL teachers get legitimate access to the repertoire of resources shared by their doctoral community and the broader research community. They also make their way to participate, at least peripherally, in the joint enterprise of knowledge production through research, which is valued by academia. Their concrete experiences are expected to facilitate their construction of

a research identity that enriches their existing professional identity. On the other hand, enabled by their academic positions in higher education institutions, they gain access to the resource repertoire shared by their institutions and the broader higher education context. Their participation in the collective enterprise of educating students and contributing to knowledge production in higher education shapes their professional identities, although sometimes the lack of research engagement impedes their construction of a holistic professional identity that incorporates both teaching and research.

In alignment with the experiential view, powerful theoretical frameworks have been developed and used to examine the issues of identity construction. Among these frameworks, the most influential ones include the social theory of learning and activity theory. In the following sub-sections, I further explain these two theoretical frameworks and brief review the empirical studies informed by these frameworks. Through critical engagement with the literature, I justify and explain the incorporation of an activity theory perspective in the present study.

3.2.1.1 The social theory of learning

The social theory of learning proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) positions identity at the central place of the experiential process of social learning within various communities of practice (see also Wenger, 1998). Learning is viewed as a process of identification, that is, a process of "acquiring an identity, of becoming someone or something" within communities of practice (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 37). As Lave and Wenger (1991) argue in their seminal work *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*:

> Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced

> and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among persons. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities (p. 53).

Building upon Lave and Wenger's (1991) work, Wenger (1998) further explicates how identities are constructed through three modes of belonging (i.e., engagement, imagination, and alignment) within communities of practice. Engagement refers to our direct experience of the world and our relations with others. The ability and legitimacy to engage in activities valued by a specific community is often seen as the first and key step towards an in-group identity (Trent & DeCoursey, 2011). Imagination is what people use to "conceive of new developments, explore alternatives, and envision possible futures" (Wenger, 1998, p. 178). As Xu (2013) puts, 'who people are' depends on "not only who they are in reality but also who they imagine themselves to be" (p. 80). Alignment refers to the coordination of one's energy and activities with one's situated or desired communities and it enables people to become "part of something big" within broader enterprises (Wenger, 1998, p. 179). Wenger (1998) also puts forward the notion of negotiability to explain the interconnectedness of power and identity. Within the 'economies of meanings' where diverse meanings are produced and compete for visibility and prominence, people's ability to contribute to or shape meanings decides their role and position in a social configuration. If the people's negotiability over meaning is undermined or absent, they may develop an identity of marginality.

Due to its great explanatory power, a bulk of literature has used the social theory of learning to explore how identities are formed and reformed in various educational settings (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022; Bathmaker & Avis, 2005; Clarke, 2008; Liu, 2011; Liu & Xu, 2011; Morita,

2004; Tsui, 2007; Williams, 2010; Yuan & Burns, 2017). In general, this theory offers "valuable insights into learning, meaning, identity, and practice" (Storberg-Walker, 2008, p. 555). Studies drawing upon this theory also showcase the advantages of using this theory in studying people's lived experiences and identity development. First, the framework is useful in "making sense of the processes involved" (Tsui, 2007, p. 678). That is, it allows for the examination of the temporal development of one's identities and the mechanisms of identity change influenced by both internal and external factors. For example, adopting this framework, Bao and Feng (2022) map out the identity trajectories of three university teachers over a one-year in-service professional development program. The constructs in the framework (i.e., engagement, imagination, alignment, and negotiation of meanings) help to crystalize how learning and identity development happen in teachers' study experiences. Elsewhere, Liu and Xu (2011) draw on this framework to explain how a beginner EFL teacher has experienced identity vacillations and professional development through both participation and non-participation in a curriculum reform. In another larger-scale study, Clarke (2008) investigates the dynamic process of a group of student teachers' identity development within an evolving community of practice in United Arab Emirates. Second, the framework, especially with Wenger's (1998) expansion of identity construction in multiple interconnected communities, enables an understanding of how people's multiple memberships in diverse communities of practice could create a nexus and be synthesized into new identities. For example, Williams (2010) documents how an *expert novice* teacher, i.e., a student teacher who has rich non-teaching work experiences, leveraged his prior experiences in the industry setting to form new understandings of being a teacher in the educational setting. Yuan and Burns (2017) explicate how crossing the boundary of two communities, i.e., the university and the school, enabled schoolteachers to enrich their existing professional identities through engagement and imagination.

Notwithstanding its advantages, critics (e.g., Henderson, 2015; Storberg-Walker, 2008; Varghese et al., 2005) have also pointed out the limitations of the social theory of learning in terms of its mapping of the ideal apprentice model onto the messy and complex learning activities in educational settings, as well as its lack of consideration of power and ideologies in the broader sociocultural picture.

In the context of the present study, dual-status teachers' learning and development through doctoral studies is a complex process fraught with unresolved tensions (Taylor, 2007), which cannot be entirely captured by the ideal apprentice model in the social theory of learning. Moreover, dual-status teachers' learning, development, and negotiations of identities are inevitably shaped by the power and ideologies in the institutional and the broader sociocultural contexts. For example, the traditional Chinese cultural discourse that creates power differentials between doctoral students and supervisors may emerge as a significant factor influencing doctoral students' learning and identity negotiations (Bao et al., 2025). The role of power and dominant discourse thus needs more explicit account through a more comprehensive theoretical framework. Such theoretical considerations lead us to activity theory.

3.2.1.2 From the social theory of learning to activity theory

Activity theory extends from the works of Vygotsky (1978, 1986, 1998), whose contributions to identity research are not made explicit yet make "a crucial component of its foundations" (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 135). As a less widely used yet particularly pertinent theoretical lens to study issues of identity (Yuan & Mak, 2018), activity theory shares many commonalities with the social theory of learning. First, they are both within the sociocultural theoretical strand of learning and development and share their theoretical origin from Vygotsky's works on the social nature of human actions and cognitive developments (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). Although named differently, the key concept in the social

theory of learning, 'community of practice', shares similarities with the notion of 'activity system' in activity theory. As Lave and Wenger (1991) have defined, a community of practice is "an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities" (p. 98). Second, both theories emphasize the social nature of human activities and conceptualize learning and identity development as socially mediated activities. Third, both theories acknowledge the role of contextual factors in shaping people's learning and development process, viewing the construction of identities as both contextual and personal.

While sharing these commonalities with the social theory of learning, an activity theoretic perspective of identity meshes better with the present study, as it can address some of the gaps in the social theory of learning and allows for a more nuanced understanding of tertiary EFL teachers' experiences of doing a doctorate. As Hashim and Jones (2007) comment, activity theory can "render explicit the more tacit elements of an action" (p. 7). Specifically, an activity theoretic perspective puts more emphasis on "contextual discourses and power relations" in shaping teachers' identities (Nazari & Karimpour, 2022, p. 1), enables an in-depth analysis of the tensions and contradictions that dual-status teachers encounter in their dual engagements as practicing university teachers and doctoral students, and allows us to look closely into the interactions between the dual systems of teachers' professional context and doctoral studies context. First, although the social theory of leaning highlights the role of context in shaping people's identities, activity theory moves a step forward to further classify the contextual factors into *rules*, *community*, *tools*, and *division of labor*. Activity theory also puts explicit emphasis on power dynamics by putting the vertical distribution of power and status under the construct of *division of labor*. Second, while the social theory of learning proposes an ideal apprenticeship model of learning and identity development in communities of practice, it does not allow an in-depth analysis of the tensions and contradictions in an activity system. As

Varghese et al. (2005) cogently put, the three defining characteristics in a community of practice, i.e., mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, oftentimes do not apply to teacher learning through professional development programs. Creese (2005) also comments that although Wenger (1998) acknowledges the complexities and tensions within the community dynamics, he tends to put less emphasis on the conflictual aspects of communities of practice. That being said, the social theory of learning may have limitations when used to examine in-service teachers' learning through doctoral programs, considering the endemic problem of isolation and lack of mentorship in doctoral education (Johnson et al., 2000), as well as the "double contradictions experienced by those in dual roles" (Clouder et al., 2020, p. 1963). With inadequate theorization of contradictions, the social theory of learning may fail to explore the mechanisms through which contradictions occur and how contradictions lead to identity formation (Trent & Gao, 2009). Activity theory addresses this gap by foregrounding the notion of *contractions*. According to activity theory, contradictions arise as systemic tensions within or between components either of one activity system or across different activity systems. As a key notion in activity systems analysis, contradictions are not just "surface conflicts or disruptions" (Lei & Hu, 2019, p. 64), but are "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). The socio-cultural-historical embeddings in activity systems are highlighted in the analysis. Third, although the social theory of learning proposes the notion of boundary crossing to capture people's engagements in multiple communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2010), third-generation activity theory further emphasizes polycontextuality and schematizes the interactions between multiple activity systems into its theoretical framework. As noted by many scholars (e.g., Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Engeström, 2001; Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003), the attention on multiple parallel activity systems makes activity theory especially useful in understanding people's simultaneous engagements across different contexts, such as in this

study of practicing teachers who concurrently pursue a doctorate. Before I explain how activity theory is incorporated into the conceptual framework of the present study in Section 3.3, I briefly review the historical development and constitutive components of activity theory as well as the rationale of adopting an activity theoretic perspective in identity research in the following sections.

3.2.1.3 Historical development and constitutive components of activity theory

Tracing back to the early 1920s and 1930s, the Russian psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky (1934/1986) points out the analytical challenge in studies of human cognition and behavior, that is, the segregation of thought process from the fullness of life (Roth & Lee, 2007). To address this conundrum, he claims that human and their surrounding environments are part of a complex system that co-constructs human thought and cognition through human participation in activities (Vygotsky, 1978). Human learning is thus a mediated process that happens in social interactions (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009). This conceptualization moves beyond behaviorism and highlights the role of mediated action in human development (Vygotsky, 1978, 1934/1986). Through using tools/artefacts and interacting with various social others conferred by the social environments, individuals move towards their goals, make meanings out of themselves in relation to the outer world, and transform themselves. This is considered as the social formation of human consciousness (Wertsch, 1985). Vygotsky's idea is graphically represented by the well-known triangular model that positions subject, object, and mediating tool/artifact at the three prongs of the triangle (see Figure 3.1). The *subject* in this model refers to the individual who engages in the activity while *object* refers to the motive or goal of the activity. The mediating artefact/tool may include "artefacts, social others, and prior knowledge of the subject that contribute to the subject's mediated action experiences within the activity" (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 16).

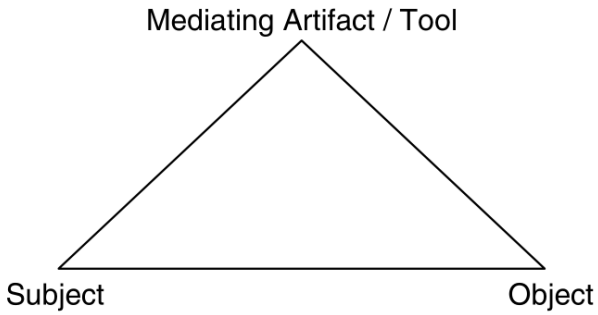

Figure 3.1 Vygotsky's basic triangular model (reproduced from Cole, 1996)

This triangular model is often recognized as the first-generation activity theory, although Vygotsky does not explicitly use the term activity theory. In the decades following Vygotsky's death, his basic triangular model is further developed by his students and followers such as Leont'ev (1978, 1981) and Luria (1974, 1981), and later by Engeström (1987, 1993, 1999, 2001, 2010, 2015). While Vygotsky's idea of mediated action is a big breakthrough from the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter and lays the foundation for the later more full-fledged activity theory, it is critiqued for its somewhat narrow analytical focus on individuals' mediated actions (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999), which "did little to spell out how specific historical, cultural, and institutional settings are tied to various forms of mediated action" (Wertsch, 1993, p. 46).

This leads to the formalization of the second-generation activity theory, as mainly represented in the works of Leont'ev (1978, 1981). Recognized as having built "the cornerstone for the present forms of activity theory" (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 189), Leont'ev makes major contributions to the development of activity theory through expanding the unit of analysis from mediated human action in the Vygotskian tradition to activity system (Kozulin, 1986; Tsui & Law, 2007). In his famous trope of the primaeval collective hunt (Leont'ev, 1981), he emphasizes that human actions are directed towards the collective goals of the activity system, which are intertwined with the "societal, cultural, and historical dimensions" of the activity system (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 189). That is, human actions "must be understood in the context of the motive of the collective activity system" (Tsui & Law, 2007, p. 1291). In a collective

hunt, the beater's action of frightening the animals may seem meaningless unless it is understood in the context of the collective activity of hunting to obtain food and clothing. If the goal of the collective activity system changes, human will perform different actions. In other words, the goal embedded in the socio-culturally and historically defined activity system regulates how human perform the actions, and any change in the goal will lead to a significant change in the human psychological process (Luria, 1979). Leont'ev's contributions are captured by Engeström's (1987) graphical representation of the second-generation activity theory (see Figure 3.2). The second-generation activity theory addresses the risk of oversimplification in Vygotsky's privileging of mediated human action as analytical focus and provides "a conceptual framework that brings together local human activity and larger social-cultural-historical structures" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 222).

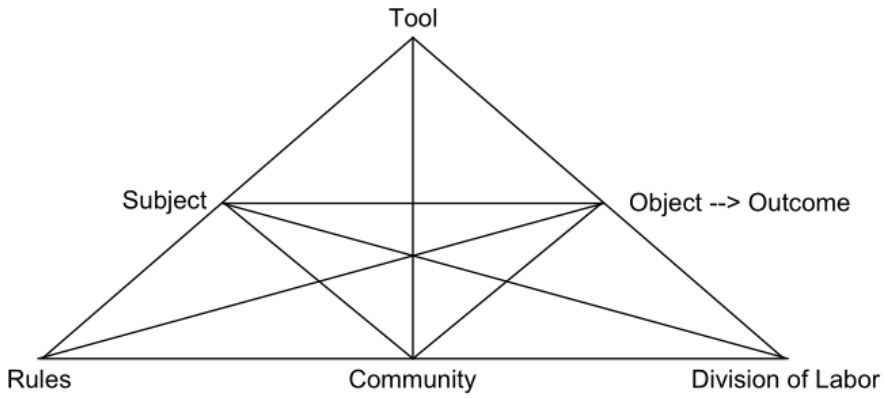

Figure 3.2 The model of a human activity system (reproduced from Engeström, 1987)

As shown in Figure 3.2, three new components are added to Vygotsky's original triangular model: *rules*, *community*, and *division of labor*. To emphasize the collective nature of any activity system, *community* is added to represent the social basis of an activity system. It refers to the social group in which the *subjects* are situated. *Subjects* relate to the *community* through the mediation of *rules*, that is, "the norms, conventions, expectations, and social relations within the community which are historical and cultural" (Tsui & Law, 2007, p. 1291). *Division of labor* is the organizational structure of the *community*, which includes the horizontal distribution of tasks and the vertical division of power. Like *rules*, *division of labor*

is also interconnected with the broader sociocultural and historical structures. While *rules* reflect how *subjects* are expected to behave, *division of labor* reflects how tasks are shared among the *subjects* in the course of attaining the object. By engaging with *rules* and *division of labor* defined and shared by the *community*, *subjects* apply themselves to the *object* of the activity system and try to convert the *object* into an *outcome*. By adding these three components, the two-way interaction between *subject* and *object* in Vygotsky's original triangular model becomes a three-way interaction among *subject*, *object*, and *community*, while at the same time, the sole focus on *mediating artefact/tool* as a mediator is expanded to include *rules* and *division of labor* as well (Kaptelinin, 2005).

Another key notion first proposed in the second-generation activity theory is *contradictions* (Engeström, 1987, 1999), usually represented in the forms of "problems, ruptures, breakdowns, clashes" (Kuutti, 1996, p. 34). Contradictions are not surface conflicts but are historically formed and accumulated in the activity system. They generate from the dialectical relationships within and between the constitutive components in an activity system. They may also come from interactions between different activity systems, as captured by the third-generation activity theory that takes interrelated activity systems as the unit of analysis. In brief, by introducing the notion of contradictions, the second-generation activity theory enables a more systematic and nuanced analysis of the trajectories of human development and learning, as contradictions are not only impediments to human activity, but also have the potential to become "sources of change and development" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). By identifying the contradictions, tracing their origins through activity systems analysis, and looking at how individuals "adopt particular practices and ways of thinking to solve specific problems or challenges within a setting" (Grossman et al., 1999, p. 12), we can arrive at an understanding of how individuals agentively respond to the contextual constraints, and transform themselves and perhaps the systems along the way.

Despite the significant advancement over the first-generation activity theory, the second-generation activity theory has limitations in terms of its focus on single activity systems, which cannot fully reflect the complexities of human activities across multiple activity systems. In other words, the second-generation activity theory cannot sufficiently account for collaborative and networked human activities that are becoming increasingly common in the modern world. This leads to the formulation of the third-generation activity theory. Alleged to be "the best kept secret of academia" (Engeström, 1993, p. 64), the third-generation activity theory extends the unit of analysis to at least two interacting activity systems, and aims to "understand dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 135). Human's mediated actions are considered to be situated in poly-contextual environments, where multiple voices are at play. By highlighting polycontextuality and multi-voicedness (Engeström, 2001; Engeström et al., 1995), third-generation activity theory offers a theoretical frame to account for how multiple voices and different ingredients across different activity systems may become sources of tension as well as sources of learning and innovation.

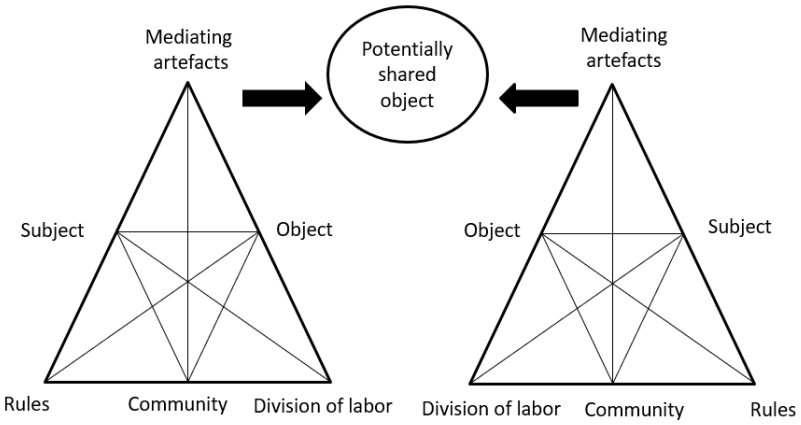

Figure 3.3 The model of two interacting activity systems (adapted from Engeström, 2001)

As shown in Figure 3.3, the two interacting activity systems may direct at "a potentially shared or jointly constructed object" (Engeström, 2001, p. 136), which arises out of interactions between the systems (Tuomi-Gröhn et al., 2003). With multiple interrelated activity systems becoming the unit of analysis, people's shuttling between different activity systems,

conceptualized as boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Engeström, 2010), gains more analytical attention. Boundaries are "interesting places" (Wenger, 2010, p. 183), where tensions and contradictions may be created on the one hand and where learning potentials are carried on the other hand (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Through boundary crossing from one system to another, people try to "establish action or interaction across different practices" (Bakx et al., 2016, p. 77), and along the way they are given the spaces to form new meanings of themselves in relation to the world, meanings that may go beyond the limits of both systems (Engeström, 2001). The third-generation activity theory model is particularly useful for examining people's simultaneous engagements in interrelated activity systems. Such simultaneous engagements are characterized by "mov[ing] between multiple parallel activity contexts" and "negotiating and combining ingredients from different contexts to achieve hybrid solutions" (Engeström et al., 1995, p. 319). Thus, as mentioned previously, the third-generation activity theory gels well with the present study, as it may well capture dual-status teachers' simultaneous engagements in interrelated parallel activity systems: the workplace activity system and the doctoral studies activity system. Beyond the third-generation activity theory, there has been a budding interest among activity theory scholars in developing the fourth-generation activity theory. The prototype of the fourth-generation model seeks to explore the possibilities of using heterogenous and collaborative coalitions involving diverse social actors at multiple levels to address critical society problems (Engeström & Sannino, 2021). While this model is still in its infancy, it informs the present study by directing greater analytical attention to collective agency, that is, the potential collaboration of different stakeholders in addressing the systemic tensions experienced by dual-status teachers across their professional work activity system and doctoral studies activity system.

3.2.1.4 An activity theory perspective in identity research

Activity theory is widely acknowledged as a powerful framework to study human learning and development in various organizational and educational settings, due to its theoretical roots from Vygotsky's (1978, 1986, 1998) works on learning and development. As Kuutti (1996) notes, activity theory is "a philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different kinds of human practices as developmental processes, with both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time" (p. 25). Viewing identity at the center of any human development, activity theory offers an illuminating perspective on how individuals construct and reconstruct themselves through various social practices in their situated and broader sociocultural contexts. Penuel and Wertsch (1995, p. 83) call for identity researchers to "study identity in local activity settings where participants are actively engaged in forming their identities; to examine the cultural and historical resources for identity formation as empowering and constraining tools for identity formation". Holland and Lachicotte (2007) further explicate the necessity of examining identity-in-activity by saying that:

> Identities are social and cultural products through which a person identifies the self-in-activity and learns, through the mediation of cultural resources, to manage and organize himself or herself to act in the name of an identity (p. 114).

As these quotes reflect, an activity theory perspective allows for a holistic understanding of individuals within their local settings and the broader sociocultural environments (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009). This echoes the theorization of identity as an ongoing process of development deriving from the dialectic interplay between human agency and social structure (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). On the one hand, individuals are "agentic social subjects" (Cross, 2020, p. 38), who can make choices, utilize tools, and act upon their beliefs and goals. Through exercising their agency, they try to resolve

the contextual challenges, move towards their goals, and construct their identities accordingly. On the other hand, individuals are not completely free agents, and their self-constructions are constrained by "a wider system of social, cultural, and historical relations" within activity systems (Lee, 2013, p. 331). The dialectic is vividly captured by Engeström's (2001) argument: "The individual could no longer be understood without his or her cultural means; and the society could no longer be understood without the agency of individuals who use and produce artifacts" (p. 134). Although identity is not schematized as a constitutive component of the activity system, it is "a derivative and an integral aspect of an activity system" (Beauchamp et al., 2009, p. 267). It is the moment-by-moment and the ultimate outcomes of individuals' mediated actions toward their objects within activity systems (Feldman & Weiss, 2010). People negotiate their perceptions of the self "as a result of progression (or not) toward intended goals" (Beauchamp et al., 2009, p. 269). As Roth et al. (2004) note: "From an activity-theoretic perspective, identity is a product and byproduct of activity. That is, through their agency, the people in an activity not only produce material outcomes, but also, in the process, produce and reproduce themselves" (p. 51).

Although not dominant in the bulk of identity studies, an activity theoretic perspective has already been adopted by an emerging line of studies on teacher identity in various educational settings (e.g., Dang, 2013; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Lee, 2013; Nguyen & Ngo, 2023; Yuan & Mak, 2018). For example, by integrating an identity-in-activity perspective in her study of writing teachers, Lee (2013) identifies the external mediating artifact (i.e., teacher education program) as well as the internal mediating artefact (i.e., teachers' reflections) in teachers' negotiations of their writing teacher identities. Drawing on activity systems analysis, she deciphers how tensions arose from conflicting rules, community, and division of labor, which subject to the specific school context in Hong Kong, mediated teachers' identity constructions. In a similar vein, Yuan and Mak (2018) investigate how student teachers used

an array of conceptual tools and resources, such as written scripts and teaching videos, to reflect on their teaching practices and develop their professional identity as literacy teachers in a teacher education program. They also explicate how tensions caused by the misalignment between the student teachers' object and other community members' object in the practicum supervision systems have influenced student teachers' identity work. These tensions were further traced to the corporate culture prevalent in higher education in Hong Kong. In another study based in the Iranian secondary EFL education context, Karimi and Mofidi (2019) explain how the personal, socio-cultural, historical, and materialistic factors interacted in complex ways to co-shape teachers' professional identities. What is worthy of note is that their findings reveal that even in the compliance-oriented systems of the Iranian school context, teachers could still find ways to renegotiate the rules and construct diversified teacher identities through drawing upon their own beliefs that are historically formed in their past experiences.

As these studies indicate, activity theory brings new and broadened perspectives to identity research. First, an activity systems analysis helps to unearth the complexities of the multi-layered contexts "where different stakeholders, institutional rules, and socio-cultural tools are at play" (Yuan & Mak, 2018, p. 206), and thus enables more in-depth interpretations of how people's ongoing identity constructions are contextually shaped. As Barab et al. (2014) comment, activity theory provides "a *lens*, *map*, or *orienting device* to structure analysis of complex sociocultural learning and per performance contexts" (p. 207). Second, activity theory integrates the system view with the subject's view (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). How the subject of the activity "interprets, makes sense of – and ultimately then acts upon and engages with – that system within which their role is positioned" plays a central role in "activity-meaning-making" (Cross, 2020, p. 39). When participating in an activity group, a subject "is not only a participant of that group, but also culturally and historically informed with positions related to others and other groups" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 315). Thus, different

subjects may experience activity systems differently (Clouder et al., 2020). The sociocultural and historical embeddings of the subjects will influence their attitudes towards and deployment of the systemic mediations, such as rules and tools, within their situated activity systems. This emphasis on the subject's view recognizes individual histories and dispositions embedded in the activity systems and foregrounds individual agency in identity construction (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019), thus enabling the researchers to capture the diversity of identity trajectories among different subjects within the same or similar activity systems. Despite its great explanatory power, activity theory is still scarcely used in identity research. As a number of scholars have commented (e.g., Cross, 2020; Daniels, 2006), identity is an underdeveloped construct within activity theory. To address this theoretical gap, the present study integrates the third-generation activity theory into its conceptual framework, as will be further explained in Section 3.3.

Fruitful and powerful as activity theory is, it also has its limitations. Although it is postulated that an identity-in-activity perspective brings together the personal discursive meaning-making of oneself and the practical activity within which the individual is situated as subject (Cross, 2020), activity theory itself does not provide a discourse analytic framework to analyze the "individual discourse" (p. 40). Analytical primacy is given to people's practical engagements with the material world and the multilayered contexts in which people's mediated actions are situated in. However, as widely acknowledged in identity studies (e.g., Trent, 2012; Varghese et al., 2005), subjects' voices and interpretations of their practical engagements play a key role in identity construction. While practical engagements shape people's identities, identities are also constructed and negotiated through language and discourse (Gee, 1996; MacLure, 1993). The less attention paid to discourse in activity theory, together with the pivotal role of discourse in identity construction, necessitates the integration of a discourse framework in studying identity. In what follows, before I explain how a discourse framework is integrated

with activity theory to guide the present study, I review the discursive view of identity construction as well as influential discourse analytic frameworks in identity research.

3.2.2 The discursive view of identity construction

Discourse, which can be understood as people's 'language-in-use' (Gee, 1999), consists of "a system of beliefs, attitudes, and values that exist within social and cultural practices" (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 11). Manifested through language, discourse shows "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002, p. 1). That is, discourse is replete with people's stances and identities. People's presented selves to each other and the social world are "accomplished, disputed, ascribed, resisted, managed and negotiated in discourse" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 4). In other words, people's language-in-use is closely intertwined with their sense-making of the social world as well as their sense-making of themselves in relation to the social world.

The pivotal role of language and discourse in identity construction has thus been postulated and evidenced by many scholars (e.g., Bamberg et al., 2011; Block, 2007, 2022; Gee, 1996; MacLure, 1993; Miller Marsh, 2002; Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2002; Varghese et al., 2005; Weedon, 1997). Through using language (and other semiotic resources), people "achieve certain communicative goals, perform certain communicative acts, participate in certain communicative events and present themselves to others" (Paltridge, 2006, p. 9). As pointed out by Norton (2010): "Every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world and reorganizing that relationship across time and space" (p. 350). Similarly, Joseph (2010) also explains the genesis of identities in people's everyday discursive practices:

> Our very sense of who we are, where we belong and why, and how we relate to those around us, all have language at their center. While people

> label as they chat, make observations and judgments about things, and praise, challenges, and criticize others, they are also engaged in the discursive process of identity construction (p. 9).

The discursive view of identity construction advocates the use of discourse analysis in identity research (e.g., Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; De Fina et al., 2006; Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2002). In the past four decades, there has been a proliferation of discourse approaches proposed and used by discourse scholars to study the issues of identity. Despite their difference in terms of orientation and techniques (Yuan, 2015), these approaches help to unravel how identities are articulated, indexed, and inferred in people's narration of their lived experiences as well as in various social interactional settings. Of note is that people's discursive practices are not only "'markers of identity' but also sites of resistance, empowerment, solidarity, or discrimination" within the power dynamics of their situated social contexts (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 4). Through active positioning of themselves and others in their discursive practices (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Langenhove, 1999), people resist the unfavorable identities imposed on them by the social contexts and construct their preferred identities. For example, through a discursive analysis of non-native English teachers' linguistic autobiographies during a TESOL program, Pavlenko (2003) finds that the narrative resources of bilingualism and multicompetence proffered by the teacher education program enabled some teachers to identify themselves with the multilingual community and construct themselves as legitimate English language users and teachers, thus rejecting the traditional discourse of native speakerism. Burns and Bell (2011) explicate how teachers with dyslexia used narrative resources to actively position themselves, thus reframing their disadvantages in a positive light and constructing their unique teacher identities. In another study, Arvaja (2016) draws upon Bakhtin's (1981) notion of voicing and ventriloquation (i.e., evaluation) to analyze a university teacher's learning diaries during a one-year teacher education program. The analysis uncovers how the

teacher used active positioning to resolve her identity tensions, make sense of her professional work, and inject personal meanings into her professional identity.

As for the present study, incorporating a discursive approach to examine dual-status teachers' identity constructions enables an in-depth understanding of how teachers negotiate the multiple subject positions in their dual engagements as practicing teachers and doctoral students, make sense of their experiences across the professional and the doctoral activity systems, and construct meaning and validation of themselves in their engagements within and across activity systems. Specifically, it generates insights into how dual-status teachers position themselves to "find order and consistency" in their dual roles and to "defend their attitudes and conduct" when they juggle and struggle between parallel activity systems (MacLure, 1993, p. 320). In what follows, I introduce influential discourse analytical frameworks in studying identity construction: Fairclough's (2003) identity building tools at the textual level and Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) sociocultural linguistic framework on identity. I also briefly review identity studies drawing upon these frameworks and explain how these frameworks inform the present study.

3.2.2.1 The texturing of identity: Identity building tools at the textual level

Theoretically rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Fairclough (2003) highlights the role of language in shaping people's ways of being. According to him, "What people commit themselves to in texts is an important part of how they identify themselves, the texturing of identity" (p. 164). What is worthy of note is that although there has been voluminous literature discussing how discourse theories may help to understand the broad-ranging social issues including identity (e.g., Jorgensen & Philips, 2002; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), Fairclough (1992, 2003) is one of the few who has "developed a detailed set of tools" for discourse analysis (Clarke, 2008, p. 18). In his seminal book *Analysing discourse: Textual*

analysis for social research, Fairclough (2003) operationalizes the analysis of identities at the textual level and explicates how people's identities are linguistically realized through *modality* and *evaluation*. According to him, how people identify themselves is closely connected with "what is true and what is necessary (modality)" and "what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad (evaluation)" (p. 164). At the textual level, modality can be expressed through both epistemic and deontic forms. Epistemic modality conveys degrees of certainty or belief, as seen in modal verbs such as "can", modal adverbs such as "certainly", hedges such as "kind of", and mental process clauses or expressions indicating awareness, such as "I think" or "I realize". Deontic modality reflects obligation, necessity, or permission, and is often realized through modal verbs like "must", "should", or "may". Evaluation can be expressed explicitly through using words such as "good" or "bad". It can also be conveyed implicitly, often embedded within narratives that recount events and subtly invoke judgements. These implicit evaluations are shaped by shared "value systems between author and interpreter" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 173).

Besides *modality* and *evaluation*, drawing upon Van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) work, Fairclough (2003) also proposes the tool of *legitimation* to explain how people justify their various commitments to truth at the textual level. Legitimation can be linguistically realized through authorization (e.g., drawing on principles, laws and theories), rationalization (e.g., drawing upon references to provide detailed reasoning), moral evaluation (e.g., drawing upon references to value systems), and mythopoesis (e.g., drawing upon narratives). People's identities are constructed and reflected through how they legitimize their beliefs and course of actions, as well as those of others. Other textual tools that can inform the interpretations of identity constructions in Fairclough's (2003) framework include *equivalence* and *differences*, which originate from Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) notions of 'logic of equivalence' and 'logic of difference'. As Fairclough (1993) notices, "Texts are constantly combining some elements and dividing others" (p. 101). These textual moments of *combining* and *dividing*, or drawing

equivalences and creating *differences*, are significant sources of identity construction, due to the relational nature of identity construction. In other words, people construct their identities through discursively aligning themselves with certain social groups and/or differentiating themselves from others.

Based on the discourse analytical tools proposed by Fairclough (2003), studies have been done to explore the identity constructions of English language tutors in shadow education (Xiong et al., 2022; Yung & Yuan, 2020), cross-border preservice teachers' negotiations of identities in face of multiple positionings by stakeholders in their professional context (Gu, 2011), teachers' adaption to local classrooms and identity development after their completion of international teacher education programs (Trent, 2020), and teachers' identity reconstructions in school-university partnerships (Trent & Lim, 2010). Taken together, Fairclough's (1992, 2003) approach, or CDA more broadly, is based on a close engagement with textual analysis while at the same time pays close attention to the situational and broader contexts in which texts occur (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). The identity building tools at the textual level provides a frame of reference for the identification of people's identities in their narratives while the theoretical orientation of CDA towards structures and ideologies reminds the researchers to interpret the constructed identities in the bigger institutional and sociocultural pictures. For example, in Xiong, Li and Hu's (2022) research on English tutor identities in China, the examination- and score-oriented teacher identities were identified through the participant teachers' constant use of high modality words when describing their predominant professional onus to help students to perform better in exams (e.g., You *have to* raise their grades). The construction of such identities was then explained in relation to the Confucian utilitarian tradition rooted in the Chinese cultural context.

While Fairclough's (2003) framework for identity research sheds illuminating light on the discursive process of identity construction, the framework is not without limitations. First,

as Fairclough (2003) himself admits, the categorization of textual tools in his framework is "somewhat misleading" (p. 99), as there might be overlap between concepts. For example, *moral evaluation* as a tool of legitimation often overlaps with other parallel tools (i.e., *authorization*, *rationalization*, and *mythopoesis*), as the deployment of all the other parallel tools may involve *moral evaluation* "in the sense of reference to value systems" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 99). Second, Fairclough's (2003) framework mainly deals with the socio-political context of language, as can be seen in the detailed and extensive analysis of identity constructions and impression management of political figures in his book. It does not engage sufficiently with the broader linguistic context and thus may not apply to other discourses beyond the political discourse. Third, although the discursive building of identities can be unpacked through some of the important concepts proposed by Fairclough (2003), his framework is more targeted at the bigger picture of social practice, ideologies, and power relations, due to its theoretical root in CDA. In other words, although identity constitutes a part of the major concerns the framework aims to address, the framework itself is not specially made and refined for identity studies. Thus, like previous studies (e.g., Fairclough, 2003; Trent, 2012; Trent & Gao, 2009), the present study integrates part of Fairclough's (2003) framework into a more comprehensive discourse framework (i.e., the sociocultural linguistic framework on identity) to examine dual-status teachers' identity construction at the discursive level. In what follows, I present the sociocultural linguistic framework on identity proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) and briefly review studies that have adopted this framework.

3.2.2.2 The sociocultural linguistic framework on identity

Informed by Fairclough's (2003) framework rooted in CDA, Bucholtz and Hall (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) further develop a more comprehensive and refined framework on

the discursive construction of identity. Treating identity as a sociocultural "linguistic phenomenon" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010, p. 19), the framework accounts for the realization of identities at the linguistic level "within the social order" (Bucholtz, 2011, p. 10). Like Fairclough, Bucholtz and Hall give special analytical attention to how identities are constructed through language whilst also attending to the macro realm of cultural contexts and social structures within which people's linguistic practices are situated in. As they put, a sociocultural linguistic perspective on identity focuses on "both the details of language and the workings of culture and society" (2010, p. 18).

As Yuan (2015) comments, a major contribution of Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) framework lies in that they further theorize the mechanism whereby identities are discursively constructed. This mechanism is known as *indexicality*. Derived from variationist sociolinguistics (Drummond & Schleef, 2016; Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 1985), indexicality refers to the ways linguistic forms become linked with social meanings and identities (Ochs, 1992). Notably, the association between linguistic forms and social meanings and identities is not a matter of individual language users but is also concerned with the social structures and prevailing ideologies. Drawing upon and reconceptualizing the notion of indexicality, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) synthesize previous frameworks of language and identity into a more comprehensive one. According to them, identities emerge through several indexical processes, which include:

> (a) Overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one's own or others' identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups (p. 594).

Overt mention of identity categories is the most direct and obvious way to construct identities. According to Locher and Bolander (2010) and Chan (2023), overt mention of identity categories, or self-labelling, is an explicit form of identification and it allows us to identify people's identities directly. Implicatures and presuppositions that instantiate certain identities "require additional inferential work for interpretation" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 595), and is thus less direct. For example, people may provide additional information or assumptions about their beliefs, relationships, values or social roles, whereby their identity positions are revealed. The display of evaluative and epistemic orientations, which shows people's stance, is another commonly used way to index identities. As Du Bois (2007) notes, through evaluation and display of epistemic stance, people position themselves and choose to align with or detach from others. Fairclough's (2003) explication of the linguistic tools of *evaluation* and *modality*, as mentioned in the previous section, lays important foundations for the identification of people's evaluative and epistemic orientations in their talks and narratives. The last indexical process, i.e., the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups, is mainly concerned with how the use of specific slangs, accents, dialects, or jargons indexes memberships in particular social groups or subcultures.

Besides indexicality, Bucholtz and Hall (2004a, 2005, 2010) propose another mechanism, i.e., *tactics of intersubjectivity*, to further account for the relationality of identity construction. According to them: "Identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 598). In correspondence to these complementary relations, three pairs of tactics are proposed to explain how people "position the self, the other, or (most often) both" in their discursive practices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004b, p. 494). These three pairs are *adequation*/*distinction*,

authentication/*denaturalization*, and *authorization*/*illegitimation*. It has to be noted that the enactment of these tactics and identity relations could be either "agentive and deliberate acts" or "more habitual practices" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004b, p. 494). Hence, tactics of intersubjectivity could be applied to examine identity construction in a variety of situations, be it strategic identity construction for the sake of achieving certain purposes or more simultaneous identity construction as a response to the contextual dynamics.

Among these three pairs of tactics, the pair of *adequation* and *distinction*, which index sameness and difference, is particularly significant in the construction of identities. Identity construction through displaying sameness or difference is the most commonly used strategy in people's discursive practices and is thus most widely theorized. As mentioned in the previously section, scholars such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and later Fairclough (2003) have all emphasized this pair of tactics in people's discursive construction of identities, as can be seen from their theorization of 'logic of equivalence' and 'logic of difference'. Adequation refers to both equation and adequacy. To construct an in-group identity in a certain social group, people need to display that they are sufficiently similar to other group members. By contrast, distinction foregrounds the differences and suppresses similarities. Generalizing from Bourdieu's (1984) works on social differentiation, numerous studies have drawn upon the notion of distinction to explore how language has played a role in producing and reproducing identities (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010). Distinction is used to alienate oneself or others from a certain group, constructing an out-group identity.

Authentication and *denaturalization* are concerned with the "the processes by which speakers make claims to realness and artifice, respectively" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 601). While authentication focuses on how identities are discursively verified, denaturalization attends to how the 'realness' of an identity can be disrupted or removed. For example, in studies of national identities in sociolinguistics, people's language choice in their quotidian

conversations, which displays their ethnic and nationalist stances, can be a vehicle for authentication. Once the language choice becomes authenticated, speaking in such a way comes to "index particular ways of being in and belonging to the nation-state" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a, p. 385).

Authorization and *illegitimation* take institutional powers into consideration, focusing on how identities are institutionally and structurally sanctioned and denied, respectively. Authorization refers to "the confirmation or imposition of an identity through structures of institutionalized power and ideology" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 603). It echoes the notion of legitimation in Fairclough's (2003) framework. By referring to "the authority of tradition, custom, law, and of persons in whom some kind of institutional authority is invested" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 98), people's identities become legitimized. Illegitimation is the counterpart of authorization and it addresses "the ways in which identities are dismissed, censored or simply ignored" within certain structures and ideologies (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010, p. 24).

Due to its theoretical origins in sociolinguistics, Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) framework has been mainly used in studies of social identities, such as race and gender. It is not until the last decade that the framework has been applied in the field of educational research. Notably examples include Yuan's (2016) study on the identities of teacher educators in the Hong Kong higher education context and Taylor's (2017) study on schoolteachers' construction of researcher identities through a teacher education program in the US education context. Taken together, the indexical processes and the tactics of intersubjectivity proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) provide a comprehensive framework to examine how people position themselves and are positioned by others in their self-narrations as well as in their interactions with others. Besides unravelling the micro details of identity construction at the linguistics level, their framework also

foregrounds the discussion of identities in relation to the macro-level social structures and cultural processes (Bucholtz & Hall, 2008). Previous discourse analysis frameworks, most notably Fairclough's (2003), are to a large extent incorporated in this comprehensive framework.

Having discussed the pivotal role of language and discourse in identity construction, it has to be noted that a discursive approach alone cannot address the complexities of identity constructionss in the material world. As admitted by Fairclough (2003), discourse analysis is only one analytical approach amongst many approaches to identity and it is better to combine discourse analysis with other forms of analysis. Similarly, Benwell and Stokoe (2006) argue that "discourse approach to identity neglect the material reality of the body and its relevance to social action" and because of these concerns, identity scholars need to "include *something other* than what discourse itself tells them about the identities being constructed within it" (p. 46). Thus, in what follows, I further justify the necessity to integrate the discursive view with the experiential view in identity research.

3.2.3 The necessity to integrate the experiential view and the discursive view

The theoretical orientation of combining the experiential view and the discursive view in identity research has attracted much scholarly discussion in the past two decades. In their much-cited review article about teacher identity research, Varghese and her co-authors (2005) conceptualize identity construction as inextricably intertwined with language and discourse, while also being derived from people's real-world practices. Similarly, but in a different field, through reviewing and critiquing studies of ethnicity and cultural identities, Mendoza and her co-authors (2002) maintain that identity is constructed "within specific institutionalized discourses and practices" (p. 318). In general, these theorizations point to the necessity for identity researchers to maintain a dual focus on "shared practices in communities" and

"individual meta-awareness" realized mainly through language (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 39). As Gee (1996) simply puts, identity is "what you are doing while you say it" (p. viii).

In response to these theoretical calls, scholars have made their forays into combining the discursive view and the experiential view to enable more multi-faceted and multi-layered analyses of identity constructions (e.g., Gu, 2011; Trent, 2013, 2016; Trent & DeCoursey, 2011; Trent & Lim, 2010). However, although identity is examined through both lenses (i.e., discursive and experiential) in these studies, researchers tend to treat the two lenses separately without clearly elucidating their interrelationships. As Yuan (2015) comments, "The segregation of identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice to some extent creates a binary relationship between these two interrelated dimensions of identity" (p. 46). Following Yuan (2015), I argue that the integration of the experiential view and the discursive view in the present study is more than just simply combining the two theoretical perspectives but integrating them into a coherent conceptual framework based on their interrelationships. These two theoretical strands are not competing and separate. Instead, there is inner coherence and complementarity between them.

First, identities are simultaneously discursive and experiential, and there is inner coherence between identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice. Tracing back to Bourdieu (1977), language is considered as a practice instead of an abstract system. Following his ideas, Schatzki (2002) explicates the inner coherence between language and practice by conceptualizing linguistic practice as one type of social activities. As he puts, activities combine both "doings and sayings" (p. 73). In a similar vein, Kanno and Stuart (2011) propose the mutually constitutive relationship between identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice by explaining that "discursively constructed identities are part of the identities-in-practice, as discursively constructed identities are verbal expressions of the ongoing mutual relationship between the self and the practice" (p. 240). Lee (2013) further asserts that people's narratives

and discursive practices reflect both identity-in-practice and identity-in-discourse, as individuals' narratives encompass both their experiences and their meaning making out of their experiences.

Second, the two views (i.e., experiential and discursive) complement each other and it is only through integrating these two views that we can generate a holistic understanding of identity construction. While the discursive view of identity focuses on people's demonstrated identity performances through the use of linguistic tools and discursive resources, the experiential view of identity, or more specifically, an activity theoretic perspective on identity, enables a systematic analysis of the multi-layered and interconnected contexts in which people's discursive identity performances are situated, thus linking identities with sociocultural formations and historical influences in more concrete ways (Mendoza et al., 2002). In other words, although discourse theories of identity recognize "the linguistic and the social as coextensive" (Clarke, 2008, p. 16), they sometimes fall short of a systematic analysis of the social factors within human activity systems. As Hermans and Kempen (1993) note: "Every utterance has a history in preceding discourses and an embeddedness in situation and culture" (p. 73). Instead of making assumptions based on shared understandings of culture, like many discourse scholars do (e.g., Feng, 2016), the socio-cultural-historical embeddings in people's discursive practices can be made more explicit through systematic explorations of people's concrete practices in concrete contexts (i.e., what people do and in what contextual settings their practices occur) guided by theories rooted in the experiential view of identity construction. On the other hand, while the experiential view of identity enables an understanding of how identities are constructed "by routinized personal behavior as well as by cultural and historical mediation" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 313), a discursive view helps to unravel the micro-genesis of identities at the linguistic level. Even with similar experiences in similar sociocultural and historical contexts, people may view themselves and their circumstances

quite differently, which can be examined through their personal sense-making at the linguistic level. A discursive view and a concomitant discourse analytical framework thus render a more nuanced account of how people make sense of their experiences and construct their identities.

3.3 An integrated conceptual framework for the present study

Drawing upon activity theory as the overarching framework complemented with the sociocultural linguistic framework on identity, the present study focuses on teachers' goal-oriented mediated actions in activity systems as well as their personal sense-making of their actions. By combining micro-level discourse analysis and macro-level activity systems analysis, the study aims to address the issues of identity "in its full complexity and dynamics" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 316).

Combining the activity theoretic perspective and the sociocultural linguistic perspective, identity is defined as a sociocultural product and process, which emerges from people's practical and discursive engagements across different activity systems (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Yuan, 2015; Yuan & Mak, 2018). It is a product reflective of people's phased and momentary experiences situated in a configuration of many personal and contextual factors interacting with each other (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017), whilst it is also a process subject to people's changing responses towards the situational contingencies within the activity systems. Specifically, identity is operationalized in terms of how people draw upon contextual mediations to address the tensions and challenges when they engage with multiple interrelated activity systems in the social, historical, and cultural world, as well as how they position themselves in relation to the world when they engage with multiple interrelated activity systems (Cross, 2020; Lee, 2013). People's identity constructions reflect the ongoing interplay between their agency and the contexts in which they are situated (Beijaard et al., 2004; Trent, 2013). Based on the conceptual framework, to understand dual-status teachers' identity negotiations when they engage with the interactive systems of their professional work and doctoral studies, we have to figure out:

1) their motives and projected identities in pursuing further doctoral studies; 2) the contextual tensions and affordances they encounter within and across the two activity systems; 3) their context-mediated actions in moving towards their goals; and 4) their interpretations of their experiences and their self-positionings. The integrated conceptual framework enables the unpacking of these questions.

As shown in Figure 3.4, the third-generation activity theory is used in the conceptual framework, integrated with Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) sociocultural linguistic framework. While the third-generation activity theory enables a systematic analysis of dual-status teachers' mediated actions within the contextual dynamics across the two activity systems, the discourse analytic framework helps to unravel how dual-status teachers perceive their experiences and position themselves at the discursive level. By combining activity systems analysis with discourse analysis, we can arrive at a holistic understanding of how dual-status teachers' identities are negotiated experientially and discursively within the socio-cultural-historical factors embedded across the interrelated activity systems of their professional work and doctoral studies.

In both activity systems (i.e., the professional activity system and the doctoral activity system), tertiary EFL teachers who concurrently pursue their doctorates are the *subjects*. *Object* is the motive of the activity. Object plays a crucial role in an activity system, as it is the goal towards which the activity is oriented. In the case of tertiary EFL teachers doing professional doctorate, the object of their professional activity system may include the fulfillment of various professional tasks and duties to educate the students, contribute to knowledge production, and support the institutional development (Shams, 2019). This object is often operationalized through teaching, research, and professional service, a triad well-recognized in scholarship on higher education faculty roles (Boyer, 1991). The object of their doctoral activity system may primarily focus on the successful completion of the doctorate, through which they are expected

to develop or enhance a research identity. Ideally, this research identity should inform their existing teaching identities, aligning with the rationale of professional doctoral programs (Burnard et al., 2018). The two activity systems also potentially share a common object of building the teaching-research nexus and constructing a legitimate and holistic academic identity in higher education, which incorporates both teaching and research (Tight, 2016). It needs to be noted that while an activity system may have a general collective object, individual subjects may have varied personalized motives or objects when engaging with the activity system, usually shaped by their personal histories and dispositions as well as their interpretations of the system's goals and dynamics. For example, within the overarching object of building the teaching-research nexus potentially shared by the two activity systems, teachers attending doctoral programs may prioritize developing a researcher identity out of personalized motives, such as securing smooth and quicker career promotion within the neoliberal performative institutional contexts where research is prioritized in staff appraisals. Despite the variation, the personalized motives or objects that the individual subjects aim to achieve within the activity collectively compose the object of the activity system (Kaptelinin, 2005). *Mediating tools* refer to the resources and instruments that the subject uses to attain the object. According to activity theory scholars (e.g., Engeström, 2015; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009), mediating tools include not only cultural artefacts but also social others. For example, while research articles written by senior doctoral students could become mediating tools for novice doctoral students, senior doctoral students themselves are also a source of resources that novice students could draw upon. In the professional activity system, teachers could refer to established teaching plans as mediating tools for their own teaching practice. They could also turn to more experienced teachers when they need guidance and inspirations for their own teaching. *Rules* are the tacit or explicit norms and regulations that constrain or enable the actions within an activity system. For example, in the doctoral

activity system, doctoral students' handbooks outline the regulations governing students' conduct and the requirements for competing the degree. In the professional activity system, there are also codes of conduct regulating teachers. *Community* refers to the social group in which the subject is situated to perform the activity. For example, fellow doctoral students, supervisors, discipline-based experts, and other support networks compose the community of the doctoral activity system, whereas colleagues, students, and management staff make the community of the professional activity system. *Division of labor* refers to the horizontal distribution of tasks and the vertical division of power. For example, supervisors manage doctoral students' study progress and occupy a higher status in the doctoral activity system. In the professional activity system, teachers are assigned with teaching tasks and are subject to the leadership of upper management. In general, *rules*, *community*, *mediating tools* and *division of labor* constitute the contextual dimension of an activity system, whereby the *subject* engages in the activity to obtain the *object*. In this study of dual-status teachers' identity negotiations, the constitutive components in the activity systems help to map out in nuanced terms the personal and contextual factors influencing teachers' identity work in their situated social practices across the two systems.

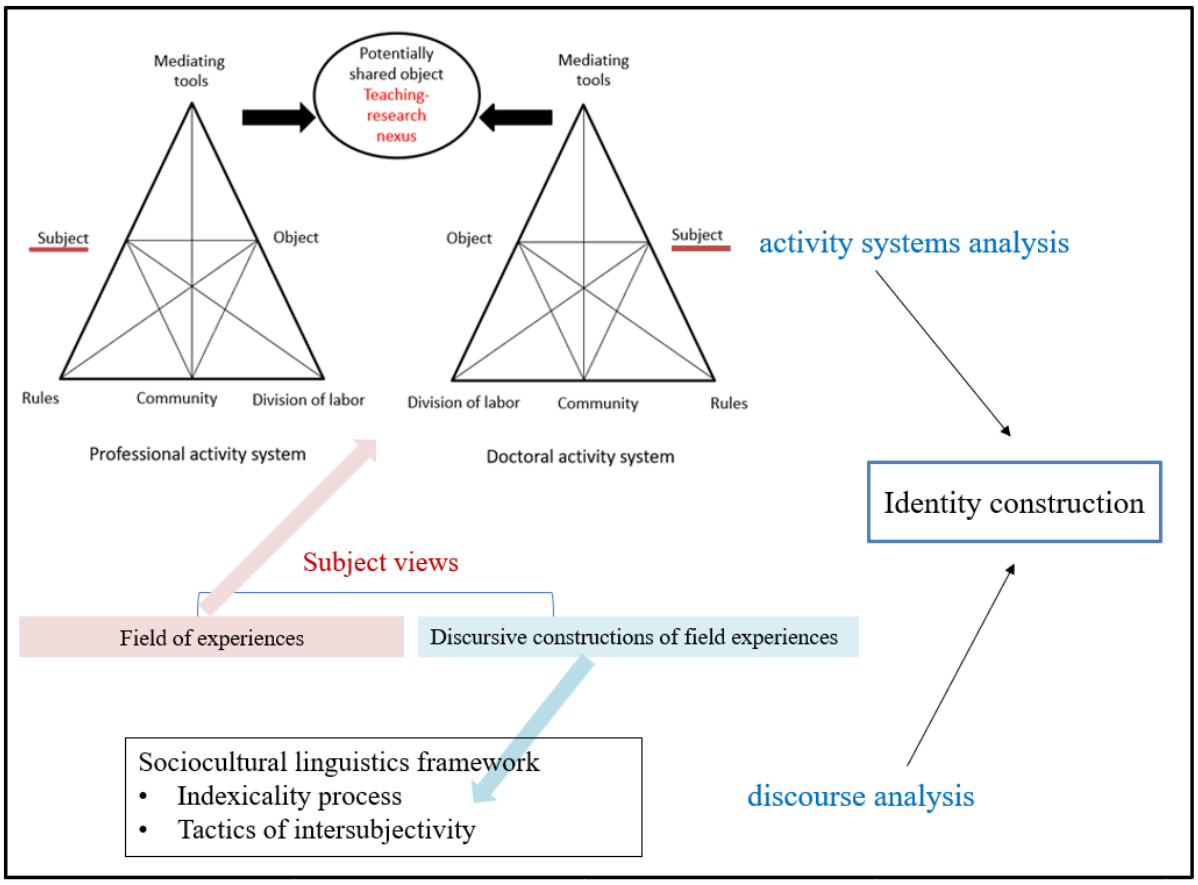

Figure 3.4 An integrated conceptual framework (adapted from Bucholtz & Hall, 2010; Engeström, 2001)

Another key notion in activity theory is *contradictions*, as mentioned in the previous section. Contradictions arise when there are conflicts, tensions, or misalignments within or between different components of a single activity system or between interconnected activity systems. Contradictions are socio-culturally and historically accumulated structural tensions that are often persistent and not easily resolved. However, contradictions are also "sources of change and development" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137), since they prompt the subjects to reflect upon themselves and their situations, adopt adaptive strategies, and reconcile competing contextual demands. The process of utilizing tools and coping with contradictions is a process of doing identity work, through which the subjects develop new understandings and practices. According to Tsui and Law (2007), contradictions "afford opportunities for the transformation of conflicts and tensions into rich zones of learning" (p. 1290). This 'expansive learning', as

called by Engeström (2001), is by nature an identity transformation process (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Yang, 2022). For example, in the case of on-the-job EFL teachers pursuing a doctoral degree, contradictions may arise out of the conflicts between the heavy teaching load and miscellaneous administrative duties in the workplace context and the necessity to graduate on time in the doctoral studies context (i.e., division of labor in the professional activity system *versus* object in the doctoral activity system). However, these contradictions may also stimulate teachers to manage their time and prioritize duties strategically, thereby crafting an efficient staff/student identity. Identifying the contradictions and the agents' responses towards these contradictions within and between activity systems through activity systems analysis helps to unearth the 'how' and 'why' questions of the agents' identity work. Besides, an activity theoretic perspective on identity "goes beyond the here-and-now" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 316) and takes into consideration the socio-cultural-historical embeddedness in activity systems (Engeström, 2015). For example, while the difficulty of constructing an academic identity in the doctoral activity system may be caused by the lack of supervision and academic induction in professional doctoral programs, which is a matter of division of labor, it could be further attributed to the neoliberal ethos dominating higher education, whereby financial rewards and efficiency are highly valued and doctoral supervisors are given more supervisees than they could handle. Boundary crossing is also a key concept when multiple activity systems are examined. According to Engeström (2001), taking parallel activity systems as the unit of analysis allows for the examination of interactions between activity systems. Moving from one activity system to another affords the subject with new tools and resources to resolve the contradictions that may arise in a single activity system (Finlay, 2008). For example, EFL teachers' challenges in integrating theories into their teaching designs within their professional activity system can be addressed through their boundary crossing into the doctoral activity system, where systematic trainings of educational theories are offered.

While an activity theoretic framework focuses on teachers' concrete experiences and the contextual dynamics, this study also integrates the sociocultural linguistic framework (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) to account for how teachers perceive their experiences and position themselves. As has been mentioned previously in Section 3.2.1.4, although activity theory foregrounds subject views in its theoretical claim (Cross, 2018), it does not allow for an analysis at the discursive level (Daniels, 2007) and pays little attention to the subject's underlying thought process (Clouder et al., 2020; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). To address this gap, this study highlights subject views through a narrative-based design, which will be further explained in the Methodology section. As shown in Figure 3.4, subject views collected through narrative frames and interviews reflect both dual-status teachers' recount of their field of experiences[6] (i.e., their experiences within the contextual dynamics of the activity systems) as well as their discursive constructions of their field of experiences. While dual-status teachers' field of experiences is analyzed through the lens of the third-generation activity theory, their discursive constructions of their field of experiences are subject to discourse analysis informed by the sociocultural linguistic framework (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010). As indicated in Figure 3.4, by referring to the *indexicality process* in their framework, I first examine what identities are explicitly or implicitly indexed in dual-status teachers' narrations of their experiences. I then check how these identities are linguistically constructed through the *tactics of intersubjectivity* in their framework. Fairclough's (2003) textual tools of *modality* and *evaluation* are integrated in the guiding framework in order to generate "a finely detailed account of the particular ways" through which identities are discursively constructed (Trent & Gao, 2009, p. 268). For example, while Bucholtz and Hall's

[6] I coined the phrase 'field of experiences' to refer to dual-status teachers' experiences within the contextual dynamics of the activity systems. Drawing upon systemic functional linguistics, the notion 'field' highlights both the social activities and the contexts. Therefore, I use 'field of experiences' as an integrated concept that emphasizes both teachers' experiences and the contexts in which their experiences are situated. Accordingly, discursive constructions of field of experiences refer to how teachers make sense of their experiences and position themselves at the linguistic level.

(2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) framework lists *evaluative and epistemic orientations* as one of the indexicality processes, Fairclough's (2003) elaboration on the textual realizations of *evaluation* enables me to identify this indexical process through finding textual hints and clues. The discourse analytical framework and explications of how analysis is operationalized at the discursive level will be further explained in the Methodology chapter.

Chapter 4 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology adopted in the present study. It begins with the rationale of choosing a narrative case study approach within the qualitative research paradigm, followed by a detailed introduction of the participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis protocols. After that, I explain how issues of trustworthiness and ethics are addressed in the study. At last, I discuss my researcher positionality, reflecting on how it may influence the study and how I attempt to both utilize and neutralize this influence.

4.1 The adoption of a qualitative research paradigm

The choice of a research paradigm hinges upon the researcher's philosophical worldviews (Creswell, 2013), or epistemological stance in other words (Crotty, 1998). It also depends on the research objectives and the research questions to be addressed.

In terms of my worldview, I adopt an interpretivist approach and conceptualize realities as socially constructed (Cohen et al., 2018; Popkewitz, 2011), which are created by individuals in their social contexts instead of being external and objective. In other words, truth and realities are "relative" and "dependent on one's perspectives" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). In addition, human behaviors and meaning-makings are too complex to be abstracted into linear causalities and generalizable patterns. As Johnson and Christensen (2012) have put, human behaviors and perceptions are "fluid, dynamic, [and] changing over time and place" (p. 35). Their changing behaviors and perceptions are colored by kaleidoscopic personal and contextual factors. Therefore, I commence with idiosyncrasies of people and seek to explore their evolving interpretations of their experiences in relation to the world (Cohen et al., 2018). My philosophical worldviews lead me to adopt a qualitative research paradigm, which posits that research inquiry is interpretive in nature. Understanding individuals' practices and their accounts of their practices in their situated sociocultural contexts is both an adequate and

significant purpose of research inquiry. In more specific terms, a qualitative research paradigm provides a thick and contextualized portrayal of the particularities of a phenomenon and allows for an in-depth understanding of the situation and its meaning for those involved (Merriam, 2002).

In terms of the research objectives and the research questions, the present study uses identity as a lens to explore the lived experiences of tertiary EFL teachers doing professional doctorate. The first research question I aim to address is: What are the motives and projected identities of Chinese tertiary EFL teachers who choose to pursue a professional doctorate? The second research question is: How do they negotiate their identities when they juggle the two activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies? Three sub-questions are asked under the second research question: i) What challenges do they encounter? ii) How do they cope with these challenges and move towards their goals? and iii) How do they make sense of their experiences and position themselves? The third research question is: How does doing a professional doctorate contribute to their identity configurations as tertiary EFL teachers? Three sub-questions are pursued under the third research question: i) What new tools (conceptual, material, symbolic, or social) have they gained from engaging with the doctoral activity system? ii) How do they use these tools to mediate their practice in their professional activity system? and iii) How do they make sense of their experiences and position themselves?

As can be seen from the research objectives and research questions, a qualitative research paradigm is well-suited for the present study. First, the study addresses people's lived experiences. A qualitative research paradigm is "fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives: their perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments, presuppositions, and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them" (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 10). In other words, a qualitative research paradigm enables the description and interpretation of "what particular people do in their

everyday lives and what their actions mean to them" (Erickson, 2011, p. 87). Second, the study uses identity as an analytic lens, which "has often been described as an elusive, intangible, and highly idiosyncratic abstraction that cannot be accessed or observed directly" (Bukor, 2015, p. 306). Due to its dynamic, complex, and idiosyncratic nature, identity can hardly be examined through quantitative methods. A qualitative research paradigm allows the researchers to delve into the complexities and richness of individual experiences, perspectives, and meanings associated with identity. Third, as has been mentioned in the literature review chapter, the main research focus in this present study, i.e., the experiences of tertiary EFL teachers pursuing a professional doctorate, is a rarely explored area in the existing literature. To generate an understanding of this under-researched and under-theorized phenomenon, a qualitative research design facilitates the discovery of emerging findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This is due to the discovery-oriented nature of qualitative designs, which advocate for naturalistic inquiries that document the experiences people *lived* and *felt* in their natural settings without enacting control or intervention (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Richards & Morse, 2013). Fourth, the research questions, primarily centered on "how" inquires, are particularly well-suited to being answered through the qualitative research paradigm, especially through case studies.

4.2 The adoption of a narrative case study design

A narrative case study design, which synergizes case study and narrative inquiry (Chen, 2020; Sonday et al., 2020), is adopted in the present study. A narrative case study design is particularly useful in understanding lived experiences, contextual complexities, and social actors' meaning making of their experiences within the contexts. It offers opportunities for the researchers to uncover the nuanced and sometimes implicit dimensions of a phenomenon within its contexts. As Brandell and Varkas (2010) note:

> Fundamentally, the narrative case study provides entrée to information that might otherwise be inaccessible. It makes possible the capture of phenomena that might not be understood as readily through other means of study (p. 653).

The choice of case study and narrative inquiry as merged methodologies suits well with the focus of exploration as well as the theoretical framework in the present study. First, case study is an appropriate method for providing an in-depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world contexts, especially when researchers aim to explain the 'how' and 'why' questions (Duff, 2012; Yin, 2018). As Creswell and Guetterman (2018) have put, case study is widely used as a productive method to generate in-depth understandings of authentic, context-specific issues in the educational settings. It enables a thick description and interpretation of the complexities and dynamics of a particular phenomenon and allows for the discovery of "systematic connections among experiences, behaviors, and relevant features of the context" (Johnson, 1992, p. 84). The present study investigates the contemporary phenomenon of tertiary EFL teachers doing professional doctorate and aims at a comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences within their situated contexts through the lens of identity. This phenomenon under investigation makes a 'case', a "bounded entity" (Yin, 2018, p. 6), with each participant serving as an embedded case contributing to the understanding of the collective 'case'. Guided by the central question of identity constructions, the focus of the study lies in an array of interrelated 'how' questions: how dual-status teachers respond to the contextual tensions and challenges, how they move towards their goals, and how they make sense of their experiences. Thus, the study can be well addressed by a case study design.

Apart from the fit between the focus of the study and a case study design, the overarching theoretical framework of the study, i.e., activity theory, also matches well with a

case study design. As pointed out by many scholars (e.g., Fenwick et al., 2011; Lampert-Shepel, 2008), activity theory as a theoretical framework combines well with case study. The strength of using activity theory to promote an understanding of people's mediated actions within complex social contexts can be further enhanced by the adoption of a case study design. Specifically, while case study "captures the contextual emerging meanings", activity theory unearths the "fundamental relationships of the phenomenon" (Lampert-Shepel, 2008, p. 223). A combination of activity theory and case study helps to explore "the boundaries between experiences and context" (Clouder et al., 2020, p. 1964). The detailed and rich data about individuals' experiences and their situating contexts, collected in a case study, can by analyzed in a more systematic and nuanced manner using activity theory.

Second, since the study uses identity as a lens to investigate dual-status teachers' experiences of pursuing and navigating further doctoral studies while straddling their workplace duties, a narrative inquiry approach is also adopted to complement the case study design. As Connelly and Clandinin (1999) note, identities are "stories to live by" (p. 4), which can be "narratively constructed and understood" (Burns & Bell 2011, p. 952). In more specific terms, Sfard and Prusak (2005) observe that "identities may be defined as collections of stories about persons or, more specifically, as those narratives about individuals that are *reifying*, *endorsable*, and *significant*" (p. 16). Narrative inquiry captures the meanings participants give to their experiences, which constitute who they are in the material world. In other words, it is in the participants' narrated stories that they generate a sense of the self (Kerby, 1991). Through narratives, participants "tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and they try to act as though they are who they say they are" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 3). As a vibrant approach to identity research (Canagarajah, 1996; Norton & Early, 2011), narrative inquiry has been widely used in studies of identity-related issues (De Fina, 2009), especially when the research participants are under-represented social groups (e.g., Burns &

Bell, 2011; Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Ladegaard, 2017; McMahill, 2001; Simon-Maeda, 2004). In the field of education, narrative inquiry is recognized as the most appropriate way to explore teachers' lived experiences, identities, and professional development (Bell, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Tsui, 2007), as a narrative approach enables the researchers to capture the complexities in teachers' personal and professional lives, highlights teachers' individual differences, and empowers teachers by giving them a voice to validate their experiences and challenge dominant discourses. As for the present study, the adoption of narrative inquiry attends to the voices of the under-represented tertiary EFL teachers who pursue a professional doctorate. As mentioned in the Introduction chapter and the Literature Review chapter, tertiary EFL teachers are often neglected as an occupational group in the higher education community due to their role as service-oriented and teaching-focused academic staff (Zeng & Fickel, 2021). As a group of professional doctoral students, they are somewhat alienated from the mainstream research culture in the doctoral community due to the contested legitimacy of PD programs in academia (Buss et al., 2014). A narrative inquiry approach thus not only helps to capture the intricate complexities of how dual-status teachers make sense of their experiences, but also empowers them by giving them opportunities to voice their perceptions and inject personal meanings into their professional and study experiences.

Taken together, case study is a hybrid research method (Verschuren, 2003), which is methodologically eclectic (Cohen et al., 2018). As Lincoln and Guba note (1985), case study is especially compatible with 'emic' enquiry that explores the insiders' perspectives and the subjective experiences of individuals within a sociocultural group. Case study thus gels well with narrative inquiry, which foregrounds participant voices (Barkhuizen, 2016). While the case study approach enables a holistic and contextualized understanding of the experiences of dual-status teachers, narrative inquiry allows researchers to delve into the intricacies of how these teachers make meaning of their experiences and examine how they construct their

identities through their narratives. As Sonday et al. (2020) have summarized, while case study offers a way to "understand the context and the process in the context" (p. 3), the embedded narrative inquiry gives perspectives to who the individuals are that are engaging in this process and what meanings they derive from their engagement.

4.3 Participants

As qualitative studies seek in-depth interpretation rather than statistical generalization, purposeful sampling is the most widely used sampling strategy (Palys, 2008). Purposeful sampling allows the researchers to "select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Patton (2002) observes that "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling" (p. 169). The very first step of purposeful sampling is to decide the selection criteria in choosing the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). General selection criteria for the present study include: 1) the participants have to be in-service EFL teachers in mainland Chinese universities; 2) the participants are preferably experienced mid-career teachers who have at least five years of teaching experience and have formed a relatively stable understanding of their profession (Huberman, 1989); 3) the participants are concurrently pursuing a professional doctorate in Applied Linguistics or Education; 4) the participants are senior doctoral students (i.e., non-first-year doctoral students) or recently completed doctoral students so that they have formed a deeper understanding of the doctoral program in which they are enrolled. Guided by these criteria, I employed network/snowballing sampling and maximum variation sampling to recruit information-rich participants, hoping to bring diverse perspectives and thicker data on the studied phenomenon.

4.3.1 Network/snowball sampling

Network sampling, or snowball sampling, involves using personal connections to locate a few key participants who meet the sampling criteria and then relying on these key participants to identify more participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a former tertiary EFL teacher in a mainland Chinese university and a current doctoral student based in Hong Kong, I happened to know some Chinese tertiary EFL teachers who were pursuing a doctorate for professional development. When I decided to conduct a study on dual-status teachers, I drew upon my personal networks to recruit a few at the beginning stage of my study.

I then asked each of these early participants to refer me to other potential participants that meet the selection criteria for the study. As Patton (2015) suggests: "By asking a number of people who else to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information-rich cases" (p. 298). With the help of key participants, I approached approximately thirty eligible participants who met the sampling criteria. I conducted informal interviews with these potential participants to explore their degrees of willingness to participate in the study, their availability, and their potential to provide rich information. Taking these factors into considerations, I further narrowed down the sample to around twenty participants, since both case study designs and narrative inquires prioritize depth and can only accommodate a relatively small sample. I then used maximum variation sampling strategy to further refine the selection of participants.

4.3.2 Maximum variation sampling

While narrative case studies are generally based on a relatively small sample, researchers need to adopt strategies to maximize the "variation of a small sample" in order to capture a wider spectrum of experiences and strengthen the transferability of the study findings (Patton, 2002, p. 125). To achieve this, I used maximum variation sampling, is considered as

"the most effective basic strategy for selecting participants for interview studies" (Seidman, 2006, p. 25). Sampling participants based on the principle of maximum variation is likely to bring diverse experiences and perspectives (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). In the present study, I used maximum variation sampling strategy to choose participants who differed in teaching years, affiliated institutions, and enrolled programs, hoping to "adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population" and "ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the entire *range* of variation" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 100).

As a narrative case study that "seeks depth rather than breadth in its scope and analysis" (Duff, 2012, p. 96), the study cannot work with many focal participants. As Bell (2002) comments on narrative-based studies: "The time commitment required makes it unsuitable for work with a large number of participants" (p. 210). Elsewhere, Duff (2008) explains the rationale of recruiting small samples in case studies. As she notes, working with too many participants in case studies would make it difficult to "provide an in-depth description and contextualization (or thesis chapter) of each one, taking fully into account the complexity of interactions, the perspectives of the participants, and so on" (p. 124). Thus, following the suggestion of Yin (2018), who mentions that six to ten participants in a case study are most likely to bring "compelling support" for theoretical replications (p. 124), I elicited twelve focal participants, with the consideration of possible attritions (Duff, 2008). At the same time, I remained open about the recruitment and the number of focal participants during the whole research process, considering that new issues may emerge along with the progression of a qualitative inquiry (Mason, 2018).

In the end, all the twelve participants, anonymized as T1 to T12, remained engaged through the entire research process. Table 1 summarizes the profiles of the participants. All the twelve participants primarily taught public English courses to non-English-major undergraduate students, with T4, T5, T6, and T9 also undertaking a few courses for English-

major students. They had six to twenty-one years of work experience and were affiliated with different types of institutions. Overall, they worked in universities across the three-tier model of the mainland Chinese higher education system: from private colleges to government-funded regional universities to government-funded national key universities. In the three-tier model, national key universities hold the most prestige in terms of resources and student entry requirements, while private colleges hold the least. As for the participants' job title, eight of them held the title of lecturer, while two were associate professors and one was a full professor. Five participants were enrolled in Doctorate in Education programs, while the remaining seven participants were from Doctorate in Education programs. Despite the difference, the PD programs they were enrolled in follow a similar structure. Completing the degree requires a coursework section and a capstone thesis section. Unlike PhD programs, where students are assigned a supervisor or supervision team at the commencement of their doctoral studies, PD students are expected to complete the coursework work before they can proceed to supervisor identification. The doctoral programs the participants were enrolled in were offered by higher education institutions in Hong Kong, Macao, Malaysia, and Sino-foreign corporative universities based in mainland China. It should be noted that the aim of recruiting participants from programs in multiple sites is not to make comparisons but to "provide multiple perspectives and thicker data" (Leshem, 2020, p. 172). As part-time professional doctoral students who had to juggle their workplace duties, the twelve participants were at different stages in their doctoral progress, ranging from 3rd-year students to recent graduate. One thing in common is that they had all completed their coursework section at the time of data collection.

Table 4.1 Profiles of the participants

Participant	**Gender**	**Teaching years**	**Job title**	**Work institution**	**Program**	**Doctoral progress**
T1	Male	14	Lecturer	Regional public university	Doctorate in Applied Linguistics	3rd-year, thesis in progress

T2	Female	11	Lecturer	Regional public university	Doctorate in Education	5th-year, thesis in progress
T3	Male	10	Associate Professor	Private college	Doctorate in Education	4th -year, ready to submit thesis
T4	Male	9	Lecturer	National key university	Doctorate in Education	6th -year, thesis in progress
T5	Female	16	Associate Professor	Regional public university	Doctorate in Education	Recently graduated
T6	Female	6	Lecturer	Regional public university	Doctorate in Education	Recently graduated
T7	Female	21	Lecturer	Regional public university	Doctorate in Education	4th -year, thesis in progress
T8	Female	9	Lecturer	Private college	Doctorate in Applied Linguistics	Recently graduated
T9	Male	12	Associate Professor	Regional public university	Doctorate in Applied Linguistics	Recently graduated
T10	Female	7	Lecturer	Private college	Doctorate in Education	4th -year, thesis in progress
T11	Female	11	Lecturer	Regional public university	Doctorate in Applied Linguistics	3rd -year, thesis in progress
T12	Female	13	Lecturer	Regional public university	Doctorate in Applied Linguistics	4th -year, ready to submit thesis

4.4 Data collection

To achieve an in-depth and contextualized understanding of the studied phenomenon, case studies usually draw upon multiple-sourced data to enact inductive reasoning (Merriam, 1998). As Baxter and Jack (2008) point out, a case study design "facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources" (p. 544). Various sources of data complement one another to provide a rich picture of the studied phenomenon whilst they also enable the triangulation of findings and thus enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

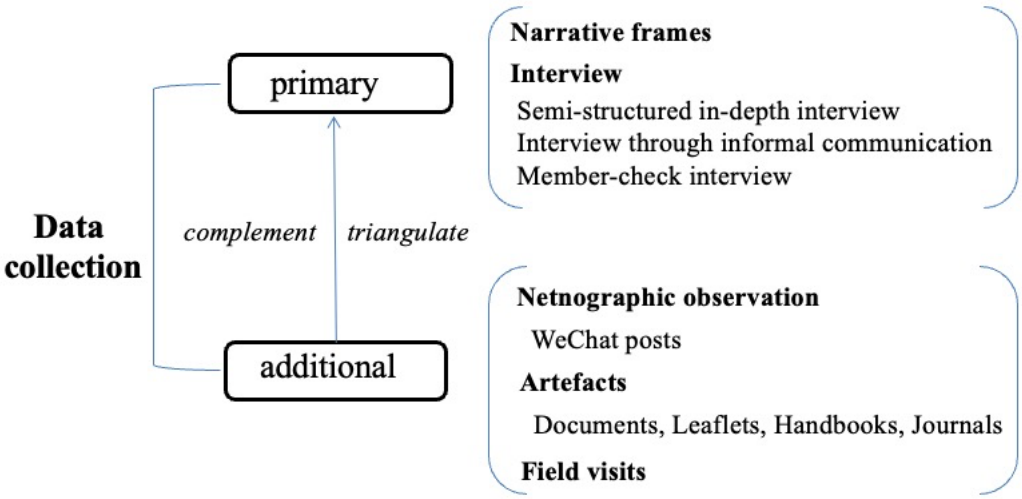

Figure 4.1 An overview of data collection

In the present study, multiple sources of data were collected (see Figure 4.1 for an overview of data collection). Primary data were collected through narrative frames and interviews, which provided participants with discursive venues to articulate their experiences, give meaning to their experiences, and express their perspectives and dispositions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These narrative-based data aimed to "capture the nature and meaning of experiences that are difficult to observe directly and are best understood from the perspective of those who experience it" (Barkhuizen et al., 2014), and have been widely recognized as essential for identity research (Barkhuizen, 2017; De Costa & Norton, 2017). Additional data included the participants' WeChat posts[7] collected through netnographic observation and artefacts such as policy documents and the participants' reflective journals. I also conducted field visits to two of the PD programs: one Doctorate in Education program and one Doctorate in Applied Linguistics program. Additional data mainly served to contextualize, complement, and triangulate the primary data (LeCompte et al., 1993). In what follows, I introduce and justify the use of each data source in greater details. I also explain how data collection was carried out.

[7] WeChat is a free instant messaging application widely used for personal and professional communication in China. WeChat offers a platform for people to create posts and share their posts among their contacts.

4.4.1 Narrative frames

Narrative frames were used in the first stage of data collection. Using sentence starters and hints to present stories "in skeletal form" (Barkhuizen, 2014b, p. 13), narrative frames provide "guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written by helping teachers to recount their experiences" (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 376). The reason for using narrative frames in the present study was three-fold.

First, narrative frames served as a means of "gaining entry into a research site" (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 383), through which I started "entering into the lives" of my participants (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 438). Despite my insider position as a former tertiary EFL teacher and a current doctoral student, I had limited practical knowledge about what it is like to be a practicing teacher and a doctoral student concurrently. Due to the conspicuous under-exploration of the studied phenomenon, the literature also offers limited insights into the lived experiences of dual-status EFL teachers. Thus, using narrative frames at the first step of data collection enabled me to get some baseline information before I conducted more in-depth investigations of the studied issue. Due to the flexible nature of qualitative research design, the adoption of narrative frames helped me to calibrate my research focus and further refine the follow-up instrumentation of the study.

Second, as a structured yet flexible tool of data collection, narrative frames helped me to efficiently create a "shared stock of narratives" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) among the participants, which provided a focused, panoramic, yet rich picture of the studied phenomenon before more in-depth investigations are made. Information generated from narrative frames also enabled me to better situate the findings gained from in-depth investigations. As Barkhuizen (2014b) mentions, narrative frames can be used as a tool for verifying the findings from in-depth interviews.

Third, the responses I got from narrative frames served as a guide for in-depth interviews. With a general understanding of each focal participant's experiences and perceptions, I further tailored my interview questions in individual interviews. Responses to narrative frames were thus used as briefings of each focal participant's stories, which were "explored in greater depth in the interviews" (Nazari et al., 2023, p. 5).

The design of the narrative frames in the present study was based on the overarching theoretical framework, i.e., third-generation activity theory, as well as existing literature on tertiary teachers' professional development and doctoral education. In the narrative frames, I used sentence starters and prompts to scaffold the participants to write long narratives about: 1) their personal motives and projected identities in choosing to pursue a professional doctorate; 2) the challenges and tensions they face when they straddle the two activity systems of professional work and doctoral study; 3) their coping strategies; and 4) their changing perceptions of themselves, their profession, and their doctoral studies. In the narrative frames, I also asked the participants to fill out basic information about their work experience, affiliated institution, professional title, and the type of their enrolled doctoral program. The narrative frames were piloted with two dual-status teachers who were not participants of the study and were further revised before being distributed the participants (see Appendix II for the narrative frames). I wrote the narrative frames in English, but the participants can choose to write the responses either in English or Chinese. All participants wrote in Chinese.

4.4.2 Interview

Marking a move from viewing participants as manipulated and data as external to human beings (Kvale, 1996), interview is the most widely used and most productive data collection method in qualitative research. The benefits of using interview have been well-recognized and well-documented in the existing literature. For example, Saunders et al. (2012)

observe that interview enables the researchers to amass valid and reliable data that are closely related to the research questions. Berg (1998) argues that interview is the most productive method to learn the perceptions of the participants, i.e., how the participants give meaning to the phenomenon under investigation. Creswell (2007) notes that interview enables researchers to collect data in a structured manner while also remaining open to the participants' responses, thereby balancing rigor with the flexibility to capture emerging insights.

In the present study, interview was used as the primary means of data collection. Such an attempt was driven by a gap in studies drawing upon similar theoretical lens and perspectives. It was also driven by the adoption of a narrative-based design. For one thing, using interviews may well address "the lack of participant voice and interpretation" in observation-oriented studies (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 38). In her comments on studies using activity theory as the theoretical framework, Yamagata-Lynch (2010) points out that these studies primarily focus on observable actions and behaviors and tend to give less attention to people's narrations, where they give meaning to their actions. Following Yamagata-Lynch's (2010) comment, Clouder et al. (2020) argue that the over-emphasis on activity and the neglect of the underlying thought process could be overcome by interviews. Thus, the present study employed interview as the primary data collection method and aimed at a rich understanding of the participants' discursive meaning making of their experiences. For another thing, narrative inquiry was embedded in the methodological approach of the present study. As such, in-depth interview became essential in data collection, as interview provides the ideal mode to gather the participants' life stories and their meaning making of their life stories (Chase, 2003). Apart from being a data collection method, interview is also a form of social practice and provides a discursive venue for the interviewer and interviewee to co-construct knowledge (Talmy, 2010). This knowledge co-construction is what characterizes narrative inquires, through which researchers can better tell and retell, and story and restory the participants' experiences.

Three types of interviews were used in the present study, namely semi-structured in-depth interview, interview through informal communication, and 'member-check' interview. First, following the narrative frames, each focal participant was invited to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interview. In these interviews, focal participants were asked to: 1) further elaborate their written responses to the narrative frames; 2) provide a detailed account of their professional histories and institutional environments; 3) elucidate their perceptions of their profession and give comments on tertiary EFL education and the academic profession in the current milieu of Chinese higher education; 4) further explain their motivations to pursue a professional doctorate; 5) narrate their experiences and perceptions of their doctoral studies; 6) describe the interactions between their professional work and doctoral studies; 7) reflect on their dual engagements across the two activity systems; and 8) illustrate their changing perceptions of themselves and their profession and project their future.

Following the suggestion of Chase (2003), interview questions were carefully formulated to invite the participants to share their stories. Although I used an interview guide (see Appendix III), I encouraged the participants to take the lead and take responsibility for their own meaning making during the interview. This openness prevented the researchers from "imposing their own sense of the world on their participants rather than eliciting theirs" (Seidman, 2006, p. 39). For each interview, I started with easier and non-controversial questions to make the participants feel at ease. When critical incidents and insights emerged from the participants' narratives, I asked for further elaboration. These probes encouraged the participants to clarify or elaborate on their responses to the interview questions, thereby "addressing richness, depth of response, comprehensiveness and honesty that are some of the hallmarks of successful interviewing" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 514). In general, during the interview processes, I played the role of a supporter who kept the conversation going as well as the role of a promoter who dug deeper when necessary (Barkhuizen, 2010).

In-depth interviews were conducted through Tencent Meeting, an online video conferencing application widely used in China. The use of online interview provided great convenience for the participants, who were generally very busy with packed schedules considering their multiple roles as in-service teachers, doctoral students, and sometimes as parents in their personal lives. In addition to the convenience, online interview also created an easy and non-threatening communication environment and participants could feel more comfortable and unrestricted to express themselves (Yu & Zhao, 2021). Each interview lasted around 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, the participants' mother tongue, and were recorded with the participants' permission.

Second, due to the emergent and iterative nature of qualitative studies (Cohen et al., 2018), it was difficult to collect all the information needed in one interview. Thus, several rounds of follow-up interviews were conducted with the progression of data analysis. However, instead of arranging formal interviews, these inquiries were made through informal communications facilitated by WeChat. According to methodology scholars (e.g., Swain & King, 2022), informal communications are equally valid and should hold the same epistemological status as interviews. In addition to flexibility, the advantage of using informal communications through WeChat lied in that the participants were more spontaneous in these communications, which facilitated the collection of more naturalistic and dependable data. By using informal communications, I was able to "get nearer to the reality of individuals' experiences, values and perceptions" (Swain & King, 2022, p. 8), as the participants tended to be less performative in informal communications compared with in formal interviews. For example, one participant mentioned his affiliated institution as a hindrance to the smooth progression of his doctoral studies in the semi-structured interview. Although I asked several follow-up questions during the formal interview, the participant spoke in very general terms about the unsupportive policies without giving any more specific details. Later I found

institutional policies to be a recurring theme in many of the participants' narratives. I thus mentioned this initial finding to the participant and further asked him to elaborate on how and why institutional policies had hindered his pursuit of a doctorate on WeChat. He explained in greater detail this time and shared with me the policy documents from his institution. He also revealed some hidden truth about the institution's attitudes towards in-service faculty members pursuing higher degrees. We ended up having a lengthy discussion about why institutional attitudes towards teachers' continuing professional development through doctoral studies had become mixed and even paradoxical in many universities, which is a shift from several years ago.

Third, member-check interviews were conducted during data analysis. After initial analysis was done, I held "narrative-checking meetings" with each of my participants (Consoli, 2021, p. 13), asking them to validate and comment on my interpretations and provide additional insights. When the participants disagreed with my interpretations, I further discussed with them and revised or expanded my interpretations accordingly.

4.4.3 Netnographic observation

Observation, especially unobtrusive observation, can counteract the potential reactivity effect in interviews and provide chances for researchers to gain 'live' data from naturally occurring social situations (Cohen et al., 2018). In this study, I conducted netnographic observation to collect additional data (Kozinets, 2010). As some of the participants were active in documenting their lives and communicating their thoughts through WeChat posts, I found these posts a valuable source of data that would enrich my understanding of their experiences as well as how they made sense of their experiences. Thus, with the focal participants' permission, I retrospectively collected their WeChat posts over the years ever since they had commenced their doctoral studies and had become a dual-status teacher. Enabled by the

technology affordances, these posts were composed using a variety of multimodal semiotic resources, including language, images, and videos, among others (see Appendix IV for an example of the collected WeChat post). Through these posts, I gained a deeper understanding of how the focal participants presented and projected themselves in relation to the outside world (cf. Bao & Feng, 2024). The collection of data in multimodality made "an effective and strong contribution in gaining a more nuanced interpretation of identity construction, providing a new or additional perspective" (Ahn, 2021, p. 10). It needs to be noted that, since the participants were not equally active in subscribing to WeChat posts, I only collected those that were available to me.

4.4.4 Artefacts

Artefacts can complement other sources of data and help researchers to gain information that cannot be gained from interviews directly (Merriam, 1998). To enrich the dataset, I collected all the relevant artefacts where they were available, which included policy documents from the participants' affiliated institutions, as well as program leaflets, program webpage, and student handbooks of the participants' enrolled doctoral programs. In addition, I asked the participants to share any materials related to their professional work and doctoral studies, if available. T2 shared her three reflective journals, in which she reflected upon her work, her doctoral studies, her living habits, and her family responsibilities as a mother of two children. T3 provided his handwritten schedules detailing his work commitments and doctoral studies. T6 shared two diaries she kept while doing her capstone project and writing up her doctoral thesis. The diaries primarily focused on the difficulties she had encountered in this process, along with her coping strategies and personal reflections. According to Yin (2018), these artefacts served to "corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (p. 180). Appendix V shows an example of the artefacts I collected.

4.4.5 Field visits

To develop a 'native' understanding of the contexts in which the participants' narratives were situated (cf. Liu & Yuan, 2025), I conducted field visits to the program-providing universities where several of the participants were doing their professional doctorate. One program I visited was a PD program based in mainland China, where I attended a postgraduate conference with one of my participants. During my visit, I had the opportunity to talk with different stakeholders of the program, including other professional doctoral students and program tutors and course instructors. I also made multiple visits to a PD program based in Hong Kong. Due to my identity as a doctoral student in Hong Kong and my rapport with a few participants from this program, I was able to gain access to the field and attend several program activities, including students' academic sharing sessions and informal social gatherings, where I had the opportunity to talk with many PD students in the program. I also attended several graduation thesis vivas and thesis proposal vivas, through which I gained insights into the research projects in PD programs. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality, I did not include these data in the presentation of the findings. However, these data played a role in my interpretation of other sources of data.

4.5 Data analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is "the process of moving from raw materials to evidence-based interpretations" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 201). It is a process of researchers trying to make sense of the data in terms of the participants' definitions of their situations through a theoretical lens. While there is no cookbook for analyzing and presenting qualitative data (Maxwell, 2013), I followed several general guidelines in qualitative data analysis, including systematic data management as part of the data analysis, iterative analysis concurrent with data collection, and moving back and forth between the raw data, the theoretical framework, and the research questions. Before I move to the specific data analysis methods

used in the present study, I first explain how these general guidelines inform my overall data analysis.

First, data management is often seen as an integral part of data analysis in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To manage my data in a systematic way, I annotated and transcribed different sources of data. Interview data were first transcribed using software. I then manually checked the transcription by listening to the recordings multiple times. Although time-consuming, this process was "an integral and important initial phase of data analysis" (Duff, 2008, p. 154), through which I familiarized myself with the data and generated some initial ideas and sensitizing concepts about the potential themes in the data. Transcription and initial analysis were done in the original language (i.e., Chinese) to avoid possible meaning loss caused by translation. After the transcription of interview data, I organized all the textual data, i.e., written responses to narrative frames, interview transcripts, and documents, with the help of MAXQDA, a data curation software package. Data were stored both by type and by participant. Besides data in textual form, there were also data in digital multimodal form, i.e., the WeChat posts collected through netnographic observation. These posts were kept as screenshots, with annotations in terms of major content, additional remarks about the context of the post, and my personal comments.

Second, following the suggestions of methodology scholars (e.g., Cohen et al., 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Robson & McCartan, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), data analysis was an evolving and recursive process that began from data collection. Analyzing data at an earlier stage enables "progressive focusing" (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976), wherein researchers start with a wider angle when gathering data and gradually narrow their focus on digging data that are more relevant to the research questions. This emergent approach was quite instrumental in helping me fine-tune my focus of inquiry. For example, after initial analysis of the responses to the narrative frames, I found that financial issues were mentioned by several participants as

an impediment to their doctoral studies, which I did not expect when I first designed the interview guide. I thus initiated several follow-ups around this issue in the formal and informal interviews, in which I asked all the participants to articulate their relevant experiences. This led to the identification of a series of factors influencing the dual-status teachers' identity negotiations, for example, the tensions arising out of the contradiction between conducting time-consuming classroom-based research and the practical need to complete on time and save tuition fees.

Third, data analysis was an iterative process that involved constantly moving back and forth between the raw data, the research questions, and the theoretical framework (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The analysis was thus both bottom-up and top-down (Bazeley, 2013; Yuan, 2015). Initial codes and later subthemes and themes were generated from the data through an inductive method, guided by the research questions. But at the same time, the generation of themes was also informed by sensitizing concepts in prior research and the theoretical framework (Nowell et al., 2017). In other words, while I kept an open mind in my inductive analysis of the data, I also bore the research questions in mind and drew upon the theoretical framework and the existing literature to guide my analysis. By situating the 'local' insights and patterns drawn from raw data into a broader theoretical context, I was able to go beyond mere description of the phenomenon and arrive at theoretical interpretations that unpack the broader meanings and implications of my research findings.

Following the above general guidelines, specific data analysis methods were employed in order to generate a holistic picture of the phenomenon studied in accordance with the conceptual framework. Specific data analysis methods included thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and activity systems analysis. Discourse analysis was done concurrently with thematic analysis, followed by activity systems analysis. In what follows, I explain how each data analysis method was operationalized.

4.5.1 Thematic analysis

The purpose of thematic analysis was to identify themes relevant to the research questions through making sense of the raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A reflexive approach was adopted in thematic approach, which acknowledges researchers' subjectivities as analytic resources rather than constraints and advocates the researchers' reflexive engagement with data, theory, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Following the recommended procedures in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I first read and reread the data elicited from narrative frames and interviews to generate a holistic understanding of the participants' narratives and try to capture "the voices within each narrative" (Chase, 2008, p. 73). In this stage, I noted down initial ideas and created memos for later coding. I then coded interesting features of the data and collated data relevant to each code. I tried to use *in vivo* codes where possible. In vivo codes, or "indigenous concepts" in Patton's (2002, p. 454) words, refer to the use of participants' "exact words in the original item" as codes (Yin, 2011, p. 188). Using in vivo codes enabled me to stay close to the data and maximally capture the participants' meaning making of their situations. After initial coding was done, I categorized the initial codes and sorted them into potential themes. For example, the initial codes of "heavier teaching load" and "more administrative duties" were combined into the category of "service-oriented positioning of tertiary EFL teachers in Chinese higher education", which were later put under the theme of "neoliberal climate in Chinese higher education". The potential themes then underwent iterative revisions based on their pertinence to the research questions and their capacity to capture the contours of the coded data. Informed by my research questions, I collated and refined the themes around the participants' personal motives and projected identities in pursuing a professional doctorate, the challenges of engaging with the dual activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies, the participants' mediated actions in response to these challenges, and the tools they developed and adapted across dual activity systems.

As additional sources of data were mainly used to contextualize, triangulate, and complement the primary sources of data, they were analyzed through "a selective reading approach" based on their relevance to the research questions and the identified themes from the primary sources of data (Van Manen, 1990). Specifically, I checked and compared whether additional sources of data can triangulate, enrich, or falsify the themes generated from primary sources of data, resulting in confirmation, expansion, or revision of the themes. For example, some participants' mention of their time deprivation due to their dual engagements as a practicing teacher and a doctoral student was triangulated and enriched by their frequent WeChat posts that depicted their busy life or burnout.

4.5.2 Discourse analysis

As this study adopted identity as a lens to study dual-status teachers' experiences and theorized identity as both practical and discursive, dual-status teachers' 'doings' and 'sayings' in their situated activities across different activity systems were conceptualized as manifestations of their ongoing identity negotiations. Participants' narratives were treated as verbal accounts of their lived experiences on the one hand, and discursive spaces where they interpretated their experiences and negotiated their self-positionings on the other hand. In other words, participants' narratives were both revelation of their practices in the real-world settings and the "discursive constructions" of their subject positions (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 216).

Thus, concurrent with a traditional thematic approach of data analysis, I also employed discourse analysis to take into consideration the "forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers" (Riessman, 1993, p. 2), especially when I tried to figure out participants' sensemaking of their experiences as well as their positionalities of themselves in relation to the outside world. The use of discourse analysis addressed the theoretical agenda in narrative-based studies (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2014a; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011), which

posits that researchers should maintain a dual focus on 'what is told in the narratives' and 'how it is told' in their data analysis. Aligning with the conceptual framework, I drew upon Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010) linguistic framework of *indexicality* and *tactics of intersubjectivity*, together with Fairclough's (2003) textual tools of *modality* and *evaluation*, to inform the identification of identity-related themes at the micro-discursive level. As has been discussed in the Theoretical Foundations chapter, by drawing upon a discourse analytic approach, I can better examine the participants' explicit or implicit stances, attitudes, perceptions, and self-positions in their description of their lived experiences.

Specifically, as shown in Figure 4.2, I paid attention to the participants' explicit identity construction, as well as their implicit identity construction based on their perceptions of their experiences and future orientations (i.e., indexicality processes). Explicit identity construction can be realized through *overt mention of identity labels*, for example, when participants overtly drew upon labels to assert their roles. It can also be realized through drawing upon *metaphors* to convey their sense of identity. As a linguistic tool, metaphors have been widely acknowledged as an archetype and an expression of identity (Saban, 2006). As for implicit identity construction, I checked the participants' evaluative and affective orientations within texts displayed through *modality* and *evaluation*, as well as their positionings of themselves through *tactics of intersubjectivity*. Adapting Fairclough's (2003) work, *modality* can be expressed through both epistemic and deontic forms. Epistemic modality conveys degrees of certainty or belief, as seen in modal verbs such as "can", modal adverbs such as "certainly", hedges such as "kind of", and mental process clauses or expressions indicating awareness, such as "I think" or "I realize". Deontic modality reflects obligation, necessity, or permission, and is often realized through modal verbs like "must", "should", or "may". *Evaluation* shows the meaning-makers' judgements and attitudes, which can be expressed directly through value-laden language such as "good" and "bad", or indirectly implied through meaning-makers'

narratives that could invoke judgments. Implicit identity construction could also be achieved by positioning through *tactics of intersubjectivity*. According to Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008, 2010), *adequation* highlights the similarities or alignment with others, while *distinction* focuses on the differences or boundaries. *Authentication* refers to the verification of an identity, while *denaturalization* is concerned with questioning or challenging the realness or naturalness of an identity. *Authorization* involves leveraging societal or institutional power to validate an identity, while *illegitimation* denotes the rejection of an identity through power and dominant ideologies.

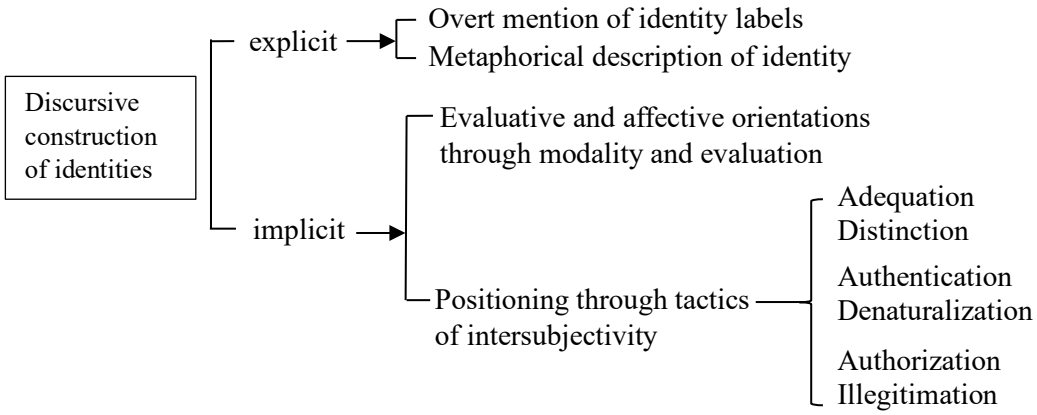

Figure 4.2 Discourse analytical framework

Applying this discourse analytical framework, I coded the discursive features of the participants' narratives and identified the identities that were indexed in their narratives. Table 4.2 shows a protocol of how I code the participants' identities. For example, in an interview with T2, after elaborating on the setbacks and frustrations she had encountered, T2 commented: "I plan to complete this and that's it! I will resume my teaching role. I will never do this again" (T2-Interview). In this comment, T2 used high-modality words, i.e., *will* and *will never*, to indicate her yearning for her original teacher role and her rejection of the researcher role. Therefore, I interpreted the comment as showing T2's identity construction as a comeback teacher and non-researcher.

Table 4.2 Examples of coding the participants' identities through discourse analysis

Participants' narratives	**Discursive features**	**Identities indexed**
"我打算赶紧读完了这个，**就**好好上班了，**再也不**做这个了！" (T2-Interview) "*I plan to complete this and that's it! I **will resume** my teaching role. I **will never** do this again.*"	Implicit identity construction The use of high-modality words: 就[*will*] 再也不 [*will never*]	A comeback teacher and non-researcher
"我导师手里有十几个博士生，他非常忙，不能给每个人细致的指导。那我只能自己管自己，**我算个自主学习者吧**。" (T3-Interview) "My supervisor has around a dozen PhD and EdD students at hand and is too busy to exercise intensive supervision to every supervisee. I have to rely on myself. ***I consider myself as a self-regulated student***."	Overt mention of identity labels The use of overt identity label: 我 算 个 自 主 学 习 者 吧 [*I consider myself as a self-regulated student*]	A self-regulated doctoral student
"我觉得跟全职读博**有很大区别**，PhD 在导师身边，**他们**得到的指导会多一些吧。**我们不一样**，是远离圈子的。" (T1-Narrative frames) "*It's **very different from** doing a full-time PhD. PhD students are closer to the supervisors and **they** may get more guidance. It's **different for us**. **We** are away from the 'academic' circle.*"	Implicit identity construction The use of the tactics of distinction: 有 很 大 区 别 [*very different from*] 他们、我们[*they vs. we*] 我们不一样[*different for us*]	A peripheral doctoral student

4.5.3 Activity systems analysis

The application of activity systems analysis in qualitative research brings advantages in terms of rigor and reliability. As Yamagata-Lynch (2010) comments, activity systems analysis can "help investigators make sense of complex real-world data sets in a manageable and meaningful manner" by providing "a valid framework to use as a guide while building reliable interpretations of the data" (p. 5).

In the present study, activity systems analysis helped to unravel the dialectic interplay between the participants' agentic actions and their situated and broader social settings, thus enabling a comprehensive understanding of the participants' identity negotiations that are both

personal and contextual. As has been explained in the Theoretical Foundations chapter, from an activity theoretic perspective, identity construction is concerned with participants using contextual affordances to resolve the tensions and challenges when they engage with motive-directed activities within multiple interrelated activity systems in the social, historical, and cultural world (Cross, 2020; Lee, 2013). Thus, in this step of the analysis, I moved my analytical focus to the participants' motives in pursuing a professional doctorate, their mediated actions across their professional activity system and their doctoral activity system, the tensions and contradictions within and across different activity systems, and the multifaceted and multi-layered contextual factors shaping the participants' mediated actions.

To set the scene for my analysis of the interplay between the participants' agentic actions and the contextual dynamics, I followed Yamagata-Lynch's (2010) suggestion to first delineate the 'activity settings' where participants' goal-oriented, context-mediated actions unfold. In this study, the activity settings included the participants' professional activity system and their doctoral activity system. I thus synthesized the participants' descriptions of their workplace contexts and doctoral studies contexts, along with the policy documents collected, to provide a comprehensive delineation of the activity settings for the general phenomenon of in-service university EFL teachers pursuing professional doctorate.

Following the delineation of the activity settings, I mapped the themes generated through thematic analysis onto the constitutive components in activity theory. Specifically, the participants' motives and projected identities were mapped onto 'the subjects' personalized objects', which were encompassed within the collective and designated objects of the two systems. As established in the Theoretical Foundations chapter, while an activity system is oriented towards a collective object shaped by the motives of multiple stakeholders within the activity system, individual subjects may pursue personalized objects when engaging with the activity system. The participants' personalized objects served as the starting point for their

identity negotiations, mediating how they would perceive and navigate tensions in their dual engagements with the two activity systems. This mapping thus foregrounded the analysis of their ongoing identity work, particularly in reconciling their dual roles within the activity systems.

Then, the themes related to the challenges and tensions and the participants' coping strategies were also mapped onto the constitutive components in the interconnected activity systems. For example, one theme related to coping strategies, "using doctoral peers' support to deal with the challenges in doctoral studies", was mapped onto the components of "community" and "mediating tools" in the doctoral activity system. It needs to be noted that the mapping of themes onto the components in activity theory was an iterative process that involved moving between the themes, the original data, and the components in activity theory and sometimes resulted in the revision of themes (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). After all the themes were mapped onto the theoretical framework of activity theory, I was able to produce a more nuanced and systematic description of the participants' mediated actions within their situating contextual and the broader sociocultural milieu. For example, while the thematic analysis generated an array of contextual factors influencing the participants' identity negotiations—such as '*institutional management of in-service teachers' pursuit of advanced degrees*' and '*resources shared by the professional community*' —these factors have now been reconceptualized as '*rules*' and '*mediating tools*' through an activity theoretic lens. This added cohesion and rigor to both the analysis and the communication of findings.

After completing the initial mapping of components within the activity systems, I further examined the interrelationships between different components both within and across the participants' professional activity system and doctoral activity system. This phase of the analysis, enabled by the theoretical construct of *Contradictions* (i.e., conflicts, tensions, or misalignments within or between different components of a single activity system or between

interconnected activity systems) in activity theory, not only led to the identification of the more latent reasons underlying the participants' identity negotiations, but also facilitated the communication of these reasons when presenting the findings. For example, as revealed by the thematic analysis, some participants' difficulty in constructing a researcher identity through doctoral studies was caused by the lack of supervision. Through the analysis of *Contradictions*, this constraint was further explained through the misalignment between the participants' *object* (i.e., smooth progression in doctoral studies) and the doctoral activity system's *division of labor* (i.e., heavy workload assigned to supervisors). Considering that *Contradictions* are not surface conflicts but are historically and socio-culturally formed and accumulated, this identified misalignment may be further attributed to the neoliberal higher education climate wherein universities have been expanding enrolments of self-financed post-graduate students by a large margin to attract fee income (Deng & Feng, 2021), without thorough consideration of the hosting capacity in terms of supervision.

Taken together, an activity systems analysis based on thematic analysis further refined my interpretation of the participants' identity negotiations in their dual engagements across the professional activity system and the doctoral activity system. By drawing upon the constitutive components and their interrelationships within and across activity systems, my interpretation became more systematic on the one hand and more nuanced on the other. Furthermore, by acknowledging and foregrounding the socio-cultural-historical embeddedness in human activity systems, the activity systems analysis also enabled an in-depth interpretation of the more latent factors influencing the participants' identity negotiations. In this sense, activity systems analysis served not only as an analytical tool but also as a critical lens for examining the implicit power structures, sociocultural climate, and historically inherited conventions that have shaped the participants' identity constructions.

4.6 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is proposed as a parallel concept to the concepts of reliability and validity in (post)positivist research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As an important criterion for assessing the integrity and quality of qualitative studies, trustworthiness is tailored to the epistemological and methodological foundations of qualitative studies. It addresses research rigor in ways that respect the complexities of human experiences and the contextual nature of qualitative studies. Several strategies were employed to guarantee the trustworthiness of the present study.

First, trustworthiness was guaranteed through methodological transparency (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021). Methodological transparency is a way to counteract researcher subjectivity and to enhance the rigor of a qualitative study. Following the suggestions of Consoli (2021) as well as Holliday (2015), I documented the trajectories of my methodological journeys through writing memos and research diaries throughout the whole research process. I also archived the raw data and kept records of data collection and data analysis at different stages. Through these endeavors, I left an audit trail to support the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Second, trustworthiness was gained through drawing upon theories and previous literature. As Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) note: “It is by seeing the world through a particular theory that we can distance ourselves from our taken for granted understandings and subject our material to other questions than we would be able to do from an everyday perspective” (p. 21). In the present study, I drew upon an integrated conceptual framework to guide my data collection and data analysis. Investigations through a comprehensive framework helped to increase the rigor of the study. In addition to theories, literature was also used as a counterweight to alleviate my potential personal bias (Greene, 2014). Referring to and

interacting with findings from previous studies enriched the theorizing of the data and enhanced the trustworthiness of the study (Berg, 1998).

Third, trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation in terms of data collection methods. As mentioned in the previous section of Data Collection, multiple sources of data were collected through an array of methods to examine the studied phenomenon. Integrating insights from different sources was likely to ensure a profound and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and lend confidence in the trustworthiness of the findings and conclusions of the study (Charmaz, 2008).

Fourth, trustworthiness was gained through respondent validation. Respondent validation, or member/participant checking, was a commonly used strategy to address researcher bias and subjectivity in qualitative research. As a narrative design was embedded in the present study, respondent validation became especially important as "the trustworthiness of the narrative research lies in the confirmation by the participants of their reported stories of experiences" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 99). Through respondent validation, researchers can better tell and retell, and live and relive the stories of the participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Liu & Xu, 2011). In this study, respondent validation was enacted through "narrative-checking meetings" (Consoli, 2021, p. 13). I shared my interpretations of the findings with my participants and held 'member-check' interviews with them to elicit their feedback on my interpretations. This enabled a thorough validation of the participants' meaning making through creating opportunities for further insights, additional knowledge co-construction, and further clarification.

Fifth, trustworthiness was achieved through peer debriefing with external researchers. During the research process, I discussed frequently with my two supervisors, who guided me through every step of the study from its inception to its design, instrumentation, and data

analysis. My lengthy discussions with my two supervisors, who performed the role of external researchers, helped to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Yin, 2009).

4.7 Ethical considerations

Ethics is a key issue in qualitative research. As Stake (2005) comments, qualitative researchers are guests in the participants' private spaces of the world and should be mindful of their manners and their code of ethics. Cohen et al. (2018) list four major considerations when addressing ethical issues in studies involving human participants, which include informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and the protection of participants from harm. Creswell (2007, 2013) adds 'reciprocity' between researchers and participants as another key ethical consideration in qualitative studies. In the present study, ethical issues were well noted and addressed.

First, before commencing the study, ethical approval was gained from the Human Subjects Ethics Subcommittee of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (No.: HSEARS20230211001). Informed consent was given and signed in writing by all the participants in the study (see Appendix I for a sample of the informed consent form). The informed consent form clearly explained the purpose of the study, the use of data, and the procedures of conducting the study. I also made clear to the participants that participation in the study was purely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time they wanted. I guaranteed that I was the only person who had access to the data, which were stored safely in a password-protected laptop and would be used solely for the purpose of study.

Second, participants' information was strictly protected. The participants, their affiliated institutions, and the doctoral programs they were enrolled in, were all anonymized in the study. All personal identifiers that may lead to the disclosure of the participants' information were shielded or removed in the presentation of the findings. To address the

participants' potential concerns over how they would be represented in the research findings, I adhered to the recent recalls on micro-ethical issues by engaging my participants in the decision-making process regarding their representation in the findings (Wang et al., 2024). Since all the participants preferred minimal disclosure and maximal non-identification, I respected their wishes by using numbers and letters for their pseudonyms (e.g., T1, T2).

Third, I made every effort to ensure that no harm was done to my participants and that minimal disruption and inconvenience were caused. As a former EFL teacher and a current doctoral student, I understood my participants' situations of doing an on-the-job doctorate and tried my best to accommodate their time arrangements during the data collection period. The narrative frames were distributed and collected at my participants' convenience. All interviews were arranged according to my participants' availability. I asked my participants whether they preferred face-to-face interviews or interviews through online video conferencing. All of them chose the online mode. During the interviews, I asked questions and communicated with the participants in a non-intimidating and friendly way. When collecting additional sources of data such as reflective journals and study plans, I followed the participants' intentions and only collected the data they were willing to share.

Fourth, reciprocity is an important ethical principle for high-quality qualitative research (Creswell, 2013), which is mainly concerned with mutual trust, sharing, and help. In the present study, I did not consider my participants as people who merely served my academic interest; instead, I was engaged in a trusted relationship with my participants and tried to reciprocate my participants through mutual help (cf. Ngo, et al., 2014). For example, I spent long hours talking with my participants and gave them emotional support when they felt bombarded by the multiple expectations from their workplace activity system and doctoral studies activity system. As my participants and I were all doctoral students in the fields of language education and applied linguistics, we often shared academic resources, such as research articles and

information about academic seminars and conferences, with one another. I also helped some of my participants to proofread their research article manuscripts. Besides, as narrative inquiry is a human-centered approach that aims to empower the participants (Webster & Mertova, 2007), the findings of study are expected to help the participants develop a comprehensive understanding of their situations and thus empower them to make informed decisions concerning their professional development (Pillow, 2003).

4.8 Researcher positionality

In qualitative research, the researchers themselves serve as the primary research instruments (Boeije, 2010; Cohen et al., 2018) and can exert great influence on the study. As Walford (2001) writes to qualitative researchers, "all research is researching yourself" (p. 98). In studies with a narrative orientation especially, it is difficult for researchers to disengage themselves from the research projects as collecting and interpreting information from the participants is often done "within a larger story of friendship" (Bell, 2002, p. 210). As Josselson (2007) more cogently puts, narrative inquiry is "inherently a relational endeavor. Every aspect of the work is touched by the ethics of the research relationship" (p. 537). Therefore, it is important for researchers to reflect upon their roles and positionalities during the whole research process. Reflexivity is a key tenet in narrative studies (Consoli, 2021). In recent years, narrative researchers have been advocating for "visible research reflexivity" (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021, p. 6), which involves giving more explicit attention to researchers' accounts of and reflections on their own positionalities during the whole research process. In this study, I constantly reflected on my role as a former tertiary EFL teacher, a current doctoral student, and a friend to many of the participants, as well as how these roles may influence the ongoing study.

First, my experience of being a former tertiary EFL teacher in a mainland Chinese university deepened my understanding of the changing institutional climate in the Chinese higher education context and the professional quandaries facing many tertiary EFL teachers.

This insider position provided me with many insights that may be unavailable to outsider researchers. As Bridges (2001, p. 371) aptly captures: “Nothing about us without us”. Insider position is often considered as an advantage in qualitative research. At the same time, I was also aware of the potential drawback of my insider position, that is, being an insider may lead to a lack of objectivity or taking things for granted. To address this potential drawback, I constantly jumped out of my insider position, stepped back to adopt an outsider identity, and tried to “negotiate a complex set of insider-outsider identifications” (Griffiths, 1998, p.138). For example, while my insider positionalities enabled me to empathize with the participants, I also discussed my ongoing perceptions of the data with my doctoral peers who came from a variety of backgrounds. Such discussions provided me with outsider perspectives and reminded me to revisit the data with an open mind. As mentioned in the previous section of Trustworthiness, I also consulted my two supervisors during data analysis and interpretation. As outsiders to mainland China’s tertiary EFL professional context, my supervisors helped me to “make the familiar strange” (Bridges, 2001, p. 374). Through their questioning and reminders, I was able to revisit the taken-for-granted experiences of my participants and reflect on my subjectivity in data analysis and interpretation.

Second, as a full-time doctoral student in Applied Linguistics, I had similar research interests with many of the participants, who were doing their professional doctorate in Education or Applied Linguistics. It was thus easier for me to build rapport and develop collaborative relationships with my participants. This facilitated my negotiation and co-construction of meaning with the participants during the interviews as well as in our informal communications (Schwandt et al., 2007). In addition, compared with studies conducted by program leaders or course instructors of professional development programs (e.g., Gholami et al., 2021; Lee, 2013; Trent, 2020), reactivity effect in the present study was greatly reduced (Maxwell, 2013), due to my nonintimidating role as a peer doctoral student. This peer

positionality that I took during the research process enabled my participants to share their experiences and perceptions with me in a natural and spontaneous way with less concerns.

Third, since I sampled key participants through my personal networks, I was familiar with them before the study began. My positionality as a friend facilitated the building of rapport with these key participants (Sarangi & Candlin, 2003), which enriched the data collected, increased the dependability of data, and deepened the interpretation of data (Polkinghorne, 1988; Tillman-Healy, 2003). At the same time, I was also aware of the potential ethical issues brought about by my positionality as a friend. Thus, I constantly reminded myself during the whole research process that I had to strike a balance between my role as a friend and my role as a researcher. While trying my best to be supportive and helpful to my participants, I also ensured that I maintained a professional boundary between myself and my participants and that I did not exploit our personal relationships for research purposes.

Chapter 5 Pursuing a professional doctorate: Activity settings, motives, and projected identities

This chapter addresses the first research question, which is concerned with Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' motives and projected identities in pursuing a professional doctorate during their mid-career, situated at the intersection of their professional workplace environments and doctoral studies contexts. To contextualize their motives and projected identities, the chapter begins by providing synthesized descriptions of the participants' institutional contexts and the professional doctoral studies contexts, which corresponds to the delineation of 'activity settings' in activity system analysis (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). It then reports the participants' motives and projected identities, analyzing how these motives and projected identities intersect with the systemic objects and structures of the dual systems they inhabit. The findings in this chapter set the scene for the subsequent chapters, which explore the participants' identity negotiations in their dual engagement with their professional activity systems and doctoral studies activity systems.

5.1 The participants' professional activity settings

This section presents a synthesis of the participants' institutional settings and dissects the institutional contexts through activity systems analysis. In the participants' professional activity systems, the participants were the subjects who were expected to contribute to the overarching object of higher education institution in general, including "educating the future workforce" (i.e., teaching) and "generating knowledge" (i.e., research) (Shams, 2019, p. 621). In the process of attaining this object, they had to navigate the contextual particularities in their situated professional activity systems, as captured by rules, community, division of labor, and instruments. Rules were the norms and regulations at their institutions, which could be explicitly stated in policy documents or implied in the routinized practices and institutional

microcultures. Rules regulated the professional conducts and practices of participants. Community consists of multiple stakeholders and networks that could shape the participants' professional lives, including their students, the administrative leaders at the departmental and institutional levels, and their colleagues. Division of labor included the horizontal division of professional tasks and the vertical division of power. As EFL teachers, the participants were assigned with various professional tasks, such as teaching, research, and other professional service delegated by the leaders. Their professional work arrangements were often characterized by a horizontal distribution of power, where power dynamics shaped both who had the authority to allocate work and how work was assigned. Instruments included the material, social, or symbolic resources that could be leveraged by participants in fulfilling their professional work and achieving their career goals. In what follows, I mapped the prominent contextual realities of the participants' professional activity systems onto the components of activity theory.

5.1.1 Institutional objects: Survival, thriving, and the making of "Hexagon Warrior"

Although affiliated with universities across tiers, ranging from national key university to private college, the participants reported some striking similarities in their professional activity systems. Despite the difference in institutional type and prestige, the overarching object of educating students and generating knowledge within higher education was translated into heightened performance expectations for teachers, serving the institutional agendas of survival and thriving in the competitive higher education market. The heightened institutional expectations manifested not only in teaching and research, but also in mounting institutional service work. As mid-career teachers, nearly all the participants lamented over the increased

workloads in recent years, which forced them to become "Hexagon Warrior [六边形战士][8]" (T5-NFs). Aspiring to achieve the object of surviving and gaining advantages in the competitive higher education landscape, institutions shifted the responsibilities and burdens to teachers, as reflected in division of labor and rules. Meanwhile, limited institutional support was provided to scaffold teachers in meeting the heightened expectations, which could be seen from the community and the instruments in the participants' professional activity systems.

5.1.2 Division of labor: Systemic overburdening

In terms of the division of labor, in addition to their already overloaded teaching hours, which generally required a minimum of 7.5 hours per week and could mount up to 12 hours per week, the participants were now faced with mounting service work and demanding requirements for research productivity. While service work used to account for a small portion of academic staff's workload in the past, it has witnessed a rise over the years. The extra service work mainly included tutoring the students in their extra-curricular activities, serving as class advisors, and facilitating administrative tasks. For example, T7 mentioned tutoring students in the entrepreneurship and innovation competitions, which involved providing not only intellectual guidance but also logistics support. This made her feel like "a private tutor and nanny" (T7-Interview). T11 recounted how she was required to accompany students to the countryside and help them develop a deeper understanding of rural life, which "was totally out of [her] expertise as a language teacher and consumed significant time and energy in organizing the activities" (T11-Interview). The allocation of tasks also reflected a vertical division of power, where teachers with senior professional titles (such as full professors) and those in

[8] Hexagon Warrior [六边形战士] is a popular internet slang that originated form a six-dimensional radar chart used by Japanese media to analyze the strengths of table tennis players. The six dimensions include power, speed, technique, serve, defense, and experience. The Japanese media use this phrase to describe the renowned Chinese table tennis player, Ma Long, who has established himself as a well-rounded and formidable athlete. The phrase has now become popular in describing someone who is well-rounded and highly capable in multiple aspects.

administrative leadership positions (such as deans) were often exempted from doing trivial and undervalued chores. For example, as T8 mentioned, “Only assistant lecturers and lecturers are expected to perform as class advisors while professors focus on the more important work of research” (T8-Interview). T1 gave a more straightforward remark, “The powerful and the capable have the capital to choose and negotiate. Lower-rank teachers are compelled to say yes to the chores. This division of labor is a hidden rule” (T1-Informal Communication).

More demandingly, as traditionally teaching-focused language teachers, they were now expected to produce quantifiable research outputs on a yearly basis. T4, who worked in a national key university, explained the changing division of labor for EFL teachers at his institution:

> When I first joined the university, EFL teachers were not expected to contribute significantly to the university’s research metrics. I still vividly remember an informal comment by the director of the personnel department back then, who said that ‘EFL teachers’ major responsibility is to teach students well, while the university has recruited disciplinary academics to contribute to the university’s research profile’. While it’s true that EFL teachers who were research-active might get smoother promotions, those who chose not to engage in research were not faced with negative consequences and could still achieve career advancement through teaching pathway. However, in recent years, EFL teachers, or the entire EFL teaching department, have been assigned research tasks. Every year or every assessment cycle, the department head has to negotiate the volume of research outputs for the whole department with the personnel department and the research administration department, and then delegate these tasks to teachers. Doing research is not a personal interest now but a formally assigned professional task. (T4-Interview)

While key universities are generally more proactive in building research prestige, the research-oriented institutional culture has permeated universities across all tiers (Li & Horta, 2024). All participants emphasized that conducting research and producing solid research

outputs had become an established professional duty for EFL teachers. T8, who was affiliated with a teaching-oriented private college, explained the rationale behind the institutional push for teachers' visible research outputs, which was closely tied to the survival of private colleges in the competitive higher education market.

> In today's competitive higher education market, where the number of universities is rising while the number of students is decreasing, not all private colleges can survive. It's not like ten years ago when the pool of students was large and private colleges did not worry much about getting enough students. My institution is eager to enhance its reputation to survive in the increasingly stringent national audits and assessments. Research outputs and staff qualifications are among the most important indicators in these evaluation exercises. Every faculty member is expected to contribute to the research metrics. The department head constantly warns us during meetings that we need to 'work really hard' and 'transition into research-active staff' if we want to 'secure our rice bowl'. (T8-Interview)

5.1.3 Rules: Quantified governance and research prioritization

To fortify the division of labor, the institutions established a series of rules regarding academic staff management, as manifested in accountability frameworks, merit-based pay and incentive schemes, staff appraisal polices, and professional title promotion policies. These high-stakes rules, which played a key role in determining academic staff's career prospects, were characterized by quantitative management and excessive research targets. First, teachers were evaluated through quantifiable criteria and metrics, such as the number of publications produced every year, the hours of teaching, and the amount of money acquired through securing research projects. As T1 commented, "The polices reduce the academic work into a series of numbers" (T1-NFs). The 'point accumulation system', characterized by rigid and cold calculation, began to gain popularity in universities, turning university teachers into 'managed professionals' (Rhoades, 1998) striving to meet the institutional criteria. Failure to earn enough 'performance points' could lead to repercussions such as salary deductions and even demotion.

For example, T3 mentioned a ‘five-point’ minimum for fulfilling the yearly research requirements. According to him, “While teachers can fulfill their performance indicators through either teaching or research, they must earn a minimum of five points for research, which translates into one publication. Those who can’t meet this five-point requirement will be fined 5000 RMB” (T3-NFs). Relatedly, T7 elaborated on the ‘points’ she had to earn every year to secure her lecturer position.

> For lecturers, we need to accumulate 105 points for teaching and research every year, plus an additional 50 points for administrative and service work. This translates into around 600 class periods (approximately 450 hours) and two publications every academic year. On top of that, the 50 points of service work has to be earned through helping with teaching secretarial work, serving as class tutors or coaching the students in their extra-curricular activities. If teachers fail to accumulate the required points for three consecutive years, their positions will be precarious. There has been hearsay that the university is setting demotion policies for teachers who fail to accumulate the required performance points. (T7-Interview)

Second, excessive research targets, often beyond the reach of traditionally teaching-focused EFL teachers, had been officially included and specified in policy documents regarding academic staff appraisal and professional title promotion. For example, T11, who chose the ‘teaching track professoriate pathway’ at her institution, recounted the difficulties in fulfilling the research requirements for the promotion to ‘teaching associate professor’. According to her:

> Although the research requirements for promoting to ‘teaching track associate professor’ are less demanding than those for ‘teaching-research track associate professor’, they are still challenging to fulfil. In addition to proving my teaching excellence through certified teaching awards and credentials, I need to publish at least two research articles in SSCI-indexed journals, at least one pedagogical research article in ordinary journals, and host at least two teaching-research projects funded by the provincial government. I’ve been a lecturer for ten years and have won two national teaching awards, which is solid proof for my teaching excellence. However, I’m far away from meeting

> the entry threshold for applying for associate professorship, as I have no SSCI papers, not even one. (T11-Interview)

The participants accounts of the heightened and sometimes unrealistic research requirements were corroborated by the official policy documents they shared, including those related to performance-based pay and professional title promotion. For example, T8 shared a document outlining the entry requirements for applying for an 'associate professorship' at her institution, a teaching-oriented private college. In this document, the requirements for teaching are conventional and relatively easy to fulfil, including completing a certain number of teaching hours, having no teaching accidents, and ensuring that teaching evaluation scores are not ranked in the lowest ten percent. However, the research requirements are much more demanding and somewhat unrealistic, which, according to T8, "opt out the majority of potential candidates" (T8-Informal Communication). The research requirements listed in the document included:

> 1) The candidate should have either led one municipal-level project as the principle investigator or participated in one provincial-level (or above) project as a major co-investigator (ranked in the top three on the contributor list). Alternatively, the candidate should have led one horizontal project (i.e., a project funded by enterprises, industry associations, or other non-government entities) as the principle investigator, with funding exceeding 500,000 RMB for natural sciences disciplines and exceeding100,000 RMB for humanities and social sciences disciplines. 2) The candidate should have published six papers, including at least two high-level publications in core journals such as journals indexed in SCI, EI, SSCI, or CSSCI. (T8-Artefact-Policy Document)

T9, who gained an associate professorship during his doctoral studies, felt fortunate about his promotion, as the benchmark for research in the latest promotion documents had been raised. According to him, "The latest review rules for associate professor positions have excluded publications in ordinary journals and increased the required publications in SSCI or

CSSCI journals from two to three, making promotions more difficult" (T9-Informal Communication). Similar comments were also made by T6, who lamented the increasingly stringent research requirements for promotion, which ignited "involution [内卷][9]" (T6-NFs).

It is also noteworthy that while some institutions allowed teachers to substitute teaching achievements for research achievements to meet promotion requirements, encouraged by the recent national mandate of *Powuwei* [破五唯][10], they still favored candidates with a strong research profile over those whose major strengthen lay in teaching. For example, as T10 remarked:

> The professional title promotion document at my institution states that if teachers win a first prize in provincial-level teaching contests, they can use this achievement to equate to leading a provincial-level research project. However, in reality, the review committee still tends to favor the application of a teacher who has led research projects over one with teaching awards, if both enter the final round of evaluation. Teaching-excellent teachers, even if they make it to the pool of candidates, often end up as bridesmaids rather than brides. (T10-Interview)

Relating to T10's observation, T1 shared his personal experience of failing to get a professional title promotion due to such implicit rules of the game. Through this disheartening experience, he developed an in-depth understanding of the institution's hidden preference for teachers with strong research credentials and abilities in staff promotions, despite the official support for teachers' pluralistic development pathways explicitly stated in national and institutional policy documents.

[9] Involution [内卷] is a term that has gained popularity in recent years, particularly in the context of Chinese society and academia. It refers to the phenomenon of intense competition and overwork, where increasing efforts yields diminishing return.

[10] *Powuwei* [破五唯], sometimes translated int 'Breaking the Five', is a policy promulgated by the Ministry of Education in 2018. The Five refers to ranks, awards, diplomas, papers, and titles. The policy aims to break the pragmatic and quantitative orientation in staff appraisal and bring about process-oriented qualitative evaluation in higher education.

> I've met all the requirements for promotion to associate professor at my institution. I've worked hard over the years to accumulate several publications. Although I don't have a high-level research project, I have a provincial-level teaching award and have coached a student to win a national award, which can substitute for the requirement for research projects according to the policy documents. But I failed in the promotion evaluation in two consecutive years. Both times, they picked younger candidates with less teaching experience and no teaching awards, but with doctoral degrees from famous universities and high-level research projects. This experience has been very unpleasant for me. If they don't give consideration to teaching-focused teachers, they shouldn't have set up the related rules. When I inquired about the reasons for my 'failure', they replied in a perfunctory way, saying that the decision was based on 'comprehensive consideration' without mentioning the actual preference for research outputs. This is unfair and lacks transparency. (T1-Informal Communication)

5.1.4 Instruments and community: Limited support behind the push

While the institutional division of labor and rules aimed to push the participants to fulfill heightened performance expectations, especially in terms of research, limited support was provided at the departmental and institutional levels. This disconnect reflects systemic shortcomings in instruments (e.g., lack of resources, training, funding, etc.) and community (e.g., lack of research leaders and networks, etc.).

First, echoing previous literature on the research ecological environment of university EFL teachers (Meng & Chen, 2022), nearly all participants pointed out the lack of research mentorship and collaboration cultures in their situated institutional contexts, except for T12, who mentioned participation in a "professional learning community led by an established professor and initiated at the institution level" (T12-Interview). For the rest of the participants, although there were some research lectures, seminars, and workshops that were often part of routine professional training for university faculty, structured and regular mentorship mechanisms were scarce. This scarcity was mainly due to the composition of the EFL

community at the institutional level, where research leaders were often lacking due to the traditional teaching-oriented positioning of EFL departments (Wang, 2018), especially in non-elite universities. As T2 explained, “It’s difficult to find a research mentor in the department to guide you through the research and publication process” (T2-Interview). Similarly, T6 mentioned “feeling completely in the dark when suddenly required to do research”, as “there is no mentor to turn to in the department” (T6-NFs). T10 remarked that “despite the emphasis on research in recent years, many late-career and mid-career teachers are still not actively involved in research, making it difficult to seek mentorship and collaboration opportunities” (T10-Interview). Even in more well-resourced universities, structured mentorship facilitated by the institution was still difficult to achieve. T4, who was affiliated with a national key university, explained:

> There are some established professors in my department, but you need to rely on personal networking to get mentorship or be recruited into their research teams. The department or institutional leaders generally won’t facilitate this connection. It seems they care more about getting publications from teachers, rather than who publishes. They don’t feel obliged to foster research communities and collaboration networks for teachers. (T4-Informal Communication)

Second, critical resources (i.e., instruments) to facilitate teachers’ researcher identity development were lacking at the institutional level. Although teacher training programs, typically in the form of lectures, seminars, and short-term workshops, were provided, they often did not specifically target EFL teachers on the one hand and may not have a long-term impact on teachers on the other. For example, T6 mentioned attending a research competence enhancement workshop intended for all faculty staff at her institution. Despite providing an overall understanding, she considered the workshop “too broad and not quite effective for EFL teachers” (T6-Interview). Relatedly, T7 shared her perception of short-term training programs, “I always feel excited and motivated after hearing a lecture from a renowned researcher, but

the feeling never lasts. Despite the initial boost, there's no hands-on guidance or tailored feedback" (T7-Interview). This is understandable, considering that socialization into the research community and the development of a researcher identity rely much more on dialogic interactions and tailored feedback (Bao et al., 2024; Carless et al., 2023).

While institutions had limited resources and support to offer at the intra-institutional level, support for participants to reach beyond their institutional contexts and seek structured research mentorship through doctoral education was also scarce. Specifically, institutions often drew upon the strategy of creating anxiety to push non-doctoral teachers to advance their academic qualifications but provided limited funding opportunities and study leaves. A doctoral degree was framed by the institution as something "non-doctoral teachers owe to their academic profession" (T8-Interview), and pursuing the doctorate was regarded as "teachers' personal matter" (T9-Interview), or even more disparagingly, as "teachers' efforts to mend their own deficits" (T9-NFs). Except for T5, T6, T11, and T12, who were provided with a one-year paid sabbatical upon signing a contract promising five to eight years of service to their institutions after graduation, the rest of the participants had to rely on themselves for time coordination and tuition fees in their doctoral studies. T8 recounted the sharp contrast between the institutional push for teachers' academic agree enhancement and the insufficient institutional support for teachers' in-service degree studies.

> Every semester, the dean would release a teacher ranking based on their academic rank, academic qualification, and performance. The ranking list is sent to the WeChat work group and sometimes even shown publicly on big screens during staff meetings. With no doctoral degree and few research outputs, I used to find my name ranked at the lower end. By these public ranking exercises, I think the dean is trying to persuade us to pursue doctoral degrees. I know the university is about to undergo another round of national evaluation and is eager to enhance staff qualification metrics. However, when I successfully enrolled in a doctoral program, my teaching load was not

> reduced, and I had to pay for my own tuition fees. This is also true for my colleagues who are pursuing their doctorates. (T8-Interview)

T7 gave a more poignant remark, "The institution doesn't need to pay anything. The only thing leaders do is intimidate teachers about their job security. I never expect them to cut my teaching load, as long as they don't increase it" (T7-Informal Communication). It is interesting to note that while T3 and T4 came from different types of institutions—T3 from a private college and T4 from a national key university—they mentioned a similar ambivalent attitude of their institutions towards teachers' pursuit of further doctoral education, albeit for different reasons. According to T3, the rationale behind this ambivalent attitude was twofold, which was grounded in the institution's instrumentalist mentality.

> For one thing, although my institution hopes to see more teachers become doctors, the leaders are concerned that if teachers receive support to pursue higher degrees, they may resign after graduation and find jobs at better public universities. This will cause losses to the institution. For another thing, compared with supporting existing teachers to pursue their doctorates, a quicker way to enhance the institutional metrics is to recruit freshly graduate doctoral students. With these considerations, they always approve in-service teachers' pursuit of doctorates but without providing any practical support. I have to assume the full workload during my doctoral studies. (T3-Interview)

At T4's institution, the reason for the lack of support for teachers' further doctoral studies stemmed from the already highly qualified faculty on an institutional scale. As a national key university, the faculty composition of the university and the EFL department has already surpassed that of many non-elite universities. Due to its prestige, the university did not have to worry about attracting enough outstanding doctoral graduates and established scholars to join the faculty. As T4 explained:

> Non-doctoral teachers are now in the minority. For faculty staff in other disciplines, the university began requiring doctoral degrees several decades ago. Even in the EFL teaching department, I joined the department in 2014 and I was the last batch of teachers hired without a doctoral degree. Every

> year, the department recruits new doctoral graduates and established professors. With more doctoral degree holders joining, late-career non-doctoral teachers retiring, and mid-career teachers completing their doctorates, the staff qualification landscape is improving. For us non-doctoral teachers, gaining a doctorate feels like having to make up for missed lessons. We can't expect the institution to provide any funding or sabbaticals. (T4-Interview)

5.2 The participants' doctoral activity settings

This section introduces the participants' doctoral activity systems, mapping the landscape of the participants' doctoral contexts onto activity system components. While the participants were drawn from two types of professional doctoral programs (PD programs)—Professional Doctorate in Education and Professional Doctorate in Applied Linguistics—offered across four institutions, these PD programs shared some key similarities in terms of program structure, study mode, supervisory models, and completion requirements. In the participants' doctoral activity systems, the participants were the subjects who were expected to complete the doctoral studies and develop a *researching professional* identity, which is the intended purpose statement of PD programs (Burnard et al., 2018). In the process of attaining this object, they had to navigate the rules, community, division of labor, and instruments in their situated doctoral activity systems. Rules included the formal and informal norms, regulations, and guidelines governing how the participants should engage with their doctoral studies. Community consisted of multiple stakeholders and networks that could directly or indirectly influence the participants' doctoral learning trajectories, progress, and outcomes. Major stakeholders and networks included the participants' doctoral supervisors, course instructors, disciplinary scholars both within and beyond the doctoral programs, and doctoral peers, among others. Division of labor included the horizontal division of labor between multiple stakeholders and the vertical division of power. To be awarded the degree, the participants' major responsibilities included completing the coursework, completing a capstone

thesis, passing the oral examination on the thesis, and attending other academic activities as required by the programs. While they had a certain degree of autonomy over their studies, they were supervised by the program leaders and managing teams, their doctoral supervisors, departmental/institutional academic review boards, and external examiners, reflecting the hierarchical power structures in doctoral education. Instruments included the material, social, or symbolic resources that were rendered by the doctoral activity systems and could be leveraged by the participants in completing their degree and achieving their personalized goals of doing a doctorate. In what follows, I mapped the contextual features of the participants' doctoral activity systems onto the components of activity theory.

5.2.1 The objects of PD programs: The rhetoric of the practice-research nexus

All the four PD programs the participants enrolled highlighted a practice-research nexus in their mission statements shown in the program prospectuses. Recurring keywords highlighted in the program brochures and promotional webpages included "educational professionals", "educational leaders", "language specialists", "agents in transforming education", "advanced understanding of the inextricable link between theory and practice", "commitment to practice", "synergy of theory with practice", "concurrent development of academic ability and professional expertise", and "research-based and practice-oriented program design", among others. For example, in the mission statement of the program offered by University B (UB), it is stated that the program "aims to equip practitioners with skills to translate research findings into actionable solutions, driving meaningful change" (UB-Artefact-Prospectus). The program overview at University A (UA) claimed that "the program is an exciting opportunity for experienced professionals to develop the critical knowledge and skills necessary to undertake their own research and thereby improve their practices and their workplace contexts, and seeks to explore the connections between policy, research, and

professional knowledge and practice" (UA-Artefact-Prospectus). The program director's messages at University D (UD) highlighted that the program "aims to use both theoretical and practical knowledge to equip passionate educational leaders and experienced teachers with new tools to create long-lasting, positive change in their organizations or communities" (UD-Artefact-Prospectus). University C (UC) promoted its program as helping candidates "integrate research skills with reflective practice in coping with the demands and development of their careers" (UC-Artefact-Prospectus). In tandem with these statements, all the four programs required prospective candidates to have work experience before applying, ranging from at least two years to at least five years, reinforcing the distinctiveness of the PD programs in terms of the practice element.

Overall, the program introductions, mission statements, anticipated outcomes, and entry requirements all reflected an alignment with the overarching objects of PD programs in general, focusing on integrating scholarly research with practical application, bridging academic inquiry and professional praxis, and generating impact on the broader professional and social communities (e.g., Boud et al., 2021; Burnard et al., 2018). Despite this rhetoric, the realization of the proclaimed practice-research nexus hinged upon the complex interplay of multiple personal and contextual factors, including the subjects' personalized motives within the overarching objects of the programs, their navigation of their doctoral studies and ongoing negotiations of their goals, and the contextual affordances and constraints in the dual activity systems they engage with. The contextual realities in their doctoral activity systems can be captured by the division of labor, the rules, the community, and the instruments.

5.2.2 Division of labor: Research-focused academic tasks

Despite the explicit emphasis on integrating practice into the PD programs, participants uniformly characterized their assigned tasks as research-focused. In other words, research-

related tasks were their primary labor within their doctoral activity systems, with the practice-research nexus somewhat side-lined. All participants reported a similar list of assigned tasks for fulfilling the degree requirements, including completing coursework related to disciplinary theoretical knowledge and research competence, passing a thesis proposal exam upon the completion of coursework, and finishing a capstone thesis project. The participants' accounts were corroborated by the official descriptions of the programs' structures. For example, according to the webpage of the program at UD, prospective candidates' tasks for completing the degree included a series of modules in educational literature, research theories, research methodology, and a research thesis (UD-Artefact-Webpage). Similarly, but in more refined manner, the program at UC required the prospective candidates to undertake core courses in research methodology and research trends, while offering a more diversified selection of elective courses in different interested areas, along with a research thesis after completing the course (UC-Artefact-Webpage).

While the program designs reflected a systematic scaffolding of candidates' research competence, the practice element in PD programs were somewhat missing, which echoed previous observations on the homogeneity between PD programs and traditional PhD programs (e.g., Neumann, 2005; Rip, 2000; Thorne & Francis, 2001). All participants noted that course modules were shared with PhD students. They commented that the primary difference between PD programs and PhD programs, in terms of assigned courses, is that PD students are generally assigned more courses, while PhD students take fewer courses, with both groups choosing from the same pool of courses. For example, T6 explained, "PhD students and PD students take courses together. The courses primarily focus on research methods or discipline knowledge and theories" (T6-Interview). T5 further remarked, "There are no tailor-made courses for PhD students and PD students. The courses are the same. The only difference is that we have to take more courses than the PhD students" (T5-Interview). These accounts revealed that the practice-

research nexus, which distinguishes PD programs from PhD programs, was not reflected in the course content. When asked about the thesis project, none of the participants mentioned specific emphasis on integrating a practice element into their thesis. As T5 explained, "Of course you could do something related to your teaching practice, but it's not required" (T5-Interview). T9 shared his understanding of the PD thesis after consulting his supervisor. Based on his explanation, while a practice-oriented research thesis is proposed as a highlight of the program, it is neither required nor assessed.

> My supervisor said I could do anything for my thesis project. The thesis does not have to be related to my professional practice. As long as the thesis is rigorous, well-designed, well-written, and complies with academic standards, you will pass with flying colors. Neither internal nor external examiners will pose challenging questions regarding whether your thesis will generate impact on your professional practice and your professional contexts. (T9-Informal Communication)

Similar to T9's account, T1 shared his supervisor's comment on the comparison between PD thesis and PhD thesis. As he recalled, "My supervisor said it's the same, except for the length. Examiners would judge your thesis based on established rubrics for research theses, and would not care much about whether it is related to your professional practice" (T1-Interview). Aligning with the participants' narratives, a tricky aspect identified from the webpages and handbooks of the programs is that while the practice-research nexus was promoted in the programs' mission statements, it is not often explicitly required as part of the candidates' work in their theses. Except for the program at UA, which asked for a thesis "focusing on the candidates' own context and/or practice" on its webpage (UA-Artefact-Webpage), the other programs were vague in specifying the requirements for integrating workplace concerns with PD theses.

5.2.3 Rules: Scaffolded pathways towards research competence—rigidity within flexibility

A distinctive feature of the PD programs was the facilitation of a structured, scaffolded induction focused on developing candidates' procedural academic literacy development within a flexible study mode, which can be seen from the guidelines and specification requirements listed in PD students' handbooks and program requirement documents. Echoing the broad literature on PD program structure (e.g., Adams, 2019), a systematic curriculum in the early years of doctoral studies was identified across all the programs in which the participants enrolled in. Despite slight variations, all four programs emphasized a focus on coursework, which typically comprised about half of the entire doctoral studies workload, with the thesis accounting for the other half. For example, as required by the program at UC, coursework and thesis each account for half of the credits required for the degree award, and program candidates must complete eight subjects of coursework before moving on to the thesis section (UC-Artefact-Program Requirement Document). Similarly, according to the study flow chart provided by the program at UB, candidates need to complete "three core courses, two specialized courses, two elective courses, and seminar series for thesis writing" before moving on to their thesis proposals (UB-Artefact-Student Handbook). Candidates studying in the program at UA need to complete four course modules and attend a summer school for intensive research training before proceeding to research proposal (UA-Artefact-Program Requirement Document). Although the program at UD assigns more credits to research thesis compared to coursework, candidates are expected to spend two to three years on coursework studies prior to their thesis projects (UD-Artefact-Webpage). The flexibility of these programs lies in their endorsement and support for a part-time study mode, with courses held on weekends, weekday evenings, and occasionally during long holidays such as summer schools. At UD, some courses even adopt an "online-onsite blended teaching and learning" mode to better meet the needs of the candidates (UD-Artefact-Webpage). The programs also allow extended periods for

completing the degree, typically setting a maximum study duration of eight years. At UA, this maximum duration can even be extended to twelve years for justifiable reasons (UA-Artefact-Student Handbook).

The incorporation of an extensive taught section of coursework and the flexibility in study duration were intended to scaffold the candidates to gradually develop their research knowledge and skills and give them more time to develop a researcher identity. According to T6, "The program wants to ensure we progress step by step towards competence in research. That's why it includes many courses and takes a longer time" (T6-Interview). Similarly, T2 compared the coursework load of PD students with that of PhD students and commented:

> PhD students only need one-third of credits for coursework compared to us. They join the PhD program with a research proposal and begin working on it under the guidance of their supervisors from the start of their studies. In contrast, we don't have a supervisor in the first two years and are required to learn a variety of subjects before finding a supervisor to discuss our potential interests for the thesis project. I guess the rationale is that the institution wants us to be better scaffolded before proceeding to the research section of the program. (T2-Informal Communication).

While the extensive coursework aimed at developing participants' research literacy and theoretical knowledge across a broader range was appreciated by some, others showed disfavor towards this rigid structure, particularly towards the rule of finding supervisors only after completing the coursework. For those who appreciated the program structure, they considered the extensive coursework within the first one to three years facilitative in helping them develop a general understanding of the field and identify an area of research interest. For example, as T7 commented, "For all these years, I've primarily focused on teaching foundation English courses. I find the courses helpful for updating my research knowledge" (T7-Interview). T11, who considered herself as a "a blank sheet of paper in terms of research" (T11-NFs), expressed her agreement with the rules concerning extensive coursework.

> Coursework is very necessary for me. The various courses offered by the program have filled me in with the basic theoretical knowledge and broadened my perspective. Before taking these courses, I often felt lost when I read the literature. Now, I can grasp a general understanding of the research articles I read. (T11-NFs)

Similar comments were also made by T1, T4, and T8, all of whom mentioned "the preparatory role of coursework for doctoral thesis research" (T4-Interview). T8 explained in greater detail, "The coursework helped me establish a groundwork. Through the 'wine-tasting' of various research areas, I made a better choice about my research topic for the thesis" (T8-Interview). It is also noteworthy that these courses were considered particularly essential for participants who did not come from an education or applied linguistics background before becoming EFL teachers, which is a common phenomenon in Chinese tertiary-level EFL education (cf. Bao & Feng, 2023; Xia, 2012). For example, T12, who studied American literature for both her BA and MA studies, commented on the benefits of a systematic curriculum.

> The extensive courses in the first two years were very useful for me. They filled my significant knowledge gaps in the field of education and applied linguistics. The paradigm, the methodology, and theories are all very different from my original disciplinary background. (T12-Interview)

Unlike proponents of the fixed coursework sections, opponents typically had a clearer direction for their thesis project upon enrolment, with some having already conducted preliminary research in their interested areas before the doctorate. Consequently, despite the advantage of broadening their perspectives, they considered that taking too many courses unrelated to their areas of interest could become "a distraction for their doctoral progress" (T10-Informal Communication). Instead of having "buffet-style" (Smagorinsky et al., 2003, p. 1413) courses that resulted in superficial knowledge in many areas, these participants preferred scaffolded in-depth investigations into their potential research areas. This was especially true

for those eager to start their research journeys with one-on-one supervisory guidance and produce visible research outcomes. T5 expressed discontent with the rigid rules requiring them to take unified courses aimed at a big audience of students, rather than individualized 'guided study courses' that only PhD students were allowed to take.

> I once asked the program administrator whether I could replace one or two subject courses with 'guided study courses', because I had seen PhD students doing them. They conduct research and write an article based on the research, usually guided by their supervisors, which equals a subject course in terms of credit. The administrator declined my request, saying that the program rules were already established. He asked me to draft my requests and put them in the suggestion box for future reference. I wish I could take a 'guided study' course and learn how to conduct research and write research articles through hands-on experience and supervisory guidance. However, in reality, PhD students are writing and publishing research articles while PD students are busy dealing with course assignments. (T5-Informal Communication)

In relation to T5's eagerness for supervised 'guided studies', the aspiration for one-on-one supervisory guidance at the earlier stage of doctoral studies was also expressed by T1, T2, T4, T6, T7, T10, and T11. While some of them were proponents of the systematic coursework section, all expressed dissatisfaction with the rules concerning supervisor allocation only after completing coursework. As T1 commented, "It feels reassuring to have a supervisor once you begin the doctoral journey. While I was lucky to finish my courses within one year and get a supervisor at the start of year two, I was constantly bothered by a sense of unrest and uncertainty during year one" (T1-Interview). Similarly, T7 explained the disadvantage of not having a supervisor during the two-year coursework phase, "Although we can ask questions to course instructors, who are generally very kind and responsive, without a supervisor at the beginning of the doctorate, no one provides an overall plan for your research studies" (T7-Interview). T10 shared a demotivating incident that happened during her first year of doctoral studies, where she lamented the disadvantages of not having a supervisor.

> During the first year of my doctoral studies, I attended a research student conference held by the institution. I was still in the coursework phase and had not been assigned a supervisor yet. However, my PhD friends who enrolled in the same year as me all had their supervisors and even supervising teams. During the conference, when we presented our research, their supervisors all came to support them. When I presented, no one was there except for some students. There was one course instructor who was my PhD friend's supervisor and knew me from his course. He sat for my friend's presentation, and I thought he would stay for mine since I was next. But he left after my friend's presentation. Since then, I have always felt that the rules were unfair. How come PhD students can have supervisors or even supervising teams at the start of their studies, but I can't? (T10-Informal Communication)

The rigid and constraining rules regarding supervisor allocation were also found to impede the potential practice-research nexus, as candidates with initial interests in practice-oriented research may waver in their choice due to the uncertainty of obtaining a supervisor with matched expertise. As T2 recounted:

> I wanted to conduct classroom-based research for my thesis project at the start of the program, but I wasn't sure if I could get a matched supervisor during my two-year coursework. Also, without a supervisor in the first two years, I had no one to talk to about the feasibility of my initial research ideas. So, I was indecisive and moved between various potential research topics, without delving into pedagogical research. (T2-Informal Communication)

5.2.4 Instruments and Community: Explicit affordances and implicit constraints

Through their enrolment in the PD programs, all participants reported gaining access to research resources and networks that extended beyond what was available in their original professional work contexts. Specifically, the doctoral activity systems provided them with some crucial instruments for developing research competence and building researcher identities. Frequently mentioned instruments by participants included "data analysis skills and tools" (T1-NFs, T11-NFs), "disciplinary and research methodology courses offered by renowned faculty academics" (T2-NFs, T4-Interview), "academic writing trainings and

support" (T12-Interview), "extensive seminars by leading scholars in the field" (T6-Interview), "comprehensive databases and other library resources" (T9-Interview, T10-Interview, T11-Interview), and "information about academic research conferences and other academic events" (T6-Informal Communication), among others.

In addition to these material instruments, the doctoral activity systems also provided the participants with symbolic and social instruments for navigating the academic career. Receiving a doctoral education signified the reified start of a research journey, which gave the participants 'legitimate peripheral membership' in the academic community (Wenger, 1998). By becoming doctoral students, the 'apprentices' in academia (Green, 2005), participants gained access to various research and disciplinary communities where research networks and collaboration opportunities were more abundant compared to their constraining institutional contexts. Doctoral supervisors were found to be the linchpins of these communities, along with other research networks proffered by the program. For example, T9 mentioned "joining the big family of his supervisor's research team" (T9-Intervew). T8, T11, and T12 expressed a similar "sense of belonging after having found a supervisor" (T8-Interview). T11 further commented, "My supervisor, who is among the most influential world-leading scholar, is the biggest academic resources for me. Although we haven't co-published anything yet, thinking of this possibility in the future is already exciting" (T11-Interview). Apart from supervisors and supervisor-led communities, participants also reported joining formal and informal research groups and research centers. Opportunities to access these networks were both directly integrated into the program structures and indirectly facilitated by networks developed during doctoral studies. For example, the program at UB specified that "each PD student will be assigned to a University/Faculty level research center according to their research interests so that students will be affiliated to the research clusters of the university" (UB-Artefact-Student Handbook). Besides these official research centers, participants voluntarily joined research

groups and associations through the networks they developed within the broader doctoral community. For example, T10 recounted her participation in a research association through a senior doctoral peer, which gave her the opportunity to consult with a prominent figure in her field.

> I have a senior doctoral peer, who introduced me into a research association in my areas of research interest. The association holds a series of academic events every year. There was one time the association invited a leading scholar, Professor D, whom I cited frequently in my research proposal. After a regular seminar, the association arranged an individual consultation session, where you could make an appointment with Professor D and talk to him in person. During the consultation session, I told Professor D my initial research ideas, and he gave me many constructive comments. (T10-Interview)

However, despite these explicit affordances rendered by the doctoral activity systems, implicit constraints in terms of instruments and community were also identified. Unlike PhD students, who were often provided with more funding opportunities through stipends, PD students had limited access to financial support from the programs. All the four programs were self-funded, with expensive tuition fees and rare opportunities for tuition waivers, causing a financial burden for many participants (e.g., T1, T3, T4, T6, T7, T8). While the self-fund nature of PD programs is a wide reality across the globe (e.g., Neumann, 2005), scholarships, research fundings, and conference grants, which are important for supporting the doctoral research journey, were also found to be lacking. In the four programs the participants enrolled in, funding opportunities and merit-based scholarships were not mentioned in the programs at UA and UD. The program at UB offered "publication award and outstanding academic performance award" to those who produced quality research outputs and those who obtained higher GPA scores (UB-Artefact-Student Handbook). Similarly, the program at UC provided cash awards to students with "high entry performance" and "high GPA scores" (UC-Artefact-Requirement Document). Compared to the number of enrolled students and the tuition fees,

these awards were reported by participants to be “highly competitive and limited in amount” (T9-Informal Communication). According to T1, “The highest cash award a PD student can receive is less than ten percent of the overall tuition fees” (T1-Informal Communication). Moreover, the lack of research funding and conference grants hindered some participants in their thesis research and other scholarly activities. As T5 recalled, “Recruiting participants for my thesis was difficult, since I relied on my own budget for participants’ cash incentives, which was limited” (T5-Informal Communication). T11 also mentioned “paying out of [her] own pocket for participant identification and data collection” (T11-Interview). T6, who viewed the program-disseminated information about academic conferences as a resource, humorously remarked, “It’s good to stay updated about key conferences in the field; however, I don’t seem to have the money to attend them. It’s like being invited to look at the academic ‘feasts’ but not being able to eat them ”(T6-Informal Communication). Given the crucial role of financial support in doctoral studies (Elliot et al., 2020), the lack of funding mechanisms in PD programs would inadvertently influence participants’ decision-makings in their doctoral journeys, as well as their learning trajectories and outcomes.

In terms of community, while the doctoral community presented valuable resources and networks for the participants, implicit constraints were also identified, often related to the part-time and long-distance nature of the study mode. For example, T2, T3, T4, T7, and T10 expressed similar views on the lack of contact with doctoral supervisors and doctoral peers. According to T10, “Not being able to be ‘physically’ present at the program-providing university hindered opportunities for supervisory guidance and peer coaching” (T10-Interview). Similarly, T7 noted the lack of supervisory connections compared to full-time PhD students. As she observed, “It’s not that my supervisor is neglecting me. It’s that he thinks I’m too busy, so he doesn’t push me” (T7-Interview). Even for participants who managed to study full-time for one year at the program-providing universities, they still felt somewhat alienated from the

core doctoral communities. In instead of feeling like "inhabitants", they felt like "guests in the doctoral community" (T5-Informal Communication). For example, T6 expressed concerns about not being invited to join her supervisor's research project group.

> My supervisor is a great person and very supportive of my studies, but I still don't understand why he didn't invite me to join his research project group meetings during my one-year full-time study at the university. He had one PhD student who entered the university the same year as I did, and they collaborated on the project and published two articles based it. I tentatively sought the possibility of joining his project and co-authoring papers with him. But every time, he asked me to focus on my thesis project and leave other options for the future, after graduation. (T6-Interview)

Another hidden constraint in the doctoral community was the lack of supervisors specializing in practice-oriented research. T2, who wavered in her decision about whether to conduct pedagogical research, observed, "While the departmental faculty are all established scholars, only a small number of them come from a language education background or have extensive front-line language teaching experience" (T2-Interview). A similar observation was made by T1, who commented that, "There are some supervisors with backgrounds in second language acquisition or TESOL, but their number is limited compared to the number of students from the professional contexts of language education. Not everyone can get what they want" (T1-Informal Communication). This reported lack of supervisors specializing in practice-oriented research is likely to undermine the rhetoric of the practice-research nexus (Symeonidis & Schratz, 2022).

5.3 Complex motives and projected identities in pursuing a PD

This section reports participants' motives and projected identities in pursuing a PD, examining these motives and projected identities in relation to the interplay between the activity settings of their professional contexts and doctoral studies contexts. Exploring the participants' motives and projected identities establishes a baseline for analyzing their identity

negotiations within the dual systems of professional work and doctoral studies in the subsequent chapters.

5.3.1 Motives for pursuing a doctorate: Gaining legitimacy and seeking career development

The participants' motives for pursuing a doctorate during their mid-career were multi-layered and complex, which included gaining legitimacy in their professional contexts and enhancing their professional worth (T1, T4, T8,), meeting institutional requirements on staff qualification and securing employment (T3, T4, T6, T7, T8, T10), breaking the mid-career paradox and gaining promotion opportunities (T1, T3, T8, T11, T10, T12), acquiring research competence and fulfilling the institutional research performance requirements (T2, T5, T6, T8, T9), and pursuing personal academic dreams and interests (T5, T9). In general, these motives were primarily oriented towards career security and development within the professional context of higher education, interspersed with personal academic pursuits. While these motives appeared to be instrumental, they mirrored systemic tensions in the participants' professional activity systems, as discussed in the activity settings of their institutional contexts in the previous section. The heightened institutional expectations for teachers, particularly regarding academic qualifications and research outputs, were what underpinned the participants' motives. For example, according to T1:

> I have no other choice but pursing a doctorate because I work in higher education. No matter how hard you work and how many achievements you gain, a doctoral title is a prerequisite for promotion. I've worked diligently for the department for fourteen years. Both my abilities and character are highly appreciated by the dean. The dean considers me an appropriate candidate for helping lead the department and encourages me to pursue a doctorate for future promotion. The doctoral title has become a key symbolic capital for legitimacy and career mobility. Every time we organize activities or engage in external exchanges, the dean introduces faculty by their doctoral degree or professional title, saying things like, 'This is Dr. A, who graduated

> from the prestigious University B' and 'That is Professor C, who holds a doctorate from University D'. I always feel a bit awkward in these occasions. (T1-Interview)

Relatedly, T12 explained the necessity to pursue a doctorate and achieve transformation in this changing landscape of higher education. According to her, "The 'publish or perish' culture is irreversible in higher education institutions. We have no options but to seek career breakthroughs by developing research competence. Doctoral training is the first step" (T12-Interview). T3 referred to a research project application document and provided a more detailed explanation of the mid-career paradox and the role of a doctorate in breaking this paradox.

> According to the document, applicants for provincial-level and national-level research projects should either be doctoral degree holders or hold associate/full professorial titles. If applicants do not meet either of these two requirements, they can apply for 'Youth Special Research Projects' if they are under 35. For mid-career teachers who are over 35 and do not hold doctoral degrees, their path to applying for these research projects is blocked, unless they hold associate/full professorial titles. However, aside from those who gained a professorial title earlier in their careers, before the advent of research-oriented institutional cultures, many mid-career teachers remain lecturers. Ironically, in today's promotion systems, if they cannot secure project grants at the provincial or national level, they are not eligible for promotion to associate professor. Isn't it paradoxical? (T3-Interview)

5.3.2 Motives for pursuing a professional doctorate: Negotiating a pragmatic trade-off

With obtaining a doctoral degree becoming essential for establishing a foothold in higher education, participants' decision to pursue PD programs often reflected a pragmatic trade-off. While many participants expressed a longing for traditional PhD programs for their prestige and currency in the academic job market, they opted for PD programs primarily due to lower competition, greater availability of admission quotas, and the flexible study mode that allows them for jugging work, family, and doctoral studies. Among the twelve participants, nine cited the relatively larger admission opportunities as a reason for their application. For

example, T10 elaborated on the difficulties of securing a doctoral student position in the field of language-related or education-related studies within Chinese higher education, particularly for mid-career EFL teachers.

> To the best of my knowledge, nearly all mid-career EFL teachers at my institution who haven't obtained their doctorates yet aspire to advance their academic qualifications through doctoral education. However, in the past seven or eight years, only one of my colleagues has received a PhD offer. The competition is so fierce because there are few universities offering PhD programs in our field. Additionally, PhD programs tend to overlook middle-aged, on-the-job applicants, considering that these applicants often have heavier burdens and may not be fully committed to doctoral studies. (T10-Interview)

Similarly, T4 recounted how he had learnt from his colleague's experiences of applying for PhD studies and decided to apply for a PD program. As he noted, "Applying for a PhD position in mainland Chinese universities often involves 'waiting in a line', even if you are qualified. One doctoral supervisor typically has only one quota every year. My colleague waited for several years before getting enrolled" (T4-Interview). Corroborating T4's words, T9 narrated his own experiences.

> I once identified a doctoral supervisor at a university specializing in foreign language studies and expressed my aspiration to pursue a PhD under his supervision. To help him better understand my abilities and commitment to pursuing a PhD, I applied for a one-year visiting scholar position under his guidance. During this one year, he came to recognize my academic potential. However, he kindly reminded that it may take several years to secure a PhD position because there was a long waiting list. He recommended that I consider other options such as PD programs. (T9-Interview)

In addition to greater availability of admission quotas, the flexible study mode of PD programs made it a suitable choice for mid-career EFL teachers who generally had more commitments outside their doctoral studies. As T4 explained, "As a mid-career teacher and a

middle-aged man with a family, I have many responsibilities to fulfill at my workplace and in my family. The part-time study mode gives me some spaces to reconcile these responsibilities" (T4-NFs). Similarly, T11 viewed her decision to pursue a PD program as a trade-off between her various commitments.

> I put pursuing a doctorate on my agenda several years ago. The reality of work and family responsibilities made me realize that a part-time doctorate would be a feasible choice for me. When I began my doctoral application, I only searched for programs that offered a flexible study mode. (T11-Interview)

In some cases where the work institutions did not allow teachers to pursue full-time doctoral studies, PD programs became their only choice. As T8 noted, "PD programs address the conflicts between the institutional push for doctoral qualifications and the institution's disapproval of teachers taking extended study leaves" (T8-Interview). T3 linked the choice of pursuing a PD to the implicit but prevailing ageism in mainland China's academic job market. His account further explained why teachers prioritized retaining academic positions over pursuing full-time doctoral studies.

> It's always good to pursue a full-time PhD degree, considering the recognition of the degree and the less pressure of juggling work. However, my institution does not permit long study leaves. If I pursue a full-time doctorate, I must resign from my current position. I'm over thirty-five years old now and will be much older when I complete the degree. In China, seeking academic positions after the age of thirty-five is a dead end. Very few universities would hire academic staff over thirty-five, even those with PhD degrees from prestigious programs. (T3-Interview)

It is interesting to note that besides these pragmatic considerations, pursuing the practice-research nexus, the raison d'être of PD programmes, was less frequently noted by the participants as a motive for attending PD programs. Among all the participants, only T2, T3, and T6 mentioned in passing the advantage of PD programs in valuing practitioner knowledge and integrating research with teaching. T2 regarded her extensive work experience as an

advantage when applying for a PD program. According to her, “The program welcomes applicants who have prior work experience, making it a better fit for me” (T2-NFs). T3 considered the alignment between his original research areas and the program ethos as an additional reason for his choice of the program. As he noted, “I did pedagogical research in my previous MA studies, and it aligns with the program” (T3-NFs). After citing the need to balance work, family, and doctoral studies as her primary motive for pursuing a PD, T6 added, “In addition, I really enjoy teaching. It would an added value of the program if it can inform my teaching” (T6-Interview). These accounts showed that even when participants viewed the teaching-research nexus as an attraction of the PD programs, it was often relegated behind pragmatic considerations.

5.3.3 Projected identities in pursuing a professional doctorate: Aspiring for research-oriented identities

Aligning with their motives for doing a doctorate and reasons for choosing a PD program, the participants’ projected identities at the commencement of their doctoral studies reflected a research-oriented identification, supplemented by an orientation towards upward career mobility. Building a researcher identity was projected by T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T7, T9, T11, and T12. More specifically, T4, T11, and T12 directly associated the building of a researcher identity with the attainment of a professorial title. T11 stated straightforwardly, “I invest in the program to develop myself as a researcher so that I could be promoted to associate professor” (T11-Interview). Meanwhile, alongside the projected researcher identity, the aspiration to construct an academic leader identity was mentioned by T1, T3, and T10. In their projection, the doctorate was a pathway to research competence, which would eventually led to higher professional status and leadership roles in their professional contexts. As T1 noted,

> I hope to accumulate more research outputs through doing the doctorate. Once I have accumulated enough academic capital, I can be more influential and

> assume leadership positions in my department. The EFL department at my institution is facing crisis. The institutional leaders consider us marginal and dispensable, and are unwilling to allocate resources to us, believing we cannot contribute much to the institution's research metrics. The newly appointed university president, who comes from a hard science background, is even considering downsizing the department. When I graduate and become a department leader, I want to help guide the department towards a better future. (T1-Interview).

Similarly, T3 projected a "researcher and educational leader" identity (T3-NFs). According to him, "Crafting a competent and prolific researcher identity will help me gain more negotiation power in the department. I'll consider leadership roles when I graduate, because I want to advocate for EFL teachers like me" (T3-Interview). T10 gave a more direct comment, "A doctoral title and a researcher identity help me advance further in administrative ranks, which provide me with more opportunities to influence policy-making and contribute to the development of the department" (T10-Informal Communication).

The participants' projections of generating impact through assuming leadership positions at their department and institutions spoke to the ethos of professional doctoral education in terms of impacting the broader professional contexts. However, while participants acknowledged that pursuing a PD degree could foster researcher and leadership identities, they appeared to overlook the potential to strengthen their existing practitioner/teacher identities when considering the anticipated benefits. When probing whether they projected a 'teaching-research integration' identity, the participants' responses fell into two camps. One camp expressed their doubts over this ideal, admitting that the integration was out of their projection. T7, who had been an EFL teacher for twenty-one years, noted:

> I doubt I can achieve this, and the integration is not my priority. Although there is always room for improvement, I feel that my teaching is just fine. I've been teaching for many years, and I know how to teach. My teaching evaluation scores have always been great, even though I seldom engage in

> research related to teaching. I don't expect to improve my teaching through my doctoral research. The reason I'm conducting my doctoral research is to complete the degree. The reason I engage in any research activities, such as publishing and securing research grants, is to fulfill the institutional requirements and, if I'm lucky, maybe get a promotion. The current overall environment is such that the institution demands solid outputs within three to five years. When we consider what kind of research to undertake, we don't think about whether it will inform teaching. Instead, we consider whether the research is feasible, publishable, and suitable for applying for higher-level grants. (T7-Interview)

T11, who chose pedagogical research for her thesis project, admitted that the decision was based on the expertise of her assigned supervisor rather than her aspiration of using research to inform her teaching. According to her:

> I chose this research topic because it aligns with the research interests of my assigned supervisor. He has done a lot of work in this area and can guide me through every step of project, from the theoretical framework to the research design. I did not consider the teaching-research nexus when I chose this topic. I might be bragging, but I feel that I don't need research to inform my teaching. I'm already doing a good job at teaching. I'm doing research to get a promotion. Suppose my supervisor is not in this area, I would choose other topics that align with his or her research expertise. I'm very flexible. I mentioned this to the admission committee of this program during my interview. (T11-Informal Communication)

Similar remarks were also expressed by T4, who had achieved a lot in teaching before commencing his doctoral studies. As he commented, "I don't need a PD degree to further establish myself as an excellent teacher. I need the degree to develop myself as a researcher" (T4-Interview).

The other camp of participants remained open to the possibility of practice-research integration but cited it as secondary in their pursuit of a PD degree. According to T6, "Along with developing a researcher identity, which is my primary reason for engaging in the doctoral

program, I also aim to seek breakthroughs in my teaching, perhaps inspired by insights gained from research" (T6-Interview). T3 explained, "I'm interested in pedagogical research. The teaching-research integration is also what I've envisioned through a PD program. It would be an additional advantage beyond building a researcher identity, which adds value to my investment in doctoral studies" (T3-Interview). Slightly different from T2 and T3, T5 conceptualized a non-linear trajectory towards the ideal of making teaching and research mutually beneficial.

> Building a researcher identity through doing a doctorate is my paramount goal. Research productivity secures the job and opens pathways for promotion. Only after my professional status is established do I have more freedom to further develop my teacher identity. Personally, as a mid-career teacher, I consider teaching my cardinal identity and have gained a sense of fulfilment through teaching. However, the freedom to further develop my teacher identity rests upon job security and professional status. (T5-Interview)

5.4 Discussion

The previous sections have outlined the activity settings of the participants' institutional contexts and professional doctoral contexts, as well as the participants' motives and projected identities in pursuing a professional doctorate within these activity settings. By examining their motives and projected identities as nested within the complex contextual realities, this chapter generates new insights into the factors shaping mid-career tertiary EFL teachers' motives in seeking continuing professional development through further education. It also adds complexity to the contestation over the uniqueness of PD programs and the thorny issues of the teaching-research nexus in EFL education.

First, the findings in this chapter show that tertiary EFL teachers' initiatives and motives for achieving continuing professional development through further doctoral education are heavily influenced by the systemic structural realities of their institutional contexts. On the

one hand, intellectual curiosity was only mentioned tangentially as a reason for pursuing doctorates, which differs from previous studies on EFL teachers' engagement with further doctoral education in other contexts (e.g., Sato & Cárcamo, 2024). On the other hand, the development of teacher identities was often overlooked or, at best, considered secondary to the cultivation of researcher identities as a motivation for pursuing PD programs. While the participants' pragmatic considerations for joining the PD programs and their projections of research-oriented identities and career mobility may seem instrumental, these motives and identity projections need to be examined within the overriding emphasis of research-metrics driven appraisal systems in their situated institutional contexts.

At institutional level, the overarching object of higher education, i.e., educating the students and generating knowledge, has been replaced by utilitarian objects that value short-term gains and visible research outputs to survive and thrive within the competitive higher education market characterized by performativity. The contradiction arising from the misalignment between the object of higher education and the institutional object constrained teachers' agency in initiating balanced professional development that attends to both teaching and research, which speaks to the international literature on the detrimental effect of research-oriented institutional cultures on EFL faculty's inclination towards research within their limited time and energy (Sato, 2023). Influenced by institutional imperatives, teachers' motives for undertaking further doctoral studies are not just a matter of personal choice but also a survival mechanism in response to systemic pressures. As indicated by the findings, having experienced the research-oriented appraisal policies and the implicit hierarchical framing of teaching and research by the institutions, all participants explained their pursuit of a doctorate in relation to gaining legitimacy within their institutional contexts and attaining career promotions, viewing it as something they must do in order to survive in their workplace contexts. Their identity projections as competent and successful researchers and academic leaders through doctoral

education are inextricably linked to the performative benchmarks and credential requirements set by their institutions, rendering the more intrinsic motives of improving and innovating teaching and strengthening teacher identities as secondary. While international literature postulates the negative impact of performative institutional culture on maintaining the teaching-research duality in higher education (e.g., McKinley, 2019; Tian & Lu, 2017), the findings add empirical evidence on how this performative culture may disrupt the duality and gradually sideline teaching by influencing teachers' directions and goals in continuing professional development. The marginalization of teaching as an associated activity is likely to affect students' learning outcomes and academic development and risks frustrating the very mission of higher education in educating the future generations and contributing to the social good (Bao & Feng, 2022; Tian & Lu, 2017).

In addition to the misalignment between higher education object and institutional objects, misalignments between elements within the institutional activity settings are also identified and found to influence teachers' decisions and choices regarding engaging in further doctoral education for professional development. Most notably, there is a misalignment between the institutional object of enhancing staff qualifications and increasing academic staff's research productivity, and the instruments and community provided to facilitate this object. As shown in the findings, despite the institutional push for teachers to meet heightened expectations, there was limited support in terms of resources and networks. For participants' self-initiated engagement in further doctoral education, institutions often held mixed attitudes and refrained from offering support policies in terms of funding and study leaves. Participants had to rely on their personal resources and self-optimize within constraining systems in their pursuit of further doctoral education, which often led to pragmatic trade-offs in their decisions and choices regarding the programs they selected. As the findings indicate, nearly all participants chose PD programs for their relatively less competitive admission and the flexible

study modes that allow for juggling multiple work commitments and doctoral studies. Although these compromises created opportunities for the participants to carve out a niche for continuing professional development amid multiple constraints, the prioritization of practicality over intellectual and scholarly considerations may risk undermining sustainable professional development in the long run. Moreover, the overreliance on personal resources and efforts and the lack of institutional support for in-service teachers' further doctoral education may hinder teachers' agency in seeking continuing professional development, as not every teacher possesses the necessary capital and resources, such as time, family support, and money, to navigate a doctoral education (Bao, 2025). This explains the long-standing issue of staff qualifications in Chinese tertiary-level EFL education. While the push for enhancing qualifications and research competence has been proposed for over a decade (e.g., Bai & Hudson, 2011), the proportion of doctoral degree holders among tertiary EFL teachers still accounts for less than twenty percent, according to a recent national survey (Zhang et al., 2024).

Second, extending previous studies that have questioned the actual realization of the practice-research nexus promoted in PD programs (e.g., Neumann, 2005; Rip, 2000; Thorne & Francis, 2001), this study adds complexity to this contestation by unravelling the multifaceted factors that may potentially influence the ethos of the practice-research nexus in PD programs. On the one hand, misalignments between components within the professional doctoral activity systems have been identified. As shown in the findings, although the programs in which the participants enrolled all highlighted crafting the practice-research nexus and enriching the candidates' existing practitioner identities, the program designs in terms of division of labor, rules, instruments, and community may not always accommodate these ideals. For example, doctoral candidates' assigned tasks within their doctoral activity systems mainly revolved around acquiring theoretical knowledge and enhancing research skills through coursework and applying their newly developed research competence to conduct a capstone thesis project.

Apart from slight differences, their courses were primarily shared with PhD students. For the thesis section, no specific requirements were set regarding the relevance to their professional practices in their capstone theses. Except for the length, their theses were examined and assessed through a homogeneous approach to PhD theses, showing that academic conventions were prioritized while applied relevance was sidelined. Regarding the rules of supervisor allocation within a cohort-based program structure, where the first one to two years of studies resembled a taught program, the allocation of supervisors only after completing the coursework posed another challenge to implementing the ideal of practice-research nexus. Uncertainties about whether they could be assigned with a supervisor specializing in practice-oriented research, along with the lack of one-on-one supervisory consultations to discuss the feasibility of their initial research ideals, could undermine participants' original aspirations for conducting practice-oriented research. This issue was particularly pronounced in doctoral communities where there was a relative scarcity of doctoral supervisors coming from a practice-oriented research background. By identifying the contradictions within the professional doctoral activity systems, the findings reveal potential hindrances embedded in the programs themselves that may impede the realization of the practice-research nexus at the program level, adding empirical explanation to the contestation over the distinctiveness of PD programs in terms of the practice-research nexus (Neumann, 2005).

On the other hand, there was a misalignment between the overall object of the PD programs and the personalized goals of PD students in pursuing PD degrees. As the findings indicate, instead of projecting a *researching professional* identity (Burnard et al., 2018), participants' motives for attending a PD program primarily lay in building research competence within the limits of their availability and capabilities, amid multiple practical constraints. In other words, they attended PD programs because they wanted to establish themselves as researchers and attain promotions in the higher education context where research excellence

serves as the major conduit for career mobility, rather than strengthening their teacher/practitioner identities through research praxis. Becoming researchers was projected to be an *end*, rather than a *means* to become better teachers/practitioners. They chose PD programs not for their advantage in bridging pedagogical practice with research, but rather as an optimal choice to navigate the competitive doctoral enrollment process and manage their multiple commitments outside of doctoral studies. This initial misalignment between candidates' goals and program object posed another challenge for the realization of the practice-research nexus in PD programs. It may also replicate the very research-practice hierarchy that PD programs aim to disrupt, by prioritizing research as the overriding goal of doctoral education and relegating the strengthening of practitioner identities to the background, thereby exacerbating the "identity crisis" of PD programs (Buss et al., 2014, p. 138).

Third, extending the international discussions on the teaching-research nexus in EFL education (e.g., McKinley, 2022; Sato & Loewen, 2022), the findings provide new insights into how EFL teachers' established work experiences and preconceived perceptions may constrain their ability to project an enhanced teacher identity through the addition of a research element. As shown in the findings, some participants held doubts towards the relevance of research in improving their teaching practices, even among those who decided to conduct pedagogical research for their doctoral thesis. It is interesting to note that these participants were all well-acknowledged excellent teachers who had either accumulated many years of teaching experience or won numerous teaching awards at the provincial and national levels. They expressed their confidence in conducting good teaching practice without referring to or engaging in research, manifesting that experienced EFL teachers tend to rely on their intuition and experiential knowledge rather than research in their teaching practices (Bao & Feng, 2023; Marsden & Kasprowicz, 2017; Medgyes, 2017). Research was considered parallel to their teaching, with the purpose of securing their academic positions and elevating their professional

status. The findings show that while experiential knowledge and pedagogical skills accumulated through years of front-line teaching may be advantageous for effective classroom practices, it may also to some extent hinder research-driven teaching innovations by creating epistemic inertia that limits teachers' imagination of new practices. In other words, historically developed tools (e.g., experiential knowledge and pedagogical skills developed over the years) may be limiting in that their conventional uses can hinder new and creative ways of thinking (Wertsch, 1993). At the systemic level, these findings also reflect the utilitarian institutional ideology that seeks quick research outputs from academic staff without considering the practical value of these outputs, leaving little space for teachers to envision sustainable and holistic development trajectories that allow for a teaching-research nexus (McKinley, 2019). However, as existing literature has suggested (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022; Bao et al., 2024; Yuan & Burns, 2017), such entrenched preconceptions of teaching and research are likely to be updated through teachers' boundary-crossing experiences in various in-service professional development programs. Although the teaching-research nexus was not initially projected by participants at the onset of their doctoral studies, their shifting attitudes and experiences regarding the teaching-research relationship throughout their doctoral studies will be further explored in the following chapters.

5.5 Chapter summary

This chapter first delineates the activity settings of Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' institutional contexts as well as the activity settings of the professional doctoral studies contexts, eliciting and mapping the major contextual realities and dynamics onto the constitutive components in activity theory. Overall, Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' institutional contexts (i.e., the participants' professional work activity systems) are characterized by heightened performance expectations for teachers, driven by the institutional object of surviving and thriving within the competitive neoliberal higher education market. Governed by institutional

rules, teachers are assigned an inordinate amount of work and are expected to produce visible research outputs that are often beyond their reach. Behind the institutional push for staff qualifications and research excellence, systemic shortcomings in instruments and community at the institutional level, including the lack of resources and networks essential for developing research competence and the lack of support for teachers' further education, are identified, forcing teachers to rely heavily on themselves for their further doctoral education and continuing professional development. Within the professional doctoral studies contexts (i.e., the participants' doctoral studies activity systems), the overarching object of curating practice-research nexus is shaped by a complex interplay between a series of contextual factors. While the ideals of the practice-research nexus are promoted as the highlights and distinctiveness of these programs, the programs' structures, specifically in terms of the division of labor, the rules, and the community, may not always accommodate these ideals.

The chapter then presents participants' motives and projected identities in pursuing a professional doctorate during their mid-career, situating their motives and projected identities at the intersection of their professional work activity system and their doctoral studies activity system. Overall, the participants hold mixed motives and project varied identities in choosing such programs. Despite some variance, their motives and projected identities are characterized by a pragmatic and instrumental orientation, with the development of research competence and researcher identities prioritized over the pursuit of building the teaching-research nexus and curating researching teacher identities. PD programs are viewed by the participants as a trade-off alternative to traditional PhD programs amid the multiple constraints in their pursuit of further doctoral education, rather than a pathway to promote their professional practice (e.g., teaching) through adding a research praxis. These projections are closely intertwined with the contextual realities of their situated professional contexts and reflect systemic pressures imposed by the skewed appraisal systems in today's neoliberal climate of higher education,

where teaching and teaching-research nexus are sidelined despite institutional rhetoric, while research becomes the de facto indicator for tenure and promotion (Macfarlane, 2011; McIntosh et al., 2022).

Through a synthesis of the activity settings of the participants' situated contexts, along with an analysis of their initial motives and identity projections in relation to these contexts, this chapter sets the scene for the following chapters, where participants' identity negotiations in their dual engagement with their professional work activity systems and their doctoral studies activity systems will be explored and discussed.

Chapter 6 Navigating dual roles and multiple expectations: Challenges, coping strategies, and self-positioning

With an overall understanding of the participants' situated activity settings, and their initial motives and identity projections in pursuing a professional doctorate explained in the previous chapter, this chapter explores how the participants navigate their dual roles as in-service teachers and doctoral students and respond to multiple expectations across the activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies. It focuses on the challenges they encounter in their dual engagement with the two activity systems, their coping strategies mediated by the tools and instruments they identify and use within and beyond these two activity systems, and their evolving self-positionings within their experiences. Challenges, usually resulting from the contradictions within or between activity systems, are viewed as key incidents that create spaces for the participants to reexamine their situations in relation to the contextual dynamics and develop new practices and new understandings of themselves. The process of meeting and addressing challenges and making meaning out of these experiences constitutes the process of doing identity work. In each subsection of the findings, grounded in my theoretical framework integrating identity-in-activity and identity-in-discourse, the participants' narratives are examined both as their recounting of their experiences of coping with challenges (i.e., identity-in-activity) and their discursive constructions of their experiences (i.e., identity-in-discourse). Their experiences are analyzed thematically to identify relevant themes related to challenges and coping strategies, and then analyzed through activity systems analysis to delve deeper into the causes of these challenges and the mediating tools shaping their coping strategies. The way they narrated their experiences are analyzed through the discourse analytical framework I proposed in Chapter 4 (see Figure 4.2). By examining the discursive features of their narratives, I aim to uncover how the participants make sense of their experiences and position themselves within these experiences.

6.1 From burnout jugglers to resilient navigators: Time-related challenges, coping strategies, and self-positionings

The biggest challenge in pursuing a doctoral degree while managing concurrent job responsibilities was time deprivation, which was repeatedly mentioned by all the participants, highlighting the shortage of time as a major impediment for on-the-job doctoral students (Clouder et al., 2020; Smith et al. 2020). Due to their concurrent roles, time became a scarce "commodity" (Clouder et al., 2020, p. 1970). The participants felt they were caught in a tug of war between multiple demands from the intersecting activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies, leading to pervasive sense of "burnout" (T2-NFs), "being torn" (T5-NFs), and "distracted" (T7-Interview). From the perspective of activity theory, the challenge of time constraints stemmed from the conflicting *objects* within the participants' professional activity systems, as well as the conflicting *objects* across the participants' professional activity systems and doctoral activity systems. Within the professional activity systems, the institutions often pursued dual but conflicting *objects*: on the one hand, they aimed to enhance their staff qualification metrics by pushing non-doctoral mid-career teachers to return to time-intensive doctoral education; on the other hand, they sought to maximize their staff's teaching productivity, which heavily occupied these teachers and left them with limited time to fully engage in their doctoral studies. Across the dual activity systems, the object of successful completion in the doctoral activity systems conflicted with the object of fulfilment of the professional tasks in the professional activity systems.

These *object-object* contradictions further manifested in contradictions at the *object-rules* plane and *object-division of labor* plane within the participants' professional activity systems, as well as in contradictions in the *division of labor* across their professional activity systems and doctoral activity systems. As explained in Chapter 5, with few exceptions, most of the participants were not granted any study leaves or sabbaticals to complete their doctorate,

reflecting the constraining nature of the *rules* within the professional activity systems. During their doctoral studies, most of them were still assigned with the regular workload by their institutions. In addition to the absence of supporting polices (i.e., *rules*), the participants' assigned labor within their professional activity systems (i.e., *division of labor*) placed heavy demands on their time, leaving them with insufficient time to devote adequately to their doctoral studies. As indicated in Chapter 5, systemic overburdening has now become the norm in the participants' professional activity systems. The participants were expected to contribute not only to teaching and research but also increasing service and administrative work. The constraining *rules* and *division of labor* within the participants' professional activity systems hindered their smooth attainment of the *object* of completing the doctorate. Across the dual activity systems, the *division of labor* in their professional activity systems often clashed with the *division of labor* in their doctoral activity systems, both of which were equally demanding and time-consuming. Although their doctoral activity systems typically operated on a flexible study mode and allowed for extended study periods, as stipulated in the *rules* of programs, the participants still found doctoral work to be a massive undertaking. As explained in Chapter 5, *the division of labor* assigned to the participants in the doctoral activity systems was characterized by extensive coursework and a doctoral thesis project. Pursuing a doctorate, even for full-time students without other engagements outside their doctoral studies, is bound be "an extremely challenging and complex journey" (Elliot et al., 2020, p. 12), let alone for part-time students who concurrently held full-time jobs. The equally consuming and sometimes competing *division of labor* across the two activity systems resulted in the participants being time-poor.

Facing these challenges, the participants demonstrated resilience to maintain their dual roles, many choosing to invest significant extra personal time to fulfill their dual roles. Very often, they had to rely on tools and resources beyond their doctoral activity systems and

professional activity systems to mediate their engagement with both activity systems. For example, they relied on the support of the family and friends, as well as their self-regulation tools that they had accumulated through their life experiences. In some cases, when competing priorities could not be resolved, they strived to settle on an optimal compromise between competing roles based on levels of importance and urgency, which often involved changing their doctoral plans to meet their tight time schedules at work. With all the strategies employed, they endeavored to address the time challenges and navigate their dual roles with resilience.

6.1.1 "Commute time is for marking and document work": Investing personal time and relying on time management

More than half of the participants, including T2, T3, T7, T8, T9, T10, and T11, mentioned working extra hours and sacrificing personal rest time to manage multiple commitments arising from professional work and doctoral studies. They dedicated a significant amount of their personal time to work and studies, and relied on the conceptual tool of time management to persevere in their dual roles. Despite occasional feelings of burnout, they managed to bound back through resilience. As T2 mentioned,

> For the past two years, I always **get up at five or six o'clock** in the morning to write my thesis before going to work. When there are upcoming deadlines, I **stay until two or three during the night**. **I feel like a spinning top**, unable to stop. Sometimes I cry in the middle of night. But after crying, I tell myself it's OK. **All doctoral students are like this**. It's just a phase and **it will end**. (T2-Interview)

In T2's narrative, she recounted how she used early mornings and late nights to juggle her roles as an in-service professional and a doctoral student. The recounting invited *evaluative* orientations towards her hard work. She then drew upon a *metaphor*, i.e., "a spinning top", to position herself as someone who was constantly in motion and unable to find rest amid relentless tasks and responsibilities. Despite her struggles and tears, she manifested

perseverance and resilience in managing her busy life. As indicated by her use of the *adequation* tactic to position herself in relation to other doctoral students (i.e., "All doctoral students are like this"), she normalized this way of living as the typical experience of being a doctoral student. In her ending comment, i.e., "It's just a phase and it will end", she used the high modality word "will" to convey a sense of certainty that this overwhelming phase will eventually come to an end, further indicating her projected persistence in muddling through difficult times before completion.

It is interesting to note that T2's narrative was echoed by one of her WeChat posts during the middle of the night. In the post (as shown in Figure 6.1), she described how she cried while writing her doctoral assignment until midnight. Meanwhile, she urged herself not to cry for too long and return to writing after a moment of emotional release. The accompanying image was a young child sitting on the ground with her head bowed, trying with all her strength to repair the cracks on the ground. The verbal comment, together with the visual illustration, invited *evaluative* orientations towards T2's resilience and determination to keep pushing forward in face of tough times.

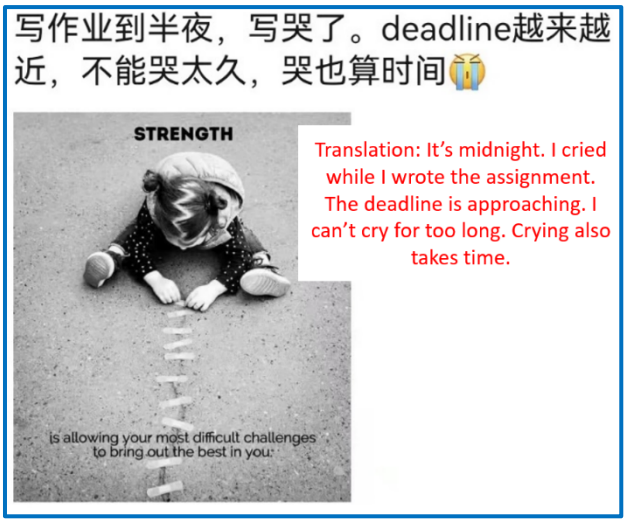

Figure 6.1 T2-Netnographic-WeChat-post

In addition to extra investment of personal rest time, participants mentioned that time management was of key importance in managing their dual roles. T3 shared his efficiency manuals and schedule books. He had been using these tools for his professional work for years and had now maintained this habit to make detailed plans for managing both work and doctoral studies. In these manuals and books, he listed his densely packed schedules with time urgency, highlighting time urgency with color-pen markings, and broke down the plans into daily, weekly, and monthly segments. The detailed and organized way he arranged his schedules invited *evaluative* orientations of his time management skills. Similarly, T11 recounted how the conceptual tool of time management, which she developed from years of work experience, enabled her to create a delicate balance between her professional responsibilities and doctoral studies and navigate the demands of both roles.

> Having worked for so many years, I'm used to planning things in advance. I once taught at a private university where English instruction was not required due to students' relatively lower English proficiency levels. Then I got a chance to land a position at a public university where English courses were required to be taught in English. I prepared the courses in advance during the summer vacation so that I had more time to handle new responsibilities when my first semester at the university began. Those experiences really helped me to cope better with my current situation of juggling two roles. It takes me three hours to travel from my home city to the university where my program is offered. **Commute time is for marking and document work** because it's noisy and not suitable for heavy writing work. At my work institution, I usually **finish teaching at noon** and **then spend the entire afternoon and evening in the library to write my thesis**. During weekends, when I spend time with my two kids, I always choose places like play castles, where the kids can play and **I can sit in the waiting areas to read the literature or preparing for my classes**. In noisy places, it's difficult for me to engage in deep thinking and write, but reading and lesson preparation are manageable. **I have become an efficient time manager now**. (T11-Interview)

In T11's recounting, she described how she developed the habit of time management through her years of work experience, particularly during her work relocation when she had to meet new job requirements. This conceptual tool was activated when she became a dual-status doctoral student, informing her about how to manage dual roles and multiple responsibilities. By recounting her work and study arrangements based on the nature of tasks and the environments—such as doing less demanding tasks in noisy settings and utilizing big blocks of time in quiet environments for serious doctoral writing—she invited *evaluative* orientations of her effective time management. This self-positioning was further strengthened by her *overt mention of identity labels* in the final comment, i.e., "I have become an efficient time manager now".

6.1.2 "I left my kid with my parents": Using tools and resources beyond the professional and the doctoral activity systems

Another noteworthy finding is that a considerable number of participants, including T2, T5, T6, T8, T9, T10, T11, and T12, mentioned that they had to rely on tools and resources beyond their professional activity systems and doctoral activity systems to maintain their dual roles as in-service professionals and doctoral students. Frequently mentioned sources of support came from family and friends, resonating with the arguments that family and friends play a key role in facilitating doctoral students' study progress (e.g., Mantai, 2017) and that embarking on the challenging journey of a doctorate requires harnessing all available support beyond the doctoral systems themselves (Elliot et al., 2020).

Support from family members were considered essential for doing a doctorate while working full-time, as aptly captured by T10's assertive comment, "It was my parents' support that enables me to pursue my doctoral studies" (T10-Interview). In more concrete terms, T9 explained how his decision to pursue a doctorate was support by his wife, who gave up a

promotion opportunity at her workplace to provide stability at home, allowing T9 to focus on his doctoral studies.

> When I got an offer from the doctoral program, my wife was offered a senior position at her workplace. Considering the increased responsibilities and workloads associated with the promotion, she decided to give up the offer because one of us had to take care of the family and our baby girl. **I certainly owe her** a great deal. **I have to** complete the doctorate no matter how difficult it is. (T10-Interview)

In T10's narrative, he detailed how pursuing a doctorate during mid-age and with a full-time job required the sacrifice and support of his wife. By commenting that 'I certainly owe her a great deal', he credited his being able to pursue a doctorate to his wife. The high *modality* word "certainly" conveyed T10's firm assurance of the important role family played in his pursuit of a doctorate. Appreciating his wife's sacrifice, he expressed his determination to complete the doctorate. The high *modality* word he used (i.e., "I have to") showed his commitment to finishing the doctorate despite challenges, positioning himself as a determined doctoral student who was resolute in navigating all the challenges.

Similarly, T12 recounted how she had to leave her kid to her parents in order to squeeze some time for her work and doctoral studies. Given that neither her work of teaching nor her doctoral studies could be compromised, she could only rely on the help of her parents for childcare. However, despite her efforts and determination to navigate her dual roles with the help of her parents, she generated a sense of guilt towards both her parents and her kid, showing that make-shift solutions to tensions may bring new tensions (Engeström, 2001).

> I left my kid with my parents during the weekdays and only picked her up to bring her home on the weekends. **I don't consider myself a qualified mother or a qualified daughter**. **I will** make it up to them **once I get the degree**. (T12-Interview)

In T12's narrative, she expressed a sentiment of guilt and self-reprimand. Through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "I don't consider myself a qualified mother or a qualified daughter"), she positioned herself as someone who was not fulfilling her designated roles as a mother and a daughter due to her busy schedule of juggling work and doctoral studies. However, through using the high *modality* expression (i.e., "I will make it up to them"), she expressed her commitment to fulfilling these familial roles in the future. On the other hand, her future fulfillment of these familial roles rested upon her completion of the doctoral degree, as indicated by her use of the conditional clause, i.e., "once I get the degree". By placing 'the completion of the degree' as a condition for assuming more familial responsibilities, she positioned herself as someone determined to navigate all the challenges and compete the degree.

Emotional support from friends was another source of support mentioned by the participants. T5 noted talking with friends to "vent pressures and seek emotional backing" (T5-NFs). Although her friends did not experience doctoral studies, they provided broader life experiences and perspectives in life, which enabled T5 to position her work and studies in bigger pictures.

> Although some of my close friends have never experienced doctoral studies, **they've experienced similar challenging moments** in their lives, and they manage to **stay positive**. Life is not easy for anyone. This is **just a difficult phase** for me. **It will pass** when I complete the doctorate. (T5-Interview)

In her recounting, T5 used the tactic of *adequation* to highlight the similarities between her and her friends, noting that everyone would encounter challenging moments in their lives. By expressing direct *evaluation* of her friends (i.e., "they manage to stay positive"), she projected a similar positive and resilient identity for herself. Then, by commenting that "this is just a difficult phase", she indicated a limitation or minimization of the difficulty through the *modality* expression of "just", suggesting the temporary nature of the difficulties within bigger life pictures and projecting her resilience in addressing these difficulties. This resilient attitude

was further reinforced through her deployment of the high *modality* expression, i.e., “it will pass”.

Relatedly, T6 explained how she relied on her friends to alleviate her sense of burnout stemming from managing dual roles and eliminate her negative energy. For her, getting along with friends provided a distraction that allowed her to relax and return to her busy life rejuvenated.

> I have a couple of friends and we always go dancing together, eat delicious food together, and chat together. I sometimes complain to them about how busy I am. Through complaining, the negative energy is expelled. **Friends are like filling stations**. They provide me with a respite from my busy schedules and fuel me with new energy to deal with the challenges. Every time I come back from our get-togethers, I would say to myself, “It’s no big deal; **I will** keep working hard”. (T6-Interview)

In her narrative, T6 used a *metaphor* (i.e., “Friends are like filling stations”) to position her friends as people who fueled her energy through the challenges of managing dual roles. This positioning was further explicated through her recounting of her changing attitudes every time she came back from these reunions with her friends. By using the high *modality* expression (i.e., “I will keep working hard”), she indicated her reinvigorated perseverance in working hard to fulfill her dual roles.

6.1.3: “I have no choice but to prioritize work”: Putting off the doctoral progress and changing the doctoral paths

No matter how invested the participants were in their dual roles, and despite the support they sought and drew upon, there were always moments when professional work and doctoral studies became irreconcilable, usually resulting from overlapping deadlines within the professional activity systems and the doctoral activity systems, as well as the cumulative workloads from both systems. In these situations, many participants, including T2, T4, T7, T5,

T9, T10, and T12, would choose to prioritize their professional work and postpone their doctoral progress. In some cases, they tried to find an optimal way to complete the doctorate that suited their professional work arrangements. These choices were often made based on weighing the different levels of flexibility in their professional work and doctoral studies. While the professional activity systems were often characterized by fixed working hours and expectations, as reflected in the *division of labor* and audited by the *rules*, the doctoral activity systems were generally more flexible, which allowed for extended periods of studies as stipulated in the *rules*. T9 articulated his understanding of pursuing an in-service professional doctoral degree, where professional responsibilities preceded doctoral studies.

> **I'm employed**; I have no choice but to prioritize work. **The leaders at my institution believe** that pursuing a doctorate is **teachers' personal matter**. The premise of approving your application to pursue a doctorate is that you can handle your work properly. When my doctoral studies and work duties conflict, **I have to** finish the work first and put my studies on hold. I feel helpless but can't do anything about it. **I'm a full-time teacher**. (T9-Interview)

In his remark, T9 explained his reason for prioritizing work, which was due to his identity as an employed professional, as articulated in his *overt mention of labels* (i.e., "I'm employed"). He also conveyed the lack of institutional support for his doctoral studies. Through the high *modality* expression (i.e., "the leaders at my institution believe"), he clearly indicated the institution's attitude towards in-service teachers pursuing doctorates, framing it as "teachers' personal matter" and expecting teachers to "handle work properly" alongside their doctoral studies. Against this backdrop, he had no other options but to put his work before his doctoral studies, as shown in his use of the high *modality* expression to indicate order of priority (i.e., "I have to finish work first and put my studies on hold"). After expressing his feelings of helpless facing this situation, he reinforced his self-positioning as a full-time teacher through

overt mention of identity labels (i.e., "I'm a full-time teacher"). This reiteration of identity labels further rationalized his choice of prioritizing work.

T4 expressed a similar prioritization of professional work responsibilities. Extending T9's rationale for this choice, T4 added an intrinsic identification with his teaching role as an explanation for his greater commitment to his professional work.

> I could free up more time for my doctoral studies by reducing some of my teaching efforts, such as spending less time on lesson preparation. However, **my conscience as a teacher prevented me from doing so**. As a teacher, **teaching is always my cardinal identity**. It's acceptable for me if my doctoral studies and research progress slowly. I can accumulate knowledge and progress gradually. I know some established professors who only started to excel in research when they were in their fifties, especially in the field of humanities. (T4-Interview)

In T4's recounting, he first excluded the choice of compromising teaching in exchange for more time for doctoral studies. This was due to his self-positioning as a conscientious teacher, as indexed in his *evaluation* of himself (i.e., "my conscience as a teacher prevented me from doing so") and articulated through his *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "teaching is always my cardinal identity"). He then rationalized his choice of putting his doctoral studies and research on hold through drawing upon the examples of some famous professors who did not start to excel in research until they were in their fifties. By citing the trajectories of well-established professors, he employed the tactic of *authentication* to further rationalize his choice, while at the same time implicitly projected himself as one of those late-blooming professors.

Complementing T9's and T4's accounts, T10 cited another reason for postponing her doctoral studies when competing demands from her work and studies occurred. According to her, in addition to the "hard deadlines" at work, the prioritization of work over doctoral studies was due to "the physical disconnection from the doctoral space" (T10-NFs). Her remark reflected feelings of alienation from the doctoral community, a common issue for part-time

doctoral students who are not always able to be physically present in the doctoral studies contexts (Adams, 2019; Dann et al., 2019). As she further elaborated, the physical disconnection from the doctoral activity system and the urgency of tasks in the professional activity system impacted her degrees of identification with the dual roles.

> I can't help but thinking about the work every day, because **I'm an in-service teacher** and need to go to work constantly. When you are frequently in a certain environment, you will subconsciously prioritize tasks in that environment. For doctoral studies, I'm not physically present in the doctoral classrooms, the doctoral community, or the supervisor's group meetings. **It's difficult to feel the authenticity of this doctoral role without being in that context**. Also, my supervisor seldom pushes me on my progress because she understands my situation as a full-time teacher. Gradually, I put my doctoral studies behind my work automatically. (T10-Interview)

In T10's explanation, she directly positioned herself as "an in-service teacher" through *overt mention of identity labels*. The fact that she was always present in her workplace context led to the subconscious prioritization of her work responsibilities. In contrast, being unable to be physically present at the doctoral studies context undermined her identification with the doctoral role, as indicated by her deployment of the tactic of *denaturalization* to describe her feelings of unreality in her doctoral role (i.e., "It's difficult to feel the authenticity of this doctoral role without being in that context"). This physical distance also led to a lack of supervisory push on her doctoral progress, causing her to sideline her doctoral role when facing competing demands from work and studies.

The make-shift solution of prioritizing urgent workplace duties led to the generation of new tensions (Engeström, 2001). Despite its flexibility, doctoral studies still operated under demanding requirements. The lack of investment in doctoral studies resulted in delayed completion of the degree. For example, T9 mentioned spending more than six years to complete the degree. T2, T4 and T7, who were now in their fifth, sixth, and fourth year respectively,

expected to complete their degrees within eight years. The extended periods in their doctoral studies were a significant source of pressure, considering that the prolonged timeline brings uncertainties and increases the risk of attribution and dropout (Van de Schoot et al., 2013). T10 expressed concerns over timely graduation after examining the trajectories of former doctoral students in the programs. As she noted, "I feel disheartened when I find out that many former students are in their seventh or eighth year and have not yet graduated. I don't want to be like them, but **we are in the same program**, and **we are all part-time doctoral students who hold full-time jobs**" (T10-Interview). T10's doubts and fear conveyed the immense pressure she felt about graduation. While she expressed her resistance to following the paths of former doctoral students, she also voiced deep concerns about facing similar situations with them, using the tactic of *adequation* (i.e., "in the same program", "all part-time doctoral students who hold full-time jobs").

Facing these new tensions that stemmed from the delay in doctoral progress, some participants, particularly those who worked in public universities with permanent contracts, leveraged job stability as a tool to counteract their anxiety caused by the delay in their doctoral progress. T4 mentioned how his *bianzhi* [编制][11] at a public university created spaces for him to extend his doctoral studies period and relieved him from excessive pressures. This resonates with the observation that academic professionals' job permanency plays a key role in reducing their psychological pressures during their part-time doctoral journeys (e.g., Boncori & Smith, 2020).

> Having a stable job while pursuing a doctoral degree, although tiring, makes me feel more secure. Although it may take me longer to complete the degree, at least **I don't have to worry about finding a job like many full-time**

[11] *Bianzhi* [编制] refers to a position within the establishment. It is often a formal and permanent post within the organization's structure, which differs from temporary or contract positions. Individuals holding such positions typically enjoy long-term employment, similar to a tenured position.

> **doctoral students**. And as I was hired before the advent of the up-or-out model, **I don't need to face the pressures of tenure clock like some newly hired staff**, which allows me to have a peaceful mindset when facing the challenges of juggling multiple commitments. I always convince myself to reduce anxiety and make progress on my doctoral studies bit by bit. It's fine to finish a little later. I see **the process of pursuing a doctorate and developing research competence as a marathon**. (T4-Informal Communication)

In this narrative, T4 employed the tactic of *distinction* to differentiate his situation from full-time doctoral students (i.e., "I don't have to worry about finding a job like many full-time doctoral students") and academic staff without a permanent contract (i.e., "I don't need to face the pressures of tenure clock like some newly hired staff"). While full-time doctoral students and staff hired within the 'up-or-out model' had to worry about employment, T4 positioned himself as in a relatively privileged situation compared with them. The permanency of his position gave him a certain degree of freedom to slow down his doctoral progress and allowed him some space to valorize work responsibilities and doctoral studies. In his last comment, he drew upon a *metaphor* to compare doctoral studies and research to a marathon, positioning himself as a patient and resilient doctoral researcher who accepted the long-term challenges of doing a doctorate, valued incremental progress, and focused on long-term goals.

Besides postponing doctoral progress, some participants also changed their doctoral plans so as to suit their busy schedules within their professional activity systems. Specifically, they tried to negotiate the most optimal way to complete their doctorates, putting their academic interests secondary and prioritizing smooth completion. T8, who once considered venturing into the new area of pedagogical research for her doctoral thesis, switched to her MA research area of critical discourse analysis when she felt deprived of time to explore a new research area amid her demanding professional tasks.

> I once considered pedagogical research for my doctoral research, which is a new area for me but is more closely related to my teaching job. In the first year of my doctoral studies, I took two courses on second language acquisition and research methods in education. However, I didn't have much time to read the literature for these courses because I had to teach twelve classes a week and preparing for lessons and teaching was very time-consuming. Without sufficient reading, those courses were challenging for me to understand, and **I didn't receive very high scores for the research proposals I wrote for the assignments in these courses**. My understandings of the relevant theories and concepts were superficial. With these challenges, I realized that **switching to a new area without sufficient learning time is beyond my reach**. **I had to** switch to my previous research area of critical discourse analysis. It's **not an ideal choice**, but it's **the most feasible approach** for me to navigate the doctoral journey amid workplace demands. (T8-Interview)

In her account, T8 explained the competing demands of exploring a new research area, which required massive reading, and fulfilling job responsibilities, which was time-consuming. She drew upon the tactic of *illegitimation* to convey her failures in attempting to learn a new research area, i.e., "I didn't receive very high scores for the research proposals I wrote for the assignments in these courses". The professors' critical feedback on her assignments, reflected in the lower scores, prompted her to abandon the new research area. As indicated by her use of the high *modality* expression (i.e., "I had to"), she expressed the urgent need to switch to her previous research area to negotiate a trade-off between busy work schedules and smooth doctoral progress, positioning herself a practical compromiser. By *evaluating* her choice as "not an ideal choice" but "the most feasible approach", she further justified her pragmatic stance and communicated her resilience and commitment to completing the doctorate.

Like T8, T9 adjusted his doctoral studies' focus from pursuing an ideal, teaching-oriented thesis project to a more manageable thesis project that could ensure timely graduation. After considering his time frame and his supervisor's expertise, he decided to study multimodal

organizational discourse for his thesis project, an area that aligned well with his supervisor's major research areas.

> I assumed that if my thesis topic fell into the realm of my supervisor's research areas, I would receive more constructive supervisory guidance, which would increase the chance of my timely graduation. **My goal was to work hard** and complete the doctorate within five or six years, which **was not that easy** for on-the-job doctoral students. **I need to establish myself as a researcher first before I can consider the teaching-research integration**. (T9-Interview)

In this narrative, T9 *evaluated* completing the doctorate within five or six years as "not that easy" for on-the-job doctoral students. However, he indicated his determination to achieve this goal through hard work and using his supervisor's expertise as a tool to facilitate his progress. As shown in his deployment of the high *modality* expression (i.e., "I need to establish myself as researcher first"), he prioritized a researcher identity before integrating a researcher-teacher identity.

6.2 From passive supervisees to autonomous doctoral researchers: Supervision-related challenges, coping strategies, and self-positionings

As the most important stakeholders in doctoral education, supervisors play a key role in shaping doctoral students' study progress and socialization into the research community (Bao et al., 2025; Weng, 2020). As part-time, long-distance doctoral students, many participants experienced an array of supervision-related challenges. From an activity theory perspective, these challenges were primarily caused by the misalignment between the *object* and the *division of labor*, as well as the misalignment between the *object* and the *rules* within the doctoral activity systems. Specifically, achieving the object of graduating competent doctoral researchers within the doctoral activity systems required intensive supervisory guidance, collaborative interactions, and close supervisor-student relationships. However, the

division of labor and *rules* within the doctoral activity systems did not fully accommodate the attainment of this *object*.

The *division of labor* assigns supervisors the key role of providing ongoing, personalized support to their doctoral students, considering that doctoral education hinges upon one-on-one, tailored guidance from the supervisors (Bastalich, 2017). Yet, with the recent expansion of doctoral enrollment, particularly the increased enrollment of PD students, doctoral supervisors were typically assigned with an inordinate number of supervisees. The excessive workload of supervisors hindered many participants from receiving intensive and individualized supervisory mentorship, which posed challenges to their timely completion. As T3 noted, "My supervisor has a dozen PhD and EdD students at hand and is too busy to take care of everyone" (T3-Interview). Similarly, T10 remarked that her supervisor suggested she complete her studies within six years, while she preferred a maximum of five years. According to T10: "My supervisor's hands are so full, and many of my senior classmates under her supervision have not yet graduated. She asked me to take my time and not submit my thesis too quickly. As fellow doctoral students under the same supervisor, we are advised to stagger our graduation" (T10-Informal Communication). The overloaded schedules of supervisors not only affected the timeliness of feedback and guidance on doctoral thesis, but also limited opportunities for academic socialization through co-authoring with supervisors. T6 shared an email response from her supervisor. Responding to T6's request to co-author an article, her supervisor replied: "I currently don't have the time to co-author this paper. It may take me months to give you feedback" (T6-Artefact).

In terms of the *rules*, while the endorsement of part-time, long-distance study mode was a highlight of these programs to accommodate in-service professionals' workplace duties, it disrupted the attainment of the *object*. On the one hand, as reported in the previous section, the participants' relative lack of commitment to doctoral studies, due to their concurrent

professional roles, impeded their doctoral progress and hindered their attainment of the *object* of smooth and timely graduation. On other hand, the long-distance study mode made it difficult for the participants to fully utilize the mediating tools and communities within the doctoral activity systems, resulting in the endemic alienation from research culture commonly found among part-time doctoral students (Dann et al., 2019). This lack of interactions with supervisors and doctoral peers was likely to hinder their cultivation of researcher identities, considering that formal and informal interactions within the doctoral community play a key role in academic socialization (Bastalich, 2017; Seloni, 2012). In particularly, the physical and temporal separation reduced the opportunities to build trust and rapport with their supervisors, which are essential to effective supervision (Grant, 2008). As T7 noted, "My supervisor has never neglected me, but due to the remote learning mode, we are not that close" (T7-Interview). Similar comment was also made by T4, who said that "It's natural for supervisors to give more guidance to those who study near them, as they have more opportunities to develop a trusted relationship" (T4-Interview).

Facing these supervision-related challenges, the participants exercised their agency in seeking available resources and developed an array of tools to address these issues. Many of the tools were beyond their doctoral activity systems and were creatively adapted to facilitate their doctoral progress and their researcher identity development. Specifically, they drew upon their conceptual tools, as reflected in their mindsets, habitus, and insider knowledge developed through years of work experience, to reframe their approach to supervision and curate their relationships with their supervisors. They also actively sought tools and resources, such as mentorship, academic advice, and research collaboration opportunities, beyond their doctoral activity systems. The agentic navigation of their doctoral studies transformed them from passive doctoral supervisees to autonomous doctoral researchers.

6.2.1 "Instead of waiting to be 'managed', I tried to manage up": Taking the initiative in supervision

As noted earlier, the packed schedules of supervisors and the concomitant potential lack of individualized, timely supervisory guidance were mentioned by many participants, including T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T10, and T12. As in-service professionals working in higher education themselves, the participants showed empathy and understanding for their supervisors' excessive workloads. Drawing upon the conceptual tools they had developed from work experiences, including the empathetic and understanding mindset, the habit of being organized and prepared, among others, they actively sought and negotiated effective supervision amid the constraints. A central strategy was to take the initiative in arranging supervision meetings and ensuring these meetings were fully utilized to address their problems and queries in their doctoral research.

T3 recounted how he quickly identified the supervision issues in his doctoral activity system and tackled the problems directly instead of getting stuck in complaints and disappointments. According to his observation, his supervisor did not intend to neglect students but was too busy to proactively supervise their progress. As he summarized, "If you request a meeting, he will always agree, but he seldom reaches out to you" (T3-Interview). Therefore, T3 took the initiative in arranging supervision meetings according to his own learning needs.

> **Unlike others**, who chose to wait for their supervisors reaching out to them and fell into internal friction when their supervisors did not, I **never** anticipated my supervisor to reach out to me and ask if I need any help. Instead of waiting to be 'managed', I tried to manage up. **I'm my own manager for my doctoral studies**. Whenever I need him, I will send him a meeting request, offering timeslots for him to chose from. He agrees to meet every time. And **he really appreciates my initiatives and praises me as an autonomous doctoral student**. (T3-Interview)

In T3's recounting, he used the tactic of *distinction* to differentiate himself from some other doctoral students. While they always expected their supervisors to reach out to them and experienced internal struggles when their supervisors failed to live up to their expectations, T8 never had such expectations for his supervisor. The tactic of *distinction*, together with use of the high *modality* expression (i.e., "never"), communicated T3's identity as a more clear-headed and proactive doctoral student. He then explained his strategy of 'managing up', where he played an active role in requesting supervision meetings. As shown in his *metaphor* (i.e., "I'm my own manager for my doctoral studies"), he positioned himself as an autonomous doctoral student who held the primary responsibilities for his own doctoral studies. He then confirmed this self-positioning through the tactic of *authorization* (i.e., "he really appreciates my initiatives and praises me as an autonomous doctoral student"). By mentioning the appreciation and praise from his supervisor, he drew upon the authority of his supervisor to reinforce his identity as an autonomous doctoral student.

Relatedly, T5 recounted how she made thorough preparations before each supervision meeting, having identified that her supervisor typically scheduled these meetings between multiple engagements and generally adhered to a strict one-hour duration for each meeting. By setting clear agendas and goals for each meeting and sorting out her queries in advance, T5 aimed to maximize the effectiveness of the limited supervision time available.

> My supervisor is the associate dean, and she is **very busy**. We meet once a month, and she can only spare an hour for me each time we meet. **As a teacher myself**, I understand the importance of preparation in advance before the meeting. One or two weeks prior to our meeting, I send my ongoing draft to her email, with clear summaries of my progress and the areas where I need guidance. This gives her a heads-up about my agenda for the upcoming meeting and allows her to prepare tailored feedback. Meanwhile, I sort out and list my queries on a notebook and bring them to our meeting. In this way, we always have **effective** communication **filled with substantive content** in

> every meeting. We work together quite well and click **because we are both efficient persons**. Every meeting is time well spent. (T5-Interview)

In this narrative, T5 first *evaluated* her supervisor as "very busy", who could only spare an hour for her during their monthly meetings. Then, through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "as a teacher myself"), she reiterated her teacher identity and drew upon this identity to explain her understanding of the importance of being prepared for the meetings with fixed durations. Following her detailed description of how she prepared for each meeting, she commented on the supervision meetings as "effective" and "filled with substantive content", which invited positive *evaluations* on her handling with the supervision meetings. She also used *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "we are both efficient persons") to further position herself as an efficient person who could effectively organize her doctoral studies.

6.2.2 "I understand what makes a good student in a teacher's eyes": Maintaining good supervisor-student relationships despite long distance

As experienced professionals, the participants clearly understood the importance of favorable supervisor-student relationships in pushing the doctoral studies forward. Several participants, including T1, T6, T8, and T12, mentioned that they had developed profound knowledge about how to maintain favorable teacher-student relationships. Such understanding and knowledge were informed by their concurrent teacher roles at their own institutions. T1 explained the rationale of developing favorable supervisor-student relationships and the strategies he took in curating a good relationship with his supervisor. Despite the long distance, he tried to maintain close contact with his supervisor.

> Teachers tend to provide more guidance to students who interact with them more frequently. According to my own experience, **it's natural for me to want to help those who appreciate my classes and show engagement and interest**. I always provide more learning advice to those who like to interact with me. Having understood this, I maintain close contact with my supervisor

> through emails and WeChat, even though I can't meet him face-to-face regularly due to the distance. **Unlike some doctoral students** who fear that constant contact might disturb their supervisors, **I believe** supervisors would like to be updated about our study progress. **As a teacher myself**, I welcome my students asking me academic questions or seeking advice from me, as it shows their engagement in learning and their recognition of my expertise. Therefore, I update my progress with my supervisor regularly and sometimes seek career advice from him. As an adult student, my supervisor and I are about the same age. We sometimes talk about work and life insights, and we resonate quite well. Through formal and informal interactions, **he gives me a lot of support, both intellectually and emotionally**. **He's both a teacher and a friend**. (T1-Interview)

In T1's elaboration, he detailed the importance of favorable teacher-student relationships. Through the tactic of *authentication* (i.e., "it's natural for me to help those who appreciate my classes and show engagement and interest"), he pinpointed the art of interacting with teachers, the tacit knowledge in the educational context. Using this tacit knowledge to inform his interactions with his supervisor, T1 managed to cultivate a close relationship with his supervisor through leveraging digital communication tools, such as emails and WeChat. He then employed the tactic of *distinction* (i.e., "unlike some doctoral students") to position himself differently from some other doctoral students, who viewed constant interactions with supervisors as a disturbance to their supervisors. Following this differentiation, he articulated his view that supervisors would like to be updated about their students' study progress, using a high *modality* expression to express this view (i.e., "I believe"). To justify his view, he reiterated his own teacher identity through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "as a teacher myself"). This insider identity provided him with the foundation to validate his insights into teacher-student interactions. After further elaborating on his interactions with his supervisor, he recounted the benefits of maintaining a close relationship, i.e., receiving support both intellectually and emotionally. Through recounting the benefits, he aimed to elicit positive *evaluations* of his approach to supervisory relationships. In the last comment, through overt

mention of identity labels (i.e., “he’s both a teacher and a friend”), he positioned his supervisor as both a teacher and a friend. This positioning of his supervisor also implied his self-positioning within a close personal relationship with his supervisor.

Relatedly, T8 narrated how she drew upon her own experience of supervising undergraduate students in their thesis projects to inform her way of interactions with her supervisor. With insights developed in her own practice as a teacher, she managed to negotiate effective interactions with her supervisor and strived to construct an ideal doctoral student identity in front of her supervisor.

> **I know clearly what makes a good student in a teacher’s eyes**. When supervising undergraduate students, I often encounter students who ask questions they could easily resolve on their own. **I will not trust these students with important tasks**. Therefore, when meeting with my supervisor, I avoid simple questions and focus on significant issues about my thesis to maintain productivity. By doing so, **I establish myself as an independent and capable doctoral student**. I’m also proactive in arranging and adhering to my study plans. Having been frustrated by my own students missing deadlines, **I ensure I don’t do the same with my supervisor**. **I show myself as a dependable student**. (T8-Interview)

In her narrative, T8 made an assertive statement about her knowledge of what it means to be a good student, using the expression “know clearly” to convey a high degree of epistemic modality and to position herself as having insider knowledge about the student-teacher dynamic. By commenting on some of her students’ unfavorable behaviors, such as their lack of independence in solving problems and missing deadlines, T8 explained how she strived to demonstrate her ability to think independently and adhere to study plans during her supervisory encounters with her supervisor. High *modality* expressions were used to convey her disapproval of her students’ lack of independence (i.e., “I will not trust these students with important tasks”) and her determination to avoid frustrating her supervisor with similar behaviors (i.e., “I ensure I don’t do the same with my supervisor”). Through her agentic efforts in shaping supervisory

interactions, she aimed to construct herself as an independent, capable, and dependable student. These identities were discursively indexed in her *overt mention of identity labels*, i.e., "I establish myself as an independent and capable doctoral student", and "I show myself as a dependable student".

Through leveraging her insider knowledge, T8 fostered a favorable relationship between her and her supervisor and reaped benefits from this relationship. As she later commented, "This trusted relationship facilitates the progression of my doctoral studies and brings more collaboration opportunities with my supervisor" (T8-Informal Communication). This comment echoed T1's recounting of receiving supervisory support both intellectually and emotionally due to a close supervisor-student relationship. Their experiences are reminiscent of the claim that supervision is a humanistic endeavor that hinges upon "a symbolic and cordial relationship" that is "collaboratively developed and sustained" (Li & Seale, 2007, p. 511).

6.2.3 "I'm responsible for my own research progress": Seeking supervisory guidance and research collaboration beyond the doctoral space

To address their alienation from the doctoral communities, many participants, including T2, T4, T5, T6, and T12, sought to obtain research guidance and collaboration beyond their doctoral programs and the immediate circle of their doctoral supervisors and fellow peers, demonstrating that doctoral learning could occur in "a wider pedagogical space" (Guerin et al., 2017, p. 98). Positioning themselves as agents who assumed full accountability for their doctoral studies and research careers, they exercised their agency to identify and adapt accessible tools and resources to facilitate their doctoral studies and research progress. T4 explained his cognitive shift and adaptative strategies when his original ideal way of pursuing the doctorate was challenged by the pragmatic constraints of the part-time, long-distance study mode.

> Originally, **I desired an in-group identity** in the doctoral community led by my supervisor. I've observed the trajectories of many established academics. **It's common for them to collaborate extensively with their doctoral connections**, including their supervisors and their doctoral peers. However, **as a part-time doctoral student with a full-time job** in another city, I missed out on opportunities for supervisory and peer interactions. Having realized that **I have to rely on my own**, I tried to find mentoring and collaboration opportunities outside the doctoral community. I used my workplace contact to join the research team of Professor Z, a well-established professor in my research area and a long-time colleague in the same department. We collaborated on a research project and published a co-authored article. Through this hands-on research experience, I further developed my research competence. **She is like a supervisor to me**. (T4-Interview)

In T4's recounting, he described his original identity projection through *overt mention of identity labels*, i.e., "I desired an in-group identity". This identity projection was based on his observation of the trajectories of established academics. By using the tactic of *authentication* (i.e., "It's common for them to collaborate extensively with their doctoral connections"), he delineated the ideal approach to navigate the academic community, where supervisory guidance and robust peer networks played a key role. This ideal was disrupted by his identity as a part-time doctoral student with a full-time job in another city, which hindered supervisory and peer interactions within the doctoral community. Facing this constraint, T4 repositioned himself as an independent doctoral student, as show in his use of the high *modality* expression to convey his self-reliance (i.e., "I have to rely on my own"). With this renewed self-positioning, he proactively sought resources to facilitate his academic socialization. Drawing upon the social tools he developed in his professional activity system, he was able to join the research team of his colleague, where he developed his research competence through hands-on research and publication experience. Commenting on the role his colleague played in his academic socialization, he used a *metaphor* to position his colleague as a supervisor to him (i.e., "she is like a supervisor to me").

Similar strategies were also used by T2 and T12. Having realized the laissez-faire supervision model caused by the long-distance study mode, T2 participated in a visiting study program offered by a university in her home city during her doctorate. By doing so, she joined the research team of her hosting supervisor, where group meetings were held on a regular basis. This enabled her to engage in constant academic discussions with her hosting supervisor as well as the doctoral peers he supervised. According to her, "in addition to the guidance and inspirations, group meetings and academic discussions **gave me a sense of being a real doctoral student**" (T2-Informal Communication). In her comment, T2 used the tactic of *authentication* (i.e., "gave me a sense of being a real doctoral student") to express her enhanced identification with her doctoral student role due to her participation in the visiting doctoral community. T12 joined an institutional-level professional learning community, where members met on a regular basis. Through constant interactions, she was able to develop acquaintances with academics from different disciplines and with various expertise and draw upon these resources to facilitate her doctoral progress. As she recalled,

> When I was writing my doctoral assignment for the quantitative research course, I consulted a colleague from the statistics department. While working on my doctoral thesis, I discussed my data analysis with a colleague who had recently graduated from his doctoral studies in a similar research area. The immediate communication and feedback are faster than sending emails to the supervisor and waiting for a response. **As adult, part-time doctoral students**, it's unrealistic for us to rely too much on supervisors. **We should proactively seek the resources we need to advance our doctoral progress**. (T12-Interview)

In her narrative, T12 explicated how she made full use of the expertise of her colleagues to advance her doctoral studies. Characterized by immediacy, she considered interactions with people within her situated networks to be more efficient than consulting her supervisor through long-distance communication. By reiterating her identity through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "as adult, part-time doctoral students"), she emphasized the importance of being

self-reliant in her situation. Her stance was further reinforced through the use of the high *modality* expression, i.e., "We should proactively seek the resources we need to advance our doctoral progress". Through demonstrating her commitment to proactively seeking resources to direct her doctoral progress, she positioned herself as an independent doctoral student responsible for her own doctoral studies.

Relatedly, T5 and T6 mentioned an array of strategies including participating in academic seminars and workshops to fill the knowledge gaps, presenting research at academic conferences to get feedback, and reaching out to scholars in the same field to seek guidance and advice. In particular, T6, who not only studied in a long-distance mode but also conducted a thesis project unrelated to her supervisor's expertise, explained how she proactively contacted scholars and peers in her field to seek guidance and advice.

> **I really count as an autonomous learner**. My research direction is different from my supervisor's. He didn't require that I have to match his research direction. He adopted a relatively hands-off approach with me, and always said, "This is your doctorate and you have to decide by yourself". So, I chose a topic I was interested in. My supervisor can only provide general comments, and **I had to rely on myself**. I attended conferences to meet scholars and doctoral students with similar research interests. I even presumptuously wrote to a famous professor I frequently cited to ask several questions concerning his works and my project. To my surprise, **he replied to my questions and commended my research ideas**. He even suggested several readings for me. **This was a huge encouragement**, making me believe that **I can manage my studies independently**. (T6-Interview)

In T6's narrative, she explicitly positioned herself as an autonomous learner through *overt mention of identity labels* and *evaluation* (i.e., "I really count as an autonomous learner"). The high *modality* word (i.e., "really") enhanced this self-positioning. After explaining his supervisor's hands-off approach with her, she demonstrated her commitment to becoming a self-reliant doctoral student, as indicated by the high *modality* expression (i.e., "I had to rely

on myself"). In alignment with this identity commitment, she reached out to scholars and peers with similar research interests. Her interactions with a renowned professor in her field became a critical incident for building her academic confidence and solidifying her identity as an independent doctoral student, as indicated by her *evaluation* of it as "a huge encouragement". By mentioning that her research ideas were commended by the professor, she expressed a sense of validation and motivation through the tactic of *authorization*. Her independent doctoral student identity was also further indexed through her use of the high *modality* expression (i.e., "I can manage my studies independently") to convey her growing belief in navigating the doctoral journey independently.

6.3 "From experienced professionals to open-minded beginners": Subject-related challenges, coping strategies, and self-positionings

As middle-aged students who returned to doctoral training after years of non-engagement or little engagement in the academic community, some participants found it challenging to reengage in the rigorous demands of academic life. Several major hurdles were mentioned, including the difficulty in keeping pace with current research trends and methodologies, the challenge in transitioning from a work mindset to a research mindset, and the complex identity shift from being teachers to becoming students. From an activity theory perspective, these challenges primary arose from the misalignment at the *subject-subject* plane. Specifically, they stemmed from the participants' dual roles: as experienced practitioners who had long disengaged from academic research and had developed well-established practitioner mindsets, and as novice research students expected to update their research knowledge and renew their mindsets after long academic interruptions. This 'expert-novice' duality constituted a paradox for the participants, requiring them to negotiate their advantages and disadvantages and redefine their identities.

This *subject-subject* contradiction further manifested at the *subject-tools* plane. That is, the participants as *subjects* within the doctoral activity systems lacked necessary tools to navigate the unfamiliar learning environments of doctoral studies and socialize themselves into the academic community, especially when compared with direct-pathway doctoral students who did not experience gaps from between the completion of their previous level of higher education and enrollment in doctoral studies (see also Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024). While the smooth progression of doctoral work relies on a range of conceptual tools—such as advanced methodologies, a keen awareness of cutting-edge research, a rigorous and critical mindset, openness to new ideas, among others—the participants were not always fully equipped with these tools. Compared with direct-pathway doctoral students whose academic trainings were consistent and systematic, the participants, who were returnees to research education after many years of interruption, often experienced disrupted academic trainings, marked by gaps in theoretical grounding, limited exposure to evolving research paradigms, and reliance on outdated research thinking and methods. As T7 lamented, "During the seventeen years between completing my MA degree and returning to pursue a doctorate, my research was largely neglected, and my research knowledge system is completely outdated" (T7-NFs).

In addition to discontinuous research engagement and training, the participants also expressed concerns over their reduced cognitive flexibility, which they attributed to their well-developed professional identity as teachers. On the one hand, a practitioner mindset, which they developed out of years of front-line teaching, did not always align with a research mindset. The shift in mindset—"from normative to analytic, and from experiential to theoretical" (Buss, 2022, p. 1070)—posed a great challenge for some participants. As T2 remarked, "Pedagogical thinking is a form of divergent thinking, which values the multiple ideas and flexible approaches. However, research requires focused thinking. I often find myself digress from the focus when I write research articles" (T2-Interview). On the other hand, extended periods in

the workplace led to diminished openness to new ideas, which was especially pronounced among established teachers who were accustomed to being in instructive roles. As T1 reflected, "To be honest, after so many years of teaching, we've developed some professional habits that are hard to shake. We get used to lecturing others and may not easily accept different perspectives" (T1-Informal Communication).

Facing these challenges, the participants adopted various strategies, which involved resorting to and adapting a range of conceptual, social, and material tools. Specifically, drawing upon resources such as classical books, latest research articles, workshops, seminars, academic consultations, and online resources, they relied on self-directed learning through various channels to compensate for the knowledge gaps resulting from inconsistent academic trainings. Their conceptual tool of grit enabled them to keep invested in doctoral learning, despite their lack of a solid academic grounding. They also drew upon the conceptual tool of reflexivity to critically examine their preconceptions and embrace new possibilities, and their doctoral social networks to renew their perspectives in conducting research and adapt to academic life. Notably, while they endeavored to make the most of the tools developed through their work and life experiences, they also sought to adopt a beginner's mindset when exposing to new ideas, consciously avoiding arrogance or cognitive inertia stemming from overreliance on prior experiences. Setting aside their professional experiences, they renegotiated their sense of self as open-minded beginners when navigating the complexities of re-entering student life and re-assimilating into academic culture.

6.3.1 "I learnt Python from YouTube before attending the class": Investing in additional self-directed learning to bridge the knowledge gaps

As mid-career teachers who had completed their MA studies long ago and had since rarely engaged in research, a number of participants, including T2, T5, T7, T11, and T12,

reflected on the rapid advancement and iteration of knowledge and technologies, noting that they lacked the solid academic groundings possessed by direct-pathway doctoral students who were "more adept at using digital databases, statistical software, and frontier theoretical frameworks and methodologies" (T5-Interview). This feeling became particularly pronounced during shared courses with younger PhD students who had recently graduated from established MA programs. In a quantitative data analysis course, T11 was taken aback upon realizing that many of her classmates were already very well acquainted with advanced programming software such as Python and R and had used these tools to conduct research during their MA studies. As she commented, "These advanced data analysis tools have not been fully developed during my MA studies, and I had no prior knowledge of them" (T11-Interview). During the course, she found it hard to follow the professor's instructions and explanations. While some classmates were already confidently responding with correct answers to in-class exercises, she was still struggling to comprehend the programming codes introduced by the professor. This gave her a profound sense of inadequacy and self-doubt. To overcome this disadvantage, she invested extra effort into the course, dedicating additional time to both learn in advance and review after class. Her persistence reflected the grit and resilience she had developed through years of professional experience and personal growth. As she further elaborated,

> During that semester of the course period, I knew nothing about Python and found it difficult to follow the professor in the first several lectures. Compared with some of my classmates, **I was a slow learner**, and it made me feel embarrassed. But **I'm not someone who gives in easily to hardships**. I've experienced challenges in my work and personal life, and I've managed to overcome them. I told myself not to be frustrated because **I was a beginner** in quantitative data analysis. At the same time, I determined to put in additional effort to address my inadequacy. I learnt Python from YouTube before attending the class. I got up at five o'clock in the morning to watch YouTube videos before starting a full day of work and study. Then I attended

> the course in the evening. In the final assessment, **the professor gave me an A for the course**. (T11-Interview)

In her elaboration, T11 recounted her initial drawbacks in the course, which stemmed from her unfamiliarity with the data analysis tool. Compared with her well-versed classmates, she positioned herself as a slow learner through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "I was a slow learner"). However, this negative self-positioning served as a catalyst for her agentic responses to her self-perceived inadequacies. Informed by her prior work and life experience, she further positioned herself as a determined person in front of difficulties and hardships, which was indicated through her *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "I'm not someone who gives in easily to hardships"). She then repositioned herself as a beginner through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "I was a beginner in quantitative data analysis"). This identity positioning shielded her from feelings of frustration and empowered her to catch up with more knowledgeable peers through self-directed learning using YouTube tutorials. Through her additional efforts, she got an A for the course. By mentioning this achievement certified by the course professor (i.e., "the professor gave me an A for the course"), she was using the tactic of *authorization* to convey her growing competence in an area where she had previously lacked expertise.

Similar experience was mentioned by T12, who had studied translation for her MA studies before she became an EFL teacher. Venturing into a new area in educational studies, T12 commented that she had to "start from scratch due to the completely different paradigms in translation studies and educational studies" (T12-Interview). Despite falling behind many of her classrooms who had progressed consistently through both their MA studies and doctoral studies, T12 remained patient and determined, choosing to address her significant knowledge gaps in educational research at her own pace. While many of her classmates adopted a time-efficient strategy of only reading the latest research articles and pursuing publication

opportunities, she devoted substantial time to read classical, book-length literature to build a deeper foundational understanding and make up for her knowledge gaps in the field. As she explained,

> **I'm not like those who pursued the same field in both their MA and doctoral studies**. Although I'm older than many of my classmates and have worked for many years, **I'm like a blank sheet of paper in this field**. Classical books helped me develop a deep understanding of the theories in the field and the evolution of the field. **I have to work hard** to lay a solid foundation first, before narrowing my own research focus. **I will try my best, even if it means going a bit slower**. My life experience has taught me that there are no shortcuts to doing things well. (T12-Interview)

In this narrative, T12 first employed the tactic of *distinction* to position herself as a less knowledgeable learner in the field she pursued, i.e., "I'm not like those who pursued the same field in both their MA and doctoral studies". This self-positioning was then reinforced through a *metaphor*. Despite her seniority in age and professional experience, T12 compared herself to "a blank sheet of paper in this field". This metaphor conveyed her identity as a novice. With this self-identification, she regarded reading classical literature as a valuable way to deepen her understanding of the field's theories and developmental trajectory. Conveyed through a high *modality* expression (i.e., "I have to work hard to lay a solid foundation first"), she demonstrated her commitment to filling in her knowledge gaps. This was followed by another high modality expression, i.e., "I will try my best, even if it means going a bit slower", which further positioned her as a devoted, hard-working, and patient student in face of challenges. The patience and determination were informed by her prior life experience.

Relatedly, T2, T5, and T7 mentioned leveraging trainings, workshops, and academic consultations both within and beyond their doctoral activity systems to learn how to use the literature management and data analysis software and develop academic writing skills. They also learnt how to stay current with the latest literature through setting up journal alerts and

creating academic social networking profiles. Although these practices were familiar to many direct-pathway doctoral students, they were quite new to the participants. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the vast amount of new knowledge and skills they had to acquire, they expressed their willingness and determination to put in extra efforts to succeed in their doctoral studies—an attitude shaped by the mental resilience developed through their past experiences. This attitude was aptly captured by T5's humorous remark that "as a middle-aged adult who has endured the hardships of life and work, the challenges of studying don't seem so difficult" (T5-Interview).

6.3.2 "I need to step outside my fixed mindset": Using reflexivity to combat pre-conceptions

Several participants, including T1, T2, and T7, reflected upon the fixed mindsets and pre-conceptions they had developed through years of established work experience. These mindsets and prior knowledge, shaped by their routine practices and strengthened by their established lecturing roles, often influenced their ways of engaging with research and potentially limited their openness to new research ideas. On the one hand, the participants had to transition from a practitioner mindset to a research mindset during their doctoral studies, a shift that was not always straightforward (Billot et al., 2021), as each had their own emphasis. As mentioned earlier, T2 commented on the distinction between pedagogical thinking and research thinking. While the former encouraged divergent thinking, the latter required focus and depth. Her habitual reliance on pedagogical thinking posed a challenge for her when she engaged in academic writing, which required maintaining a clear focus of topic and delving into in-depth analysis. Complementing her words, T7 remarked that, "Classroom teaching values practicality, but research asks for rigor, theoretical soundness, and evidence" (T7-Interview). Reflecting upon her ongoing doctoral writing, she further noted, "My supervisor always commented that my analysis was too intuitive and my findings and discussions too

anecdotal" (T7-Interview). She attributed this pitfall to her long-held practitioner mindset, which favored experiential and practical insights over analytical rigor and theory-informed argumentation. On the other hand, having been in the lecturing roles for prolonged periods of time, some participants were not always receptive to the advice of others. As mentioned earlier, T1 reflected on how experienced teachers tended to become accustomed to lecturing others in their professional contexts and may not easily accept different perspectives, which reduced their opportunities to "absorb new ideas and perspectives" (T1-Informal Communication). This comment pinpointed a subtle yet significant challenge in transitioning from experienced professionals to novice doctoral students: the need to modify and renew some ingrained thinking and habits to embrace new possibilities.

To address these challenges, the participants unanimously reported drawing upon the conceptual tool of reflexivity, which enabled them to critically re-examine their pre-conceptions and their habitual ways of thinking. Through these metacognitive strategies, they strived to adopt "an empty cup attitude" (T1-Interview), characterized by intellectual humility and openness to new perspectives. This cognitive shift marked a critical step that created spaces for them to absorb new perspectives and renew their preconceived understandings, a process that aligns with the literature identifying the transition from "unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence" as a key milestone in doctoral learning (Elliot et al., 2020, p. 9).

T7 explained how she consciously reflected upon her subconscious reliance on a practitioner mindset and her prior writing experience when critically revisiting her doctoral writing according to her supervisor's feedback. While addressing the issues in her doctoral writing still required ongoing efforts, she developed an explicit understanding of where the problem lied, which was reflected in her comment, "I've developed this awareness that allows me to critically examine my writing in relation to the academic criteria, and at the very least, I can now identify the problems" (T7-Interview). As she further elaborated,

> **Teaching focuses on** what works, and many problems can be addressed through intuition and experience. **However, in research and academic writing**, problems need to be solved through rigorous and systematic methods, and arguments need to be grounded in well-defined theoretical frameworks. **I now realized that I didn't have a research mindset before**, even though I had published a few papers in low-tier Chinese journals to meet the assessment requirements. **Those weren't really research papers**, more like personal reflections. **I need to step outside my fixed mindset and learn from the ground up**. As I revisit my doctoral writing now, I can identify the gaps. I consciously place a voice in my head, asking myself, 'does the analysis strictly follow the framework' or 'how do you make this claim'. (T7-Interview)

In her elaboration, T7 first employed the tactic of *distinction* to reiterate the difference between a practitioner mindset and a research mindset. Reflecting upon her past experiences with academic writing, she *evaluated* herself as not possessing a research mindset in the past. In this statement of *evaluation*, i.e., "I now realized that I didn't have a research mindset before", the expression "I now realized" conveyed epistemic *modality*, which marked a shift in her awareness. She then mentioned her past publishing experience in low-tier Chinese journals, using the tactic of *denaturalization* to discredit her previous publications (i.e., "Those weren't really research papers, more like personal reflections"). By recognizing that these publications did not align with academic standards, she positioned herself as a non-researcher prior to her doctoral studies. This was followed by a high *modality* expression (i.e., "I need to step outside my fixed mindset and learn from the ground up"), which conveyed her determination to jump out of her habitual practitioner mindset and her new self-positioning as a beginner learner. Her further elaboration on how she constantly reflected upon the analytical rigor and theoretical soundness in her doctoral writing conveyed her shifting ways of thinking.

Relatedly, T1 recounted how he became aware of his potential arrogance by observing the behavior of a classmate who shared a similar experience with him—returning to doctoral

studies after many years of working as a university teacher. Noticing a lack of mind flexibility in his classmate prompted him to recognize and reflect upon similar shortcomings within himself. Such reflection led him to renegotiate his identity as a novice, consciously setting aside preconceived notions in order to embrace new and diverse perspectives.

> He asked for my advice about conducting research in code-switching. I happened to have attended several lecturers on translanguaging and suggested that he reframe his research through a translanguaging perspective, as it is a current trend and matches his research focus. He appeared to have taken my suggestion on board. However, I later learnt from other students that he always asked for advice yet never listened. When he presented his research during a course, it became clear that he had not incorporated any of our advice. And then **the professor gave him the same suggestions**, but we weren't sure whether he would seriously consider it. From this incident, **I realized that I might have the similar shortcomings**. **Having been a teacher for so many years**, I have always been the one lecturing others, and I may have carried that mindset into my doctoral studies. Recalling my interactions with other doctoral peers, I sensed that I was often the one speaking and offering advice. I seldom took the opportunity to listen and absorb others' ideas, **just like my classmate**. **I need to transition from the lecturer role to the listener role and learn with the openness of a novice**. (T1-Interview)

In this narrative, T1 described in detail how a classmate with a similar background to his sought advice from him and other doctoral peers, yet continued to hold on to his own ideas, even though they had offered him some very valid suggestions. To demonstrate the validness of these suggestions, T1 used the tactic of *authorization*, i.e., "the professor gave him the same suggestions". By recounting the incident, he elicited *evaluative* orientation towards his classmate's behavior, positioning him as a student relying too much on prior knowledge and lacking cognitive flexibility. Then, T1 used epistemic *modality* (i.e., "I realized") to express his awareness of potentially sharing similar shortcomings with his classmate. This was followed by a reflection on his past role as a lecturer and how he may have carried this identity positioning into his doctoral studies. Recalling his interactions with his doctoral peers, he drew

upon the tactic of *adequation* (i.e., "just like my classmate") to index his likely similarity to his classmate. Having realized the potential shortcomings through these reflective activities, T1 used a high *modality* expression to reposition himself as a novice in the doctoral community and communicate his commitment to adopting an open mind, i.e., "I need to transition from the lecturer role to the listener role and learn with the openness of a novice".

6.3.3 "There is always something to learn from others": Tapping doctoral networks for insights and academic socialization

While reflexivity as a conceptual tool enabled the participants to develop a meta-awareness of how their prior experiences could sometimes constrain their approach to research, the actual assimilation of new research ideas and perspectives and socialization into the academic community was largely facilitated through the social networks they developed during doctoral studies. In particular, with an open mind developed through reflexivity, they became more willing to interact with their doctoral peers and adopt a learner's stance in these interactions. T1 and T6 explained how they had benefited from interactions with their doctoral peers, which resonates with the literature that highlights peer interactions as important mediators in the expansion of research ideas and the academic socialization of doctoral students (e.g., Gardner, 2008; Guerin et al., 2015; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Seloni, 2012).

T6 noted that she gained significant insights from two PhD students, who were nearly ten years younger than her and were also supervised by the same supervisor. Referring them as "both a source of pressure and a source of support" (T6-Interview), T6 narrated the intellectual and emotional support she had reaped from interacting with these doctoral peers during her one-year full-time studies. This connection endured after she completed her coursework and returned to her job to continue studying part-time.

> My two doctoral peers supervised by the same supervisor were both younger than me. **Unlike me**, who graduated from non-prestigious universities in China long ago, **they both** obtained their MA degrees in prestigious oversea universities. **They know much more than I do academically**. I experienced a lot of peer pressure at first. But then I began to view this as a learning opportunity. I had a bit more life experience than they did, and **they treated me like a big sister**. Academically, **I considered them my mentors**. We hanged out together almost every day, having classes together, going to the library together, discussing our research together, and encouraging each other in face of challenges. When we were taking the quantitative research course, one of them was particularly strong in the subject, and she would explain the difficult concepts to us. They also provided me with many new insights into how to do research. After I returned to my job, we moved our chats online. (T6-Interview)

In T6's narrative, she first employed the tactic of *distinction* (i.e., "unlike me", "they both") to explain how she differed from her two peers, who graduated from MA programs offered by prestigious oversea universities and were more knowledgeable than her academically. Despite her initial feelings of peer pressure, she changed her mentality and viewed this as a learning opportunity. Through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "they treated me like a big sister"; "I considered them my mentors"), T6 described a relationship of mutual complementarity, in which she offered life advice while they offered academic guidance. By explicitly positioning them as academic mentors, T6 positioned herself as a learner and beginner in the doctoral community. The positionings of the self and others were illustrated through concrete examples of how the two peers scaffolded her in her doctoral studies.

Similarly, T1 recounted how he benefited from interacting with doctoral peers from diverse academic backgrounds in the doctoral community. Adopting a learner's mindset, he took a proactive role in finding opportunities to talk with peers during classes, conferences, academic events, and other informal social gatherings. These interactions gave him a feeling

of immersion in the academic world and enabled him to expose to new perspectives and methodologies.

> I like talking with other doctoral students. Even though they study different areas, **I now believe that there is always something to learn from others**. During our interactions, **instead of** simply defending my ideas as I used to do, **I now** explain them while also listening attentively to their views. Those who study different areas often approach problems differently and I absorb the ideas that are useful for me. During a conference, I heard a presentation from two doctoral studies from media studies and they introduced a 'walkthrough' method that I'd never heard of. I chatted with them after the presentation and found the method promising for innovating my own research as well. I also have a long-term 'study buddy' from my program. We chat online constantly, sharing research articles and informing each other about the latest research trends. Sometimes we would discuss an academic issue for so long that we reach a state of complete immersion. These conversations allow me to temporarily step away from my hectic work and **get a feel for life in the academic community**. **It feels great to return being a curious student**. (T1-Interview)

In his recounting, T1 explained his fondness of talking with doctoral students from diverse backgrounds. This was due to his growing belief that "there is always something to learn from others", which was conveyed through an epistemic *modality* expression (i.e., "I now believe that"). He then gave concrete examples of how he learnt the 'walkthrough' method from doctoral students in media studies and how he constantly exchanged research information and ideas with his 'study buddy' through daily causal conversation. In particular, he pointed out that these conversations gave him "a feel for life in the academic community". By drawing upon the tactic of *authentication* to express his sense of living a genuine academic life, he communicated his gradual socialization into the academic community. In his final comment, he positioned himself as "a curious student" through *overt mention of identity labels*, while expressing his positive *evaluation* of this identity positioning (i.e., "it feels great to return being a curious student").

6.4 Discussion

The previous sections have showcased how the EFL teachers who concurrently pursued a professional doctorate negotiated their dual roles as in-service professionals and doctoral students, focusing on the challenges they encountered, the strategies they adopted to address these challenges, and their self-positionings in relation to their experiences. Overall, the major challenges identified included: time-related challenges stemming from conflicting *objects* and multi-level misalignments between *object*, *rules*, and the *division of labor* both within and across the professional and the doctoral activity systems; supervision-related challenges arising from misfits between the *object* and *rules*, as well as between the *object* and the *division of labor* within the doctoral activity systems; and subject-related challenges rooted in the participants' dual roles as experienced practitioners and novice doctoral students, which further resulted in their lack of necessary *tools* to navigate the unfamiliar and often alienating environment of doctoral studies. In face of these challenges, the participants adopted various coping strategies through identifying and adapting an array of conceptual, material, and social tools both within and beyond the dual activity systems. In this active adaptive process, they renegotiated themselves from *burnout jugglers* to *resilient navigators*, from *passive supervisees* to *autonomous doctoral researchers*, and from *experienced teachers* to *open-minded beginners*, as reflected in their changing beliefs and practices and their self-positionings within their experiences. This chapter generates new insights into the complexities of in-service teachers' further doctoral education, which is shaped by entangled contextual and personal factors and negotiated through teachers' agentic interpretations and navigations of their situated realities.

First, extending the limited line of research on in-service teachers'/academics' experiences of pursuing a doctorate (e.g., Billot et al., 2021; Clouder et al., 2020; Dann et al., 2019), the theoretical apparatus of activity theory helped map out, in nuanced terms, the explicit

and hidden challenges facing dual-status teachers, which are not only system-induced contradictions but also subject-induced contradictions. Notably, major contextual challenges within and across the professional and doctoral activity systems are not easily resolvable because they are structural tensions accumulated historically and shaped by prevalent sociocultural ideologies. For example, while time-related challenges have been documented in several studies on dual-status teachers (e.g., Clouder et al., 2020; Smith et al. 2020), this chapter delves deeper to reveal that tight time frames are not merely "surface conflicts or disruptions" (Lei & Hu, 2019, p. 64) but are instead related to multi-level misalignments between different components within and across the dual activity systems that dual-status teachers inhabit, among which the conflicting objects of the institutions are particularly prominent. Considering the socio-cultural-historical embeddedness in activity systems (Engeström, 2001), what underlies the institutions' conflicting objects—enhancing staff qualifications on the one hand and maximizing in-service teachers' productivity on the other—is the pervasive influence of neoliberal performative cultures in higher education, where academic labor is increasingly measured through credentials and performance indicators that prioritize efficiency and productivity (Ball, 2003; Tian & Lu, 2017). Against the neoliberal performative ethos, the responsibility of pursuing a doctorate to qualify for the academic roles is shifted onto teachers themselves, which is captured in the discourse of "teachers' personal matter", as noted by the participants. In other words, teachers are assumed to bear full accountability for "add[ing] value" (Ball, 2003, p. 217) to themselves in order to meet the heightened institutional expectations for staff qualification, even though their lack of a doctoral degree is rooted in complex historical and social factors within Chinese higher education, including the urgent need to recruit an EFL teaching force in higher education to serve the national agenda of popularizing English education at the turn of century (Liu & Borg, 2014), and the long-standing paucity of doctoral programs in language and language education-related disciplines in mainland Chinese higher

institutions (Wang, 2018). Seen from this social-cultural-historical perspective enabled by activity theory, teachers' lack of time and feelings of burnout in their dual engagements as in-service teachers and doctoral students are not individual shortcomings, but rather symptomatic of broader structural tensions.

Similarly, supervision-related issues, another contextual factor that has been widely reported in studies on doctoral education (e.g., Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Mantai, 2017), cannot be resolved merely at the surface level of training supervisors, as some existing literature has tended to emphasize (e.g., Guerin et al., 2015), but need to be revisited within the broader sociocultural landscape in higher education. The misalignment between the participants' object (i.e., receiving hands-on, intensive supervisory guidance and graduating from their programs in a timely manner) and the doctoral activity systems' division of labor (i.e., assigning inordinate number of doctoral students to each supervisor) needs to be examined within the context of the neoliberal regime, where the strategic expansion of self-financed post-graduate programs has been leveraged by higher education institutions as a means to generate tuition-based incomes (Deng & Feng, 2021; Neumann, 2005).

In addition to the contextual factors, the study also enriches the current literature by mapping out the subjected-related factors shaping in-service teachers' pursuing doctorates. Although previous studies on indirect-pathway and part-time, on-the-job doctoral students have uncovered a series of challenges related to their lack of academic skills and difficulties to adapt to new ways of thinking and doing (e.g., Burnard et al., 2018; Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024), the findings in chapter delve deeper into the underlying contradiction driving these problems: the tensions between the subjects' historically established roles as experienced professionals and their current roles as novice doctoral students. As "a higher form of sociality" (Vygotsky, 1989, p. 59), individuals embed their own activities in their histories (Engeström, 2015). Their historical embeddedness could either constrain or facilitate their engagement with

their current activities. For example, as the findings indicate, the participants' inconsistent academic trainings, primarily resulted from their status as returnee doctoral students after many years in the workplace, made it more difficult for them to reassimilate into the doctoral community, compared with direct-pathway doctoral students. Their established mindsets and roles as experienced teachers (i.e., the ones who were always in the lecturing role) could be potentially limit their openness to new ideas and perspectives. This adds evidence to the postulation that mature, on-the-job students are likely to encounter more complex challenges related to epistemological shifts and identity transformation during their academic socialization (Adams, 2019).

Second, the findings in this chapter offer new understandings of contradictions as the "motive force of change and development" (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 9), highlighting how such tensions create spaces for dual-status teachers to exercise their agency in actively and creatively developing and adapting an array of tools both within and beyond the dual systems of professional work and doctoral studies to address the challenges and (re)negotiate their identities. For example, despite the supervision-related challenges largely caused by their part-time, long-distance study mode, the participants leveraged their insider knowledge of working in the educational contexts to actively shape their relationships with their supervisors, while also seeking research mentorship and collaboration opportunities beyond their doctoral programs to facilitate their study progress and research outputs. These challenges became opportunities for them to reframe a more independent approach to doctoral studies and foster their intellectual autonomy, which is a desired outcome of doctoral education (Barnard & Shultz, 2020).

It is also worth noting that while an array of tools both within and beyond the dual activity systems have been adapted and repurposed by the participants, some of the essential tools they use to mediate their dual engagements are closely linked to the psychological and

cognitive traits that they have developed through their life and work experiences, such as grit, resilience, and reflexivity. For example, in addressing all the three major lines of challenges, including time-related challenges, supervision-related challenges, and subject-related challenges, the participants manifested their determination to work hard and mobilize all available resources to navigate the dual activity systems. They also exhibited reflective abilities to critically re-examine their past experiences, along with the courage to challenge their existing identities and embrace new possibilities. These conceptual tools, shaped by the participants' past experiences—their historical embeddedness (Engeström, 2015)—are the overriding tools that underpinned their agentic discovery and retooling of additional tools to address ongoing challenges. Extending the discussion on the affordances and constraints faced by on-the-job, mature doctoral students (e.g., Billot et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020), these findings illuminate how conceptual tools—particularly psychological and cognitive attributes developed through saturated work and life experiences—can play a crucial role in guiding these students to identify affordances and even reframe constraints in their doctoral studies.

6.5 Chapter summary

This chapter offers a presentation of how dual-status teachers negotiate their dual roles within the dual-systems of professional work and doctoral studies. Specifically, I have identified the challenges they have encountered and their coping strategies through adapting various tools both within and beyond the dual activity systems. The theoretical apparatus of activity theory enables me to provide a comprehensive account of how various contextual and personal factors interact to co-shape the participants' experiences of meeting and addressing challenges. The discourse analytical framework that I adopt allows me to examine their sense making of their experiences and their self-positionings within their experiences. The biggest challenges the participants encountered were time-related challenges, which they addressed through investing personal time and relying on time management, using tools and resources

beyond the professional and doctoral activity systems, and putting off the doctoral progress and changing the doctoral paths. Supervision-related challenges were also prevalent for the participants, which they addressed through taking initiative in supervision, managing good supervisor-student relationships despite long distance, and seeking supervisory guidance and research collaboration beyond the doctoral space. As returnees to doctoral education, some participants also reported subject-related challenges, which they coped with through investing in additional self-directed learning to bridge the knowledge gaps, using reflexivity to combat pre-conceptions, and tapping doctoral networks for insights and academic socialization. In the process of adopting strategies to address the ongoing challenges and move towards their goals, the participants negotiated their identities as resilient navigators of the dual activity systems, autonomous doctoral researchers, and open-minded beginners, which can be seen from the discursive positionings in their narratives of their experiences.

The findings in this chapter contribute to the limited line of research on dual-status teachers' experiences of juggling work and doctoral studies (e.g., Billot et al., 2021; Clouder et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). In particular, this chapter provides a nuanced account of how in-service teachers' doctoral studies are shaped by the complex entanglements of contextual and personal factors, which are further influenced by prevailing sociocultural ideologies and the "historicity" of both the systems and the subjects (Engeström, 2001, p. 133). The chapter also sheds new light on the role of historically developed conceptual tools in shaping teachers' agentic navigations of challenging realities.

Chapter 7 Reimaging the EFL profession: Mediating tools, adaptations, and self-positionings

The previous chapter explains how the participants navigate their dual roles as in-service teachers and doctoral students and negotiate their identities amid multiple expectations from the intersecting activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies. This chapter provides a comprehensive account of how their engagement with the doctoral activity systems has impacted their engagement with the professional activity systems. Viewing PD programs as "an in-service award for advanced professional development" (Bourner et al., 2001, p. 66), I focus on how the participants' doctoral experiences may have generated impacts on their professional work as EFL teachers through the lens of their identity reconfigurations. Specifically, I examine their potential change and growth through the tools (i.e., conceptual, material, symbolic, or social) they have acquired or developed through their doctoral studies, their adaptation and translation of these tools to mediate their professional work and career development, and their self-positionings when they made sense of these experiences. Grounded in my integrated theoretical framework encompassing identity-in-activity and identity-in-discourse, I treat the participants' narratives as their recounting of how they adapt tools from their doctoral activity systems to mediate their engagement with their professional activity systems, as well as their discursive constructions of these experiences. Their narrated experiences are analyzed thematically to identify themes related to their changing beliefs and practices in their professional contexts, and then through activity systems analysis to identify the mediating tools they used and adapted to mediate these changes. The way they narrated their experiences are analyzed through the discourse analytical framework I proposed in Chapter 4 (see Figure 4.2), through with I examine the participants' evolving self-positionings within their experiences.

7.1 From outsiders to (quasi-)legitimate members: Using the doctorate to approach legitimacy

While the participants were at different stages of their doctoral studies, with some having recently completed and others still working on the theses, they all acknowledged that completing/doing the doctorate became a symbolic tool for them to move towards legitimacy in their professional activity systems. Specifically, the doctoral title, or the doctoral candidate identity, was adapted by the participants to become a reified marker for their (emerging) legitimacy as a member of the professional community of higher education. Despite the challenges they encountered during their doctoral studies, when the doctorate was adapted as a symbolic tool in their professional context, it provided greater security in their academic profession, alleviated their imposter syndrome in front of colleagues and students, and opened up opportunities for inclusion in research and teaching-research projects.

7.1.1 "At least I feel safe on the shore now": The doctorate as a lifeline for the academic profession

Many participants, including T1, T2, T4, T5, T6, T8, T11, and T12, mentioned that securing a doctoral student position or completing the doctorate helped them alleviate the precarity of their academic positions, enabling them to envision their legitimacy in the higher education professional community. Although doctoral students and even newly graduated doctoral candidates are still considered apprentices of the academia (Green, 2005), the participants expressed an increased sense of job security, since the doctoral experiences placed them "on an inbound trajectory" to legitimacy (Wenger, 1998, p. 101). As T2 commented,

> I once hesitated about whether to pursue a doctorate. Some of my colleagues who haven't gained a doctorate yet choose to lie flat (i.e., withdraw from professional development). I guess the fact that I finally chose to pursue one makes me **different** from them. **Although we are all lecturers now**, I feel that **I will be more secure than them** if the rumored position transfer of non-

> doctoral, lower-rank teachers materializes. Doing the doctorate means I'm moving towards legitimacy in the academic profession. (T2-Interview)

In this narrative, T2 drew upon the tactic of *distinction* to differentiate herself from her colleagues who had decided to withdraw from professional development. Despite that they were all lecturers now, T2 positioned herself as a potential legitimate member different from her 'lying flat' colleagues, as doing a doctorate meant she was "moving towards legitimacy". The doctorate was conceptualized by T2 as a criterion for moving either inbound or outbound to the academic community.

Relatedly, T5, who was based at a science and engineering university where EFL teachers faced ambiguous positioning due to their lower academic degrees, explained her changing self-perceptions after completing the doctorate. As she summarized, "With a newly earned doctorate, I feel I'm now **no different from** those disciplinary academics. I **used to** doubt my position as an academic and consider myself **merely a language instructor**" (T5-NFs).

In her narrative, she demonstrated her evolving identity as a legitimate academic, as shown in her use of the tactic of *adequation*, i.e., "no different from other disciplinary academics", and her departure from her previous identity label, i.e., "merely a language instructor". By articulating her similarities with other disciplinary academics in terms of academic qualifications and shedding her original sense of inferiority from not having a doctoral degree, T5 exhibited an enhanced sense of legitimacy as a member of the higher education community.

Similar sentiments were also expressed by T8, who elaborated on how completing a doctorate had saved her from professional anxiety and vulnerability. Although she had not yet produced any solid research outputs to elevate her professional status at her institution, the doctoral title itself was leveraged as a symbol for emerging legitimacy.

> I **used to** worry so much about contract renewable. Teaching in higher education without a doctorate feels like **swimming in the sea**. You need to stay constantly alert to avoid drowning (i.e., getting the sack). With a doctorate, **at least I feel safe on the shore now**. Of course, this could only last for a few years in today's competitive environment. I still need to produce publications and get research grants in the coming years. But **the doctorate is like a lifeline**, pulling me back to a safe land where I can keep the efforts. (T8-Interview)

In her elaboration, T8 drew upon the *metaphors* of "swimming in the sea" and "on the shore" to mark a clear distinction between her professional life before and after completing the doctorate. As a conventional metaphor in the Chinese discourse context, "on the shore" indexes positive connotations such as success, security, and stability, which is often used to express the relief of transitioning to a stable and secure position after experiencing uncertainties and hardships. Through this conventional *metaphor*, T8 positioned herself as gradually establishing a foothold in her professional context, although efforts were still needed to gain full membership. A key mediator for her self-positioning was the doctorate title, which was viewed as a 'lifeline' that pulled her back to a 'safe land' (i.e., job security), winning her time and space to further establish her legitimacy in higher education.

7.1.2 "It's a degree I can show to others": The doctorate as a solution to imposter syndrome

Several participants, including T1, T4, T6, T11, and T12, reinterpreted the doctorate as a solution to resolve their imposter syndrome, a common sentiment characterized the academic profession (Addison et al., 2022). As mid-career teachers hired before credential inflation in China, some participants did not graduate from prestigious institutions. In recent years, however, with soaring qualification standards in Chinese higher education, the prestige of initial degree-awarding institutions and the attainment of a doctorate have become important indicators for recruiting academic staff. As a result, these participants often felt inadequate

compared with their younger colleagues who graduated with initial degrees from renowned institutions and held doctorates. As T4 explained,

> As someone graduated from this university, I was lucky to land an academic position here nine years ago. All the new teachers recruited in recent years completed their initial degrees at institutions with higher rankings than this university and obtained their doctoral degrees in leading universities with high QS rankings[12]. I sometimes **feel insecure in front of my new colleagues**. Although I have more teaching experience, nowadays in higher education, **you don't feel right without prestigious degrees**. (T4-Interview)

In his explanation, T4 used the tactic of *distinction* to explain his imposter syndrome in front of his younger colleagues, positioning himself as inadequate in terms of academic qualifications. This positioning of inadequacy was reinforced through a negative *evaluation* of the self, i.e., "insecure". While his teaching expertise was expressed through a concessive adverbial clause (i.e., "although I have more teaching experience"), he further emphasized his self-positioning of inadequacy through the tactic of *denaturalization* (i.e., "don't feel right").

T4's explanation was echoed by T1's comment that "many of my PD doctoral peers graduated from non-elite universities and viewed their pursuit of a doctorate as a way to prove themselves" (T1-Informal Communication), as well as T6's self-revelation that "I did my BA and MA studies in a non-Project 985 and non-Project 211 university and needed a higher degree from a renowned university" (T6-Interview). Pursuing a doctorate at a prestigious university provided an opportunity for these participants to prove themselves both intellectually and academically, helping them to change their self-positionings and reaffirm their competence and legitimacy in the academic environment.

[12] The QS World University Rankings are a series of comparative rankings of higher education institutions compiled by the British higher education analytics firm Quacquarelli Symonds.

T11 remarked on her enhanced confidence after being accepted into a PD program provided by a top-ranked university, "The reputation of the program-providing university adds to my value as a university teacher. I **feel less like an imposter** in the higher education community. **It will** be a degree I can show to others" (T11-Intervew). In her remark, through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., less like an imposter), she positioned herself as someone gaining confidence as a university teacher. In addition, through using high *modality* word (i.e., "will"), she expressed a strong sense of commitment to the value of this degree, thus further underscoring her self-assurance as a future legitimate member of the higher education community. A similar sense of emerging self-assurance mediated by the doctorate was captured in a WeChat post by T1.

> The subject of linguistics has climbed to around 50th in the latest QS World University Rankings by Subject. (With an official news feed releasing the rankings). (T1-Netnographic-WeChat-03/2025).

In this post, T1 shared the great achievements of his program-providing university, with an official news feed attached as proof. By drawing upon official statistics of subject rankings, he resorted to the tactic of *authorization* to construct the prestige of the program he attended. By aligning himself with the prestigious program, he positioned himself as "part of something big" (Wenger, 1998, p. 179). In other words, the prestige of the doctoral program was adapted by him to address his imposter syndrome and claim his legitimacy.

In addition to self-positionings in relation to their colleagues, the participants also positioned themselves differently in front of their students after attending doctoral programs. T12 recounted how doing a doctorate enabled her to overcome her initial lack of confidence in front of her students, especially when teaching English to MA students.

> As a teacher with only an MA degree, I used to **feel diffident** when teaching MA students. Although they are not English majors and I have much better English proficiency as their teacher, **it still feels strange to teach** MA

> students with only an MA degree myself. As my doctoral studies are now coming to an end, **I have become more assertive** in my classes, even when I teach the same content. It's the doctorate that has reduced my self-doubt. (T12-Interview).

In this narrative, T12 first positioned herself as a teacher lacking confidence and self-assurance in front of senior-grade students through an explicit evaluation (i.e., "feel diffident"). This self-positioning was also reiterated when she mentioned that she felt strange to teach MA students with only an MA degree herself. By using the term "strange" to describe her feelings when teaching senior-grade students, she employed the tactic of *denaturalization* to express her sense of inauthenticity as a university teacher. However, her self-positioning changed alongside the progression of her doctoral studies. Through an explicit *evaluation* (i.e., "I have become more assertive"), she articulated her changing identity as an assertive university teacher in front of her students. The doctorate was leveraged as a significant buffer against her self-doubt.

7.1.3 "I feel more included": The doctorate as a ticket to institutional research/teaching-research teams

Opportunities to join departmental- and institutional-level research or teaching-research teams were another benefit brought by doctoral studies, as reported by T3, T4, and T10. According to T10, even though she had not yet gained her doctoral degree yet, the fact that she was pursuing the doctorate enabled her access to several teaching-research teams in her department. On the one hand, her role as a doctoral candidate studying in a prestigious program served as a symbol of her growing expertise and her aspiration for continuing professional development, granting her access to departmental teaching-research teams. On the other hand, she also adapted the knowledge (i.e., the conceptual tool) she had learnt during her doctoral studies to be a contributing member of these teams.

> **I believe** I was given the opportunity to join the departmental teaching-research team because I'm a doctoral candidate in a prestigious program. Before attending the program, I was **never included** in these kind of teams, despite my teaching excellence. The department head and senior teachers are more inclined to give opportunities to teachers who are doctoral degree holders or current doctoral candidates, because they assume that these teachers can contribute more knowledge. Now, with the opportunity to work in a major teaching-research team, **I feel like an insider** within the department's core academic community. By applying and adapting the theoretical knowledge I've learnt during my doctoral studies, I contribute to writing proposals and developing syllabi. **I'm praised by my colleagues as a valuable team member**. (T10-Interview).

In her account, T10 attributed her opportunity to join the teaching-research team to her doctoral studies, as shown in her use of the high *modality* word (i.e., "I believe"). To strengthen this causal link, she further explained her lack of opportunities before her doctoral studies through the use of another high *modality* word (i.e., "never included"). The certainty expressed through the high *modality* expression "never included" also conveyed her self-positioning as an outsider to the departmental teaching-research activities before her doctorate studies. In contrast, her participation in the team enabled her to reposition herself as an insider of the department's core academic community, as evidenced by her *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "I feel like an insider"). Her repositioning of herself was also reinforced through her colleagues' *evaluation* (i.e., "I'm praised by my colleagues as a valuable team member"). Through doing the doctorate and adapting the knowledge she had learnt, T10 was granted legitimate participation in the department's higher-level teaching-research activities, which mediated her identity development from an outsider to an insider.

Similarly, T4 recounted how he leveraged the data analysis skills (i.e., the conceptual tool) developed during his doctoral studies to earn his participation in a research team led by a famous professor in his department, where he could engage in the higher-level research projects.

> Professor Y is a renowned scholar in my department and has led several major projects funded by national social science fund and MoE. **Many teachers aspire to** be included in her research team, **but not everyone can** have the opportunity. Once Professor Y heard about my expertise in quantitative data analysis, **she invited me to join** her research team. I took two courses in SPSS and Python during the first year of my doctoral studies and **was regarded by her as a dependable and effective member** of the team. (T4-Informal Communication)

In T4's account, he compared his colleagues' aspirations of joining the research team with his successful enrollment invited by the team leader. Through the tactic of *distinction*, he positioned himself as being in a different (and better) situation compared with some of his colleagues, which was enabled by the conceptual tool he developed during his doctoral studies (i.e., data analysis skills). He also implied his self-positioning as a fledging and contributing member of the academic community through the team leader's *evaluation* of him (i.e., "dependable and effective") and the *explicit mention of identity labels* (i.e., "member of the team").

7.2 From non-researchers to researchers in the making: Using doctoral experiences to envision future research engagements

With their initial motives of developing researcher identities, all the participants acknowledged the role of doctoral studies in helping them to envision more promising research prospects compared with their original self-positioning as non-researchers. Of note is that the doctorate was not seen as an end, but "a beginning for future research engagements" (T12-Interview). Specifically, the tools they gained through their engagement with the doctoral activity systems, which included conceptual tools such as knowledge and expertise, material tools such as databases, and social tools such as research networks, played a facilitative role in their ongoing and future research endeavors, enabling them to envision a researcher identity. The attainment and adaptation of these tools allowed the participants to anchor their research

directions and envision future academic path, develop research competence and habits for continuing research development, and identify mentors and collaborators for co-authorship and research projects. All these changes helped them navigate their budding research careers in their professional activity systems, transitioning them from non-researchers to researchers in the making.

7.2.1 "I have a research direction now": Doctoral research as an anchor for forging future academic path

Many of the participants entered the PD programs without a clear and certain research focus, mainly due to "long estrangement from research" (e.g., T9), "unrelated research areas during MA studies" (e.g., T12), and "sporadic and random research endeavors as responses to job evaluations" (e.g., T5, T7). With the progressive focusing of their doctoral research, they gradually identified their research directions. The topics and areas of their doctoral thesis projects, which were negotiated out of their close engagements with the doctoral activity systems, established a grounding for their future academic path, giving them a clear direction to follow in their subsequent academic careers. According to Becher and Trowler (2001), having a consistent and clear research direction plays a key role in crafting a researcher identity, as it enables individuals to find a niche in specific discoursal communities and establish a distinct area they will be known by.

T5 compared her dispersed research areas before the doctorate with her gradually focused research directions after embarking on the doctorate, highlighting her transformation from an instrumentalist to a budding and committed researcher in a specific field.

> I feel that my previous dedication to research **wasn't sufficient**. I did research in a hit-or-miss manner, without focusing on a specific area that I truly considered to be meaningful. I used to follow trending topics because they were easier to secure research grants for. Once a project was approved, I

> worked on it, published a few papers in mediocre journals, and then move on to a new topic. Although these attempts helped me secure a promotion to associate professor at a time when promotions were less competitive, I **didn't develop a genuine interest** in any of the topics, and my understandings of these topics were **superficial**. Along with my doctoral progress, I've developed **a strong interest** in language teacher education research. On top of my interest, I've also accumulated **much knowledge** in this field through my doctoral research. **I will** continue my research efforts to extend my doctoral research in the following years and explore this area in depth. (T5-Interview)

In her narrative, T5 *evaluated* her previous dedication to research as not "sufficient", positioning herself as a non-researcher before the doctorate. Her self-positioning was then illustrated by her recounting of how she conducted research in a hit-or-miss manner and followed trending topics to secure research grants without delving into any specific areas. By adapting and extending her doctoral research, she identified an area for her long-term research career. The tactic of *distinction* was used to differentiate her previous research efforts from her current dedication to a focused area. While the former was characterized by 'not developing a genuine interest' and 'superficial understanding', the latter was characterized by 'a strong interest' and 'solid knowledge base'. To express her commitment to stay in this research field, T5 further used high *modality* expression, i.e., "I will", to indicate her future research agendas, projecting herself as fledging and devoted researcher within this specific field.

Relatedly, T12 mentioned how honing a specific research area through her doctoral research enabled her to envision a clearer research path for the coming years and increased her confidence in producing visible research outputs in the foreseeable future.

> Before starting my doctorate, I used to feel embarrassed when people asked about my research areas, because I didn't have one and **didn't consider myself a true academic**. Thanks to the doctorate, I've developed my own research area based on my doctoral research. Along with my thesis project, I've already secured two minor research projects, one funded **by my**

> **institution** and the other **by the provincial department of education**. Both projects derived from my ongoing doctoral thesis. **These grants proved my growing expertise** in this field and greatly boosted my confidence. With my thesis project now coming to end, **I will** use my doctoral research to apply for higher-level grants. I also **need to** turn my doctoral thesis into research articles and publish them in decent journals. It's not easy to establish a research area. I did it through years of exploration during my doctoral studies. **I can't** afford to waste it. (T12-Interview)

In this account, T12 first positioned herself as a non-researcher through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "didn't consider myself a true academic"), due to her lack of a research area. By focusing on a sharpened and deepened research area developed through doctoral studies, she experienced the success of securing research grants. Revealing that these grants were approved by her institution and the provincial department of education, she used *authorization* to position herself as an emerging researcher with expertise in a specific area. She also drew upon a series of high *modality* words, i.e., "I will", "I need to", and "I can't", to show her commitment to research endeavors in this area in the coming years, which strengthened her self-positioning as an emerging researcher.

7.2.2 "I'm trained to live like an academic": Research competence and habits as foundation for continuing research development

Through doctoral training, the participants not only gained crucial toolkits for research competence, including theoretical knowledge, research knowledge, disciplinary knowledge, and research methodologies, but also developed habits characteristic of the academic profession, such as the psychological attributes of resilience and grit in face of setbacks, and the practices of reading literature and attending academic conferences. These conceptual tools constituted the essentials for living out an academic identity in higher education. By transplanting these tools in their professional activity systems, the participants established their groundings for their continuing research development.

T3, T6, T8, T10, T11, and T12 all mentioned growth in their research competence and the concomitant growth in their research confidence. For some participants, despite not yet having achieved solid research outputs, they were able to envision their future outputs due to the research toolkits they had gained through doctoral studies. T8, who had just completed her doctoral studies, commented on her changing perceptions of publishing in high-impact journals.

> Although I haven't published in prestigious journals yet, I now regard publishing **to be within my reach**. Of course, publishing in high-impact journals is still a dream, but it **no longer feels as distant as I thought in the past**. I've accumulated some research knowledge and academic writing knowledge, which I can use in my publishing endeavors. I'm now refining and splitting my thesis into research articles. Hopefully they will be published soon. (T8-Interview)

In her comment, following a concessive adverbial clause acknowledging her temporary lack of publications, T8 evaluated publishing as "within my reach". Through this *evaluation*, she positioned herself as someone having the potential and capacity to publish in prestigious journals. This positioning was then elaborated through the tactic of *distinction*, where she differentiated her perceptions of publishing after completing her doctorate from her perceptions before the doctorate, reiterating that publishing in high-impact journals was not "as distant as" she thought in the past. Her further recounting of her growing competence (i.e., research knowledge and academic writing knowledge), as well as her ongoing efforts and plans (i.e., refining the splitting the thesis for publication) concretized her self-positioning as an emerging researcher who was moving towards publishing.

For those who had already taken their foray into the publishing territory, the process of getting published during their doctorates provided them with valuable hands-on experience in academic writing and publishing, which they regarded as essential for their academic careers. More importantly, the published works served as key symbolic tools for them to construct their researcher identities, validating their inclusion in the academic community (Kamler, 2008). In

addition, the sense of achievement derived from getting published transformed research and writing from an institutional imposition into an intrinsically rewarding experience. T3, who published three peer-reviewed articles during his doctoral candidature, explained how getting published enabled him to craft a researcher identity and filled him with confidence about his future academic career.

> The first research article I wrote **garnered praise from my supervisor**, who commented that it was publishable. After submitting it to a journal, we got many constructive comments from the reviewers, which not only pointed out the flaws I was not able to identify myself but also deepened and enriched my understanding of some key concepts. After several rounds of revisions, my initial manuscript was in a much better shape. Through iterative revisions and responding to reviewers' comments, I **felt included** in an academic discussion with disciplinary academics. **The paper was finally accepted**, which gave me great confidence. (T3-Interview)

In this narrative, T3 mentioned his supervisor's praise for his article and its final acceptance by a peer-reviewed journal. As supervisors and journal article reviewers are generally regarded as gatekeepers in academia (Bastalich, 2017; Tardy, 2019), their appraisal of the article served as an *authorization* to validate the value of article, which further positioned T3 as a legitimate member in academia. Through revising the paper and communicating his thoughts with reviewers, T3 also "felt included" in academic discussions with disciplinary insiders. By articulating the feeling of being "included", T3 explicitly placed himself within the disciplinary community. Through this *overt mention of identity labels*, he positioned himself as an emerging insider within academia.

Similar sentiments were also expressed by T5. Along with the publication of her first article in an SSCI-indexed journal, T5 generated a profound sense of accomplishment, which led to enhanced motivation for continuing research endeavors. According to her,

> After my first publication, my supervisor jokingly said, '**You are officially in**'. Research and writing are **no longer a drudgery** for me. It's still difficult, but **intrinsically rewarding**. Now that I've gradually got the hang of doing research and writing for publication, **I will** keep it up" (T5-Interview).

In her account, T5 first quoted her supervisor's *evaluation* of her, i.e., "you are officially in". By drawing upon the *evaluation* from a disciplinary insider (i.e., her supervisor), T5 used the tactic of *authorization* to position herself as a member of the academic community. She then used the tactic of *distinction* to compare her previous conception of research and writing (i.e., "drudgery") with her current conception (i.e., "intrinsically rewarding"), positioning herself as someone who had generated intrinsic identification with conducting research and writing articles. With the competence she had gained, she further expressed her commitment to research through using high *modality* expression, i.e., "I will keep it up". Her first publication not only marked her official entry into the academic field but was also adapted by her to reinvigorate her passion and enthusiasm for research.

In addition to research competence, some participants, including T2, T6, and T12, also reported having formed preferrable habits for leading an academic life, including both psychological attributes and behavior patterns. By adapting and integrating these habits into their daily routines, they gradually adopted a particular "way of being" in academia (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 48). For example, T2 and T12 mentioned developing the attributes of resilience and grit through coping with various challenges during their doctoral studies. Adapting these attitudes to inform their approach to research and academic responsibilities, they were able to stick to their goals and persevere through difficult times. T2 shared a research article she had written at the beginning stage of her doctoral studies, which had been rejected by five journals. After giving up many times along the way, she was still revising this paper. According to her,

> I was **totally disheartened** at the first two rejections and decided to **leave it there** and focus on my thesis. The process of finalizing my thesis proposal, collecting data, and now composing the thesis has been full of struggles. I changed my topic after receiving a major correction decision in my proposal defense. Data collection and analysis were filled with setbacks, taking me more than one year. I often cried while I wrote, but I made it through. The thesis is on the track now. For me, this has been an intensive character training, and **I've become more resilient**. Compared with this arduous process, getting rejected by journals **is normal**. I've **picked the article up** and **kept revising it**. While it's still in the rejection circle, I've learnt through reviewer comments. I've **developed 'a big heart'** to survive in academia. (T2-Interview)

In T2's narrative, she used the tactic of *distinction* to describe her changing mindset from being "totally disheartened" to "developed 'a big heart'", and her changing behavior from "decided to leave it there" to "picked the article up and kept revising it". This contrast highlighted her growing resilience in face of setbacks, where getting rejected was now considered "normal" (i.e., the tactic of *authentication*). She also explicitly *evaluated* herself as being "more resilient". By developing resilience and adapting this psychological attribute to inform her publishing attempts, she aligned herself with the ways of life in academia, where resilience is considered one of "the essential ingredients of a successful academic identity" (Bao et al., 2025, p. 358).

T6, who had recently completed her doctorate, remarked on maintaining the habits of following and reading the latest literature, attending academic conferences, and presenting her research at conferences. While based at a less well-resourced institution where support for research was limited, she maintained the habits developed during her doctoral studies through active adaptation, trying to stay connected with the academic community. As she explained,

> My doctoral studies were the **closest experience to true academia**. The program-providing university is well-resourced. I had access to various databases and formed the habit of following, archiving, and reading the latest

> literature in my research area. The program also hosted academic seminars and conferences for us to attend. I learnt how to present my research and benefit from feedback. After I graduated, despite the limited research facilities and support at my workplace, such as fewer databases, I tried to keep my habits. To compensate for the lack of databases, I followed key researchers in my field on ResearchGate[13] and accessed their latest works through various methods, such as seeking help from my junior doctoral peers or contacting the authors through ResearchGate. I also followed updates about academic conferences and tried to attend some by seeking funding or staying within my budgets. I was trained **to live like an academic** during my doctorate and I don't want to disrupt this way of living after graduation. By adhering to these habits to the best of my ability, **I stay closer to the academic community**. (T6-Interview)

In her narrative, T6 commented on her doctoral studies as the "closet experience to true academia", during which she "was trained to live like an academic". Through the tactic of *authentication*, she positioned herself as someone embodying the norms of academic life, which involved staying updated with the latest knowledge and engaging in academic discussions with disciplinary peers on a regular basis. She adapted these habits through various alternative methods after her doctoral journey ended and resources supporting her habits became scarce. By doing so, she tried to maintain her affiliation with the academic community, i.e., "stay closer to the academic community".

7.2.3 "I'll have a big name as my co-author": The doctoral networks as a gateway to research collaborations

Half the participants, including T3, T8, T9, T10, T11, and T12, emphasized the importance of the social tools they developed during their doctoral studies, which primarily included doctoral supervisors and doctoral peers. Acknowledging the importance of

[13] ResearchGate is a social networking platform specially designed for researchers to share their publications and connect with peers globally.

connections in navigating an academic career (Elliot et al., 2020), the participants admitted that these networks served as a gateway to ongoing and potential research collaborations, and if used properly, would pave way for their future career success. Supervisors were regarded as the cornerstone of the participants' doctoral journeys and the greatest resources for their academic careers. The participants considered them not only as mentors but also, through adaptations, as collaborators and endorsers for their research endeavors throughout their entire academic career. While T8, T9, and T12 were either working with or considering working with their supervisors on co-authored papers, T10 included her supervisor as a group member when applying for high-level research grants. T9 explained his increased feelings of belonging and reassurance in navigating academia, which derived from co-authoring with his doctoral supervisor.

> Before the doctorate, I often **felt like a straggler**, and in academia, it's difficult to survive as a loner. Having a supervisor **is like finding a home in academia**, **where you belong**. **It's common in academia that** supervisors publish with their former and current doctoral students. Their resources and influence will back you up. My supervisor is **a high-profile researcher** in his field, and we are co-authoring a paper now. I feel excited that I'll **have a big name as my co-author**. If he thinks our article is ready to go, **the article gets a guarantee for its quality**. This makes me feel reassured. (T9-Interview)

In his narrative, T9 first drew upon the tactic of *distinction* to illustrate his changing self-positionings before and after having a supervisor. Without a supervisor, he felt like "a straggler" in academia, with on one to rely on and hardly able to survive. Through the conventional *metaphor* of feeling like "a straggler", he positioned himself as a marginal member in the academic community. The survival crisis he mentioned conveyed "an outbound trajectory" (Wenger, 1998, p. 263) towards exclusion from the academic community. In contrast, having a supervisor felt like "finding a home in academia". Through the conventional *metaphor* of "finding a home", he expressed his growing sense of belonging in academia. He

then explained the benefits of co-authorship with his supervisor. By positioning his supervisor as "a high-profile researcher" and "a big name" through *overt mention of identity labels* and explicit *evaluations* and envisioning the quality of their co-authored article through the tactic of *authorization* (i.e., "the article gets a guarantee for its quality"), he aligned himself with the academic reputation and prestige of his supervisor, positioning himself as an emerging academic validated by association with a renowned scholar.

Relatedly, T10 recounted how her supervisor became her biggest backing when she applied for research projects at her work institutions. With her supervisor's guidance on proposal writing and participation as a group member, T10 felt confident in her applications.

> My supervisor **is the greatest resource** for my academic career. Now when I write project proposals, I often consult my supervisor and ask for her advice. She is an expert in topics I write. **With her guidance**, the proposals are more likely to be approved. I also list her as a co-investigator every time. **Having a disciplinary expert as a co-investigator and endorser** makes my proposals stronger. (T10-Informal Communication)

In T10's elaboration, she positioned her supervisor as the biggest facilitator of her academic career through *evaluating* her as "the greatest resource". She adapted her supervisor's expertise and reputation to facilitate her research grant applications at her work institution. By articulating that the proposals were done "with her guidance" and having her as "a co-investigator", a tactic of *authorization*, she conveyed her confidence in getting the proposals approved, leveraging the authority and expertise of her supervisor to position herself as a credible applicant for research grants and an emerging member of the academic community.

In addition to supervisors, doctoral peers also constituted a major resource for the participants' academic career. Through informal interactions with other doctoral students, the participants not only gained support for their ongoing doctoral studies but also identified potential collaborators for their future research endeavors. T3 and T6 explained how they had

developed friendships with like-minded peers who were at a similar career stage or share similar research interests during their doctoral studies. They extended these friendships beyond the doctoral activity systems to benefit their long-term academic careers. Having someone to share thoughts with and collaborate with made them feel supportive in the harsh research world, which further facilitated their establishment within the academic community. For example, T3 mentioned publishing an article in collaboration with two peers from his doctoral community. This peer co-authorship experience made them feel "carving out a place in academia as emerging researchers" (T3-Informal Communication). T6, on the other hand, recounted how peer support and collaboration helped her remain engaged in the academic community amid her busy schedules in the professional activity system.

> My doctoral peers and I keep close contact, even after some of us have graduated. We have a WeChat group where we share our research thoughts and support each other. For example, we help each other collect data, find resources, and collaborate in research projects and articles. After busy days at work, I always **feel drawn back to the academic world** when we discuss about our recent research and the latest news in academia, such as which professor is giving a keynote or who is publishing in a top journal. These academic discussions and chats **infused a sense of authenticity, making me feel that I am within academia**. With these supporting peers, **I will** try my best to stay in this world. (T6-Interview)

In her narrative, T6 mentioned that peer interactions and discussions made her "feel drawn back to the academic world". Through this *metaphor*, she positioned herself as someone connected to the academic world through the support of her peers. By engaging in academic discussions and chitchats with her peers, she generated "a sense of authenticity" that she was within the academic community. This *authentication* provided spaces for her to envision her 'in-group' identity. To indicate her commitment, she further used high *modality* expression (i.e., "I will") to communicate her determination to maintain and develop her academic identity.

7.3 From experienced teachers to informed teachers: Retooling the doctoral knowledge and perspectives to inspire teaching

Although enhancing teaching practice and strengthening teacher identities were not projected by the participants as primary goals for their doctoral studies, their engagement with the doctoral activity systems ultimately fed back into their teaching practice, which expanded their initial academic objectives. It is noteworthy that while many participants did not conduct pedagogical or practice-oriented research to address their immediate classroom concerns, which is the recognized pathway to the teaching-research nexus (e.g., McKinley, 2019; Sato, 2023), their doctoral studies contributed to the development of a teaching-research nexus, albeit through non-linear pathways and varied forms. Particularly, the participants adapted the conceptual tools gained through doctoral studies—such as theoretical knowledge, research insights, research mindsets, and practical inspirations from observing doctoral courses—to critically re-examine their long-standing teaching experiences, systemize and improve their teaching designs, communicate their pedagogical merits, and develop new teaching practices beyond EFL teaching. The changes in beliefs and practices enabled them to transform from experienced teachers to informed teachers, who possessed the mindset, the knowledge, and the perspectives to continuously reflect upon, renew, justify, and expand their teaching practices.

7.3.1 "I owe my former students an apology": Theoretical insights as a lens for revisiting the long-standing teaching practices

T2, T6, and T12 remarked on how theoretical insights gained from doctoral reading inspired them to critically reexamine their long-established, taken-for-granted teaching practices, although their classes were well received by the students. T6, who used to position herself as a "gifted teacher born into a family of teachers" (T6-NFs), explained how she found the loopholes in her intuitive teaching style through the lens of a theory she learnt through doctoral reading and how her critical reflections changed her perceptions of teaching.

> **I owe my former students an apology**, even though they enjoyed my classes. **I used to be very confident** in my teaching because my classes were interesting, enjoyable, and well-received by the students. However, **I adopted a critical eye towards** my practice as **I gained more perspectives** from my doctoral studies. I read about a theory called 'broaden and build'. It's not specifically a pedagogical theory, but it reminded me that teachers need to 'broaden' their focus from themselves to their students. I looked back and asked myself: In addition to entertaining my students and showcasing my personal charisma, how effective was my class? Did my students learn something or were they just having fun? **I realized teaching is not about teacher performance, but about facilitating learning**. (T6-Interview)

T6's reflection started with a direct self-critique of her previous teaching, as shown in her articulation that "I owe my former students an apology". Through the *evaluative* expression, T6 positioned herself as an accountable and reflective teacher. The word "owe" expressed a sense of obligation or necessity, which indexed epistemic *modality* and showed T6's reflexivity and criticality regarding her past pedagogical practices. To highlight her growing reflexivity and criticality, she used the tactic of *distinction* to describe her changing attitudes towards her teaching, i.e., from being "very confident" to adopting "a critical eye", emphasizing her transformation into a critical and reflective teacher. This criticality and reflexivity were informed by her broadened perspectives through doctoral reading, which underscored her transformation into a more informed teacher. To summarize her reflections, she drew upon a mental process clause beginning with "I realized" to signal a shift in her renewed perceptions of teaching, that is, "teaching is not about teacher performance, but about facilitating learning". The expression "I realized" marked epistemic *modality*, signifying profound changes in her understanding and beliefs about the nature of teaching. The comment that "teaching is not about teacher performance, but about facilitating learning" showed her evolving *evaluation* of the fundamental purpose of teaching. Through these articulations, she positioned herself as a reflective and informed teacher who embraced a facilitative role in students' learning process.

Similarly, T2 also commented on how perspectives gained from literature on educational theories helped her develop a more in-depth understanding of student-centered learning and transformed her from an effective knowledge transmitter to a co-learner who co-constructed knowledge with her students.

> I've always known student-centered teaching, as the concept has been popular for years. However, I've developed a better understanding of it by adopting the perspective of knowledge co-construction, informed by my reading on social constructivism theories. In my past experiences, I lectured a bit too much, as **I used to be an effective teacher** and aimed to use limited class time to provide more substantial contents to students. Now my classes are more interactive, and I try to encourage the students to be more involved. **I now see myself as their co-learner** and we construct knowledge together. **The knowledge gained through doctoral studies** have subtly **changed my teaching practice**. Because **once I get this knowledge**, **I naturally adapt it and apply it** in my classrooms. (T2-Interview)

In T2's narrative, she recalled her past experiences of making the most of the limited class time to impart as much information as possible, positioning herself as "an effective teacher" through *overt mention of identity labels* . With her newly acquired understanding of knowledge co-construction though her doctoral reading, she revisited her past didactic teaching style and transformed it into an interactive approach. With this transformed practice, she renewed her self-positioning as a "co-learner" with the students, as can be seen from *her overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "I now see myself as their co-learner"). By adapting and applying the knowledge gained from her doctoral studies to her teaching context, she was able to innovate her long-held teaching beliefs and long-established teaching practices.

7.3.2 “It’s a mindset change”: Research mindsets as a reference for systemizing pedagogical designs

Nearly half of the participants, including T1, T2, T5, T9, and T12, reported drawing upon a research mindset to make their teaching more systematic and rigorous. Although their doctoral thesis projects were not necessarily related to pedagogies and teaching methods, doctoral studies trained their ways of thinking. By developing a research mindset through their doctoral studies and adapting this mindset in their teaching, they were able to foster a more systematic and rigorous approach to their teaching designs and implementation, reconceptualizing teaching as “inherently research work” (Xu, 2017, p. 121). For example, T2 recalled how she renewed all her teaching plans informed by the formats of writing research articles. The academic rigor exhibited in her renewed teaching plans garnered praise from the teaching supervisors.

> **I used to copy from** my PPT slides to create my teaching plans, and I’ve done this for years. As I became more accustomed to writing research articles, I gained a deeper understanding of the importance of rigor, not only in research but also in teaching. **I now structure** my lessons like mini research projects, with clear explanations and justifications for the teaching objectives, teaching procedures, and the choice of teaching materials. I even list the references at the end. **My teaching plans were highly praised by teaching supervisors for their rigor**. (T2-Interview)

In this narrative, T2 used the tactic of *distinction* to manifest her changing practice in writing teaching plans (i.e., “I used to” versus “I now”). She leveraged her increasing familiarization with the genre of academic articles to make her teaching plans appear more systematic and rigorous, ensuring every step was clearly explained and justified, with references listed at the end. This innovation in lesson plans strengthened her teacher identity. By citing the appraisals from teaching supervisors (i.e., “my teaching plans were highly praised

by teaching supervisors for their rigor"), T2 used the tactic of *authorization* to position herself as a rigorous teacher.

Similarly, T5 and T9 mentioned that they found ways to systemize and improve their classroom practice by drawing similarities between doing research and preparing for classes. Particularly, T9 explained how a research mindset helped him address the challenges he encountered when teaching a new and difficult course.

> I was assigned a new course, *Medical English*. The first round of teaching **was not successful**. **My experiences** of teaching general English **didn't help**. At that time, I was also exploring a new research topic to complete a course assignment for my doctoral studies. Then I thought, if the class I'm teaching were a research project, what would I do? I would explore the literature, find inspirations, and narrow down the research focus. **Informed by this mindset**, I looked for appropriate cases in medical communication around the textbook themes, **just like searching for literature**. Instead of trying to cover every language points, I saved time for important and interesting cases, **much like finding a research focus**. I also integrated my teaching procedures, **just as research needs to be coherent**. If I started by explaining a case, I would end with students' output on similar cases, asking them to apply what I taught in similar contexts. (T9-Interview)

In his explanation, T9 first *evaluated* his initial teaching practices based on past experiences as "not successful". This perceived failure prompted him to adapt the perspectives gained through his doctoral studies to inform his teaching of the new course. The a series of *adequation* tactics (i.e., "just like", "much like", and "just as"), he explained the similarities between doing a research project and designing a teaching plan. By adapting the mindset of conducting research, he came up with more systematic, focused, and integrated teaching designs. The detailed recounting of his improved classroom practices implied his identity as a more reflective and informed teacher.

7.3.3 “Prof H really set an example for me”: Observations of doctoral courses as inspirations for improving teaching

An interesting and noteworthy finding is that several participants, including T1, T6, and T8, gained teaching inspirations from observing the pedagogical practices of course instructors and supervisors in their doctoral activity systems. While the ‘apprenticeship of observation’ during early school years is acknowledged to play a key role in shaping teachers’ identities (Lortie, 1975), this finding extends the argument by demonstrating that such observational learning of teaching also applies to experienced teachers pursuing advanced research education. In particular, their experienced teacher identities allows for more nuanced understandings of the instructors’ teaching techniques during the ‘apprenticeship of observation’. For example, T8 remarked that pursuing a doctorate enabled her to observe the pedagogical practices in high-quality doctoral courses, which reshaped her teaching beliefs and practices.

> Professor H, who taught us the core course *Research Methodologies*, is **not only a world-renowned scholar but also a well-informed teacher** with many years of teaching experience in the international higher education context. His classes are the most well-received among doctoral students. I’ve noticed that his lectures often begin by assigning us worksheets and asking us to do some minor tasks that are not too difficult but quite interesting, related to the last lecture. After the short breaks between class periods, he always chatted with us a little bit before moving to teaching. **As a teacher myself**, **I realized that these techniques** act as buffers to facilitate serious learning. **Prof H really set an example for me** on how to gradually guide students into a learning state. **Inspired by him, now I do the same to my students.** (T8-Interview)

In her reflections, T8 *evaluated* Professor H as a “well-informed” teacher, who had “many years of teaching experience in the international higher education context”. Through observing his classroom practices, T8 generated new understandings of the importance of warming-up tasks and interactive dialogues in maintaining students’ attention. It is worth

noting that while these understandings were informed by her observation of the professor's teaching practices, her identity as an experienced teacher enabled her to develop a sensitivity to the professor's subtle teaching techniques. This is manifest through her *over mention of identity labels* (i.e., "as a teacher myself") when she recounted her reflections. With renewed understandings, she positioned the professor as her role model in teaching, as shown in her high *modality* expression, i.e., "really set an example for me". Following the professor, she updated her teaching practices (i.e., "now I do the same to my students"). By narrating her evolving beliefs and practices, she elicited *evaluative* orientations towards her renewed teacher identity inspired by the professor.

Similarly, T1 mentioned that attending a doctoral course taught by his supervisor inspired him to be more attentive to students' interests and preferences in their private lives during his teaching.

> My supervisor is in his mid-forties. He usually gave me the impression of being **a very serious scholar**, especially when we talked about research. I never expected him to be **so approachable and relatable** to his younger students when giving lectures. In his classes, he used all those trendy and fashionable examples, such as internet memes and catchphrases, to explain complex linguistics theories and concepts. **I know he did this for the sake of his students**. He respected their preference and strived to keep them from getting bored. I now start using this approach with my students too. **I want to be a teacher like him**. (T1-Informal Communication)

In T1's remark, he articulated two different positionings of his supervisor through *overt mention of identity labels* and explicit *evaluations*, i.e., "a very serious scholar" in terms of research and "so approachable and relatable" when teaching in front of students. The approachable and relatable teacher identity was concretized through recounting how his supervisor used trendy and fashionable examples when explicating theoretical terms in order to accommodate his students. As a teacher himself, T1 expressed his understanding of the

purpose behind his supervisor's tailored examples, which demonstrated respect and care for the students. By indicating his determination to emulate his supervisor through high *modality* expression (i.e., "I want to be a teacher like him"), T projected himself as a student-centered teacher, just like his supervisor.

7.3.4 "Now I know why my classes are well-received": Theoretical knowledge and research insights as the rationale for existing pedagogical practices

As experienced mid-career teachers who had accumulated extensive experiential knowledge about teaching, most participants were confident about their existing classroom practices, which were often well-received by the students. However, despite their excellent practices, many lacked an explicit understanding of why their teaching methods worked. By adapting the theoretical knowledge and the research insights they gained in their doctoral activity systems, they acquired a *metalanguage*, that is, a structured set of terms and concepts derived from applied linguistics and language education theories, to systematically justify their existing teaching practices. T4, T6, and T11 explained how exposure to theories and research literature within the doctoral activity systems enabled them to understand the mechanisms behind their intuitive successes in teaching. This leap from 'know how' to 'know why' reshaped their identities as informed teachers. T4 recounted how he adapted the theoretical knowledge he acquired during his doctoral studies to communicate the merits of his teaching philosophies and teaching designs to win a national teaching innovation award—a high-stakes accolade he had long aspired to but had previously failed to achieve.

> I've always known how to teach well, **but I used to have difficulties in** explaining why my pedagogical practices were effective from a theoretical standpoint. **I had failed several times** in competing for teaching innovation awards. **Reviewers always commented** that my proposals and supporting documents **'lacked theoretical footing and rigor'**. Constant failures **undermined my confidence as an excellent teacher**. During my doctoral

> studies, I spent the first year taking a series of courses related to applied linguistics and language education theories. When I applied the knowledge to examine my existing pedagogical practices, **I was able to theorize my existing practices**. For example, I understood why my efforts in finding authentic language materials and designing innovative tasks related to students' everyday lives were well-recognized by my students: they aligned with some of the key tenets of multiliteracies pedagogy. By grounding my teaching in solid theoretical foundations, I won the award I had long been aspired for. **This award serves as evidence of my excellence in teaching in higher education**. (T4-Interivew)

In T4's account, he employed the tactic of *distinction* to differentiate his experiences of competing for the teaching innovation award before and after doctoral studies. By quoting the reviewers' comments (i.e., "lacked theoretical footing and rigor"), a tactic of *illegitimation*, T4 attributed his past failures to his inability to communicate his pedagogical designs in a scholarly manner, positioning himself as lacking in theoretical knowledge. Such failures made him doubt about his excellence in teaching, as shown in his self-positioning through *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "undermined my confidence as an excellent teacher"). In contrast to his previous failures, after dedicating a whole year to courses in applied linguistics and language education theories, T4 was well-equipped with theoretical knowledge and was able to adapt this knowledge to theoretically frame his existing pedagogical practices. By articulating the attainment of the award, a tactic of *authorization*, T4 repositioned himself as an excellent teacher (i.e., "This award establishes my excellence in teaching").

Relatedly, T11, who is among the most popular teachers in her department, reported how research insights gained from her doctoral pilot studies validated her existing pedagogical practices and gave her an intensified sense of achievement.

> The English course for non-English majors at my institutions is a university-wide public elective. Different teachers offer the same course for students to choose from. **My course has always been super popular**, and **students have to register for my course immediately upon its release to secure a spot**.

> **It's the same before and after** I started my doctorate. **I consider myself as a competent teacher, with or without a doctorate**. If asked what my doctoral studies have brought to my teaching, I'd say that some research findings have validated my classroom practices. I incorporated my teaching ideas into the experimental designs of the pilot studies for my doctoral project, and the improved learning outcomes from the intervention groups validated my ideas. The rigorous theoretical validation of my teaching philosophies formed a systematic logical loop, **which really enhanced my sense of achievement**. (T11-Interivew)

In this narrative, T11 first detailed how her course was highly recognized by students among many parallel courses. Through recounting this fact, she elicited *evaluative* orientations towards her competent and excellent teacher identity. She then emphasized this competence as something she had already possessed before the doctorate, as shown in her use of the tactic of *adequation* (i.e., "It's the same before and after I started my doctorate"). This self-positioning was also reinforced through her *overt mention of identity labels* (i.e., "I consider myself a competent teacher, with or without a doctorate"), which manifested her assertive confidence in teaching. With her existing teaching skills and proficiency, doctoral research provided an opportunity for her to test and validate her intuitive teaching ideas. The theoretical validation not only ensured her original self-positioning as a competent teacher but also added a significant sense of achievement to her teacher identity, as evidenced by her use of the high *modality* word "really" to describe her sense of achievement.

7.3.5 "I could teach more than EFL": Doctoral research as catalysts for broadened teaching practice

As teachers who primarily teach skill-based foundation English courses, the participants had rare opportunities to use disciplinary research-driven insights to form "the basis of the content of teaching" (Marsh & Hattie, 2002, p. 604), which undermined their self-identification with the academic identity in a context where research- and theory-informed

knowledge dissemination is prioritized. This was evidenced by some participants' explicit self-positionings before the doctorate, such as "language instructors" (T10-NFs) and "para-academics" (T9-NFs). By adapting the knowledge and insights gained from doing their own doctoral research, several participants, including T2, T4, and T10, reported expanding their teaching areas from EFL to include advanced specialized courses taught in English. In these new courses, they were able to infuse their classroom teaching with cutting-edge knowledge in their research areas and reshape their identity as university academics.

T10 studied industry-education integration for her doctoral research, which was heavily influenced by her supervisor's expertise. While the topic initially seemed distant from her professional practice as an EFL teacher, she gradually learnt to reframe this practice-research gap and found ways to adapt and benefit from this mismatch. As she acquired more knowledge and insights in this field alongside her doctoral studies, T10 decided to offer an English-medium course in cross-border e-commerce, which involved equipping students with cross-disciplinary knowledge to navigate the complexities of global online marketplaces.

> **At first, I thought** my doctoral research and my teaching were parallel, without no points of intersection. **However,** as I developed more knowledge through my doctoral research, **I began considering** new courses on entrepreneurship, which is gaining traction in higher education due to the national mandate to promote the employment of college students. Based on my doctoral research, I offered an elective course in cross-border e-commerce and tutored students in their entrepreneurship competitions. Now, **I'm not only an English language teacher but also a mentor for student entrepreneurship**. **Pursuing a doctorate has broadened my career path**. (T10-Interview)

In T10's account, she used the tactic of *distinction* to manifest her changing conception of the nexus between her doctoral research and her teaching practice, as indexed by "at first, I thought" and "however, I began considering". While initially thought to be parallel, the nexus was built through expanding her teaching practice based on her doctoral research. Her

expanded practice enriched her self-identification. As shown in her o*vert mention of identity labels* (i.e., "I'm not only an English teacher but also a mentor for student entrepreneurship"), she positioned herself as transcending beyond her original language teacher identity and incorporating new dimensions into her professional identity. In her final comment, she *evaluated* the role of doctorate in broadening her career path (i.e., "pursuing a doctorate has broadened my career path").

Relatedly, T4, who chose language teacher development as the focus of his doctoral research, explained how he adapted the insights from his ongoing doctoral research and the knowledge from the broader educational literature to design an English-medium, content-based course offered to all the students in teacher training programs at his university.

> I made an **exciting** attempt. As my doctoral research focused on teachers' professional development, I designed a new course, *Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Development from an International Perspective: Theory and Practice*, and delivered it in English. The course content was primarily derived from the literature I read and from my ongoing research. The course was first offered as an optional course. **It was then updated by the university as a core course** for students in teacher training programs, **due to the significant positive feedback from both students and teaching supervisors**. **EFL teachers are not teaching technicians,** and they could do more than teaching EFL. (T4-Interview)

In T4's narrative, he *evaluated* his expanded teaching practice as "exciting", which was informed and enabled by his doctoral studies. He then recounted how the course was elevated from a selective course to a core course. By articulating that the course category was "updated by the university" and that the course gained "significant positive feedback from both students and teacher supervisors", T4 employed the tactic of *authorization* to convey the quality of the course, thereby positioning himself as a competent teacher in designing and delivering the course. The mention of "significant positive feedback" indicated an *evaluative* orientation that further consolidated this positioning. His successful efforts in expanding and strengthening his

teacher identity enabled him to re-envision the whole EFL professional group in higher education, as shown in his comment that "EFL teachers are not teaching technicians, and they could do more than teaching EFL". By drawing upon the *metaphor*, i.e., "EFL teachers are not teaching technicians", he positioned EFL teachers as going beyond the traditionally constrained language teacher identity and embracing a broadened academic identity that encompassed developing high-level courses in higher education.

7.4 Discussion

Through the lens of identity, the previous sections have examined how pursuing a professional doctorate has generated impacts on EFL teachers' professional engagement and trajectories within their workplace contexts. By translating and adapting the tools they gained through their engagement with the doctoral activity systems to inform their engagement with the professional activity systems, the participants were able to reconstruct their identities and re-envision the EFL profession. Their identity reconfigurations were characterized by enhanced sense of legitimacy within the higher education professional context, budding researcher identities, and strengthened teacher identities. These identity reconfigurations not only reflected their changing beliefs and practices in their situated professional contexts but also served as "motivation for action" in their future professional trajectories (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 134). The chapter provides new insights into how boundary crossing between activity systems creates mediational spaces for teachers to engage in "expansive learning" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137) and reconfigure their professional identities. It also contributes empirical insights into the international contestation over the role of PD programs in fostering the practice-research nexus, and sheds light on potential pathways to the teaching-research nexus in language education.

First, the findings in this chapter showed that boundary crossing into the doctoral activity systems afforded the participants with a series of tools, such as degrees, status,

knowledge, perspectives, mindsets, and networks, which enables them to break free from the "locked-in congruence" in their situated professional activity systems (Wenger, 1998, p. 214). By translating and adapting these new tools, the participants resolved, or found ways to resolve, some perennial tensions in their professional development in higher education and was able to reconstruct their professional identities.

Legitimacy was a prominent issue addressed through leveraging the doctorate. Extending the international literature on non-doctoral academic staff's feelings of precarity and marginalization in the higher education community (e.g., Billot et al., 2021; Dann et al., 2019), it is found that the doctoral title or the doctoral student status could be adapted by the participants as an important symbolic tool to secure their positions, alleviate their imposter syndrome, and earn them opportunities for inclusion in core activities valued by the community, which facilitated their gradual transformation from outsiders to (quasi-)legitimate members in higher education. In a professional context where memberships are heavily marked by reified certificates of degree, the doctorate translates into a proxy for qualification, job commitment, and even competence and expertise, although oftentimes in unwritten ways. A notable example is that it was only after participating in doctoral studies that some participants gained more opportunities to be included in institutional or departmental research and teaching-research projects, despite their long-standing excellence in teaching. With credentialism becoming either a tacit or explicit rule in their professional activity systems, boundary crossing into the doctoral activity systems became an essential step for the participants to break through the previously impenetrable "glass ceiling" (Wenger, 1998, p. 104) in their career advancement, allowing them to rekindle their hope for professional development and re-envision their legitimacy in higher education.

Another persistent issue that found solutions through adapting the tools rendered by doctoral studies was research. Research, as a traditional weak point among Chinese tertiary

EFL teachers (Xu, 2014; Yang et al., 2022), has hindered the career development of many teachers. As analyzed in Chapter 5, the tensions around research could not only be attributed to the participants' individual efforts and competence, but more importantly, were caused and exacerbated by the misalignment between the institutional *object* of increasing teachers' research outputs and the limited support provided to achieve this *object*, as manifested in the *instruments* and *community* within the institutional activity systems. Their impasse in research was resolved, or at least saw hopes of resolution, through their adaptation of tools gained through their engagement with the doctoral activity systems. By building on the direction of their doctoral research, adopting the research toolkits developed during their doctoral studies, adapting the academic habits formed, and leveraging the networks built, the participants laid solid foundations for their academic careers and was able to envision themselves as researchers. For many participants, although solid research outputs are yet to be achieved and researcher identities still need to be concretized, the adaptation of tools gained from the doctoral activity systems enabled them to transform the intractable problem of research into "one that is more understandable and manageable" (Engestrom & Sannino, 2020, p. 16). These foreseeable solutions to research quandaries gave them the confidence to imagine themselves as future researchers, and the "imaginative casting of self into an envisioned future role" added new dimensions to their existing identities (Clarke, 2008, p. 76).

While teaching was less of a tension trigger in the participants' professional activity systems and was rarely mentioned by them as a motive for pursuing their doctorates, unexpected gains related to the strengthening of teacher identities emerged through leveraging their doctoral experiences. As experienced teachers whose classes were generally well-received by students, their teaching comfort zone was disrupted and enriched by the new knowledge, perspectives, inspirations, and ways of thinking gained through their doctoral experiences. These new tools, though not always specifically aimed at improving teaching, were adapted by

the participants to critically re-examine and improve their long-established teaching practices, rationalize their existing practices, and expand into new territories of practices beyond teaching EFL, transforming them from experienced teachers into more informed teachers who were intellectually well-equipped to reflect upon, renew, justify, and expand their teaching practices. These findings attested to the postulation that boundaries between activity systems are "interesting places" (Wenger, 2010, p. 183), where the new input from a different activity system can bring radical innovations and changes to long-held beliefs and long-established practices in the existing system (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). This horizontal learning of teaching through crossing system boundaries holds particular significance for experienced teachers, who have developed deep-held beliefs about their practices and are less likely to embrace innovations (Tavakoli & Howard, 2012). The discovery and adaptation of new tools through boundary crossing creates spaces for them to "take a fresh look at their long-standing practices and assumptions" (Tsui & Law, 2007), which prevents their practices from losing dynamism and becoming stale (Wenger, 1998).

Overall, the participants' self-reported gains in establishing professional legitimacy, curating researcher identities, and strengthening teacher identities through retooling the doctoral experiences demonstrate that boundary crossing between parallel activity systems creates opportunities to "achieve hybrid solutions" (Engeström et al., 1995, p. 319) to irreconcilable paradoxes arising from systemic contradictions and unnoticed gaps in seemingly plausible practices within single activity systems. Of note is that some tools developed through doctoral studies were "not conveniently handed to the subject[s]" (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 22) for them to use in their professional contexts, but rather needed to be creatively adapted. For example, in T6's case, while the systemic constraints in her professional activity system (i.e., the lack of databases) hindered her from keeping to her habits of reading the latest literature, she managed to find various alternative methods to locate and access the research,

for example, through following key researchers on research social networking platform and requesting articles from authors. Through these adaptations, she kept her way of living during her doctoral studies and strived to stay connected with the academic community. In T4's case, while doctoral research provided him with knowledge and insights to offer a new course, he needed to adapt and redesign the scholarly knowledge and insights into comprehensible and logical teaching content to accommodate the target students, ensuring that the course was research-driven yet intelligible for undergraduate students.

Second, the findings in this chapter offer some promising evidence for the role of PD programs in fostering the practice-research nexus, amidst extensive literature that has expressed skepticism towards this goal of PD programs (e.g., Levine, 2005; Neumann, 2005). While prior studies claim a "tenuous link between research and practice" (Neumann, 2005, p. 185) in PD programs and identify "little robust evidence of [their] impact on professional practice" (Moran & Misra, 2018, p. 84), most participants in this study reported their strengthened teacher identities developed through doctoral studies. It is also interesting to note that this nexus emerged even though many participants did not expect this nexus at the onset of their doctoral studies, and the PD programs themselves were not ideally tailored to facilitate this nexus, as discussed in Chapter 5. This leads us to further interrogate whether it is the specific professional doctorate or the doctorate in general that has promoted this nexus. Although answers to this query are beyond the scope of this study and warrant further comparative studies of PD programs and traditional PhD programs, several unique features of PD programs need to be acknowledged in facilitating the practice-research nexus. For one thing, PD programs value applicants' practitioner experiences and acknowledge their time constraints, making them an welcoming option for mid-career experienced practitioners who aspire to pursue higher research degrees for career advancement. In the Chinese context, where ageism prevails in higher education job market (Horta & Li, 2024) and where there is an implicit bias

against part-time candidates in PhD enrolment (Zhang & Sun, 2015), PD programs expand opportunities for these mid-career practitioners to participate in further doctoral education in a flexible mode that enables them to juggle professional work. For another thing, the intensive and systematic coursework section, which characterized the PD programs, inject new knowledge, perspectives, and mindsets into experienced practitioners. The structured learning environment fosters their immersion in an academic world "outside their economies of status, meaning and practice" (Wadham & Parkin, 2017, p. 622). By stepping out of their habitus, they are able unsettle their long-established, taken-for-granted practices and embrace new possibilities in their professional practices.

By explicating how the participants' teacher identities were strengthened and enriched, the findings in this chapter also sheds light on how to curate potential pathways to the teaching-research nexus in language education. In particular, extending the well-acknowledged rationale of achieving improved teaching practices through problem-oriented pedagogical research (e.g., Sato, 2023; Wyatt & Dikilitas, 2016), there could be alternative pathways to the teaching-research nexus. As the findings indicate, although many participants did not conduct pedagogical research on their classroom concerns for their doctoral thesis projects, they still found ways to improve their original teaching practices or even move beyond teaching EFL to incorporate new courses. Key factors in this tacit and indirect process of reshaping teacher identities include the theoretical knowledge in language education and applied linguistics acquired through doctoral courses and literature review, the cutting-edge insights obtained through doctoral research, the research mindsets developed through research training, and the on-site inspirations gained from observing the best practices of established researcher-teachers. In this study, all these new affordances are enabled by their exposure to research education. Thus, complementing previous frameworks that advocate for teachers conducting practice-based research and using research as evidence for teaching (e.g., Borg, 2010; Sato, 2023; Sato

& Loewen, 2022), the findings in this chapter warrant a broadened conception of the role of research in enhancing teaching. It may not be research itself that brings changes to teachers' pedagogical practices, but rather the renewed sense of thinking, doing, and being that research fosters. As teachers engage in the world of research, they will broaden their perspectives on teaching and change the ways they see themselves as well as their profession (Barkhuizen, 2021). With the epistemological shift brought about by a research education, teachers can revisit and improve their original intuitive and experience-based teaching, adding rigor, criticality, and creativity to their practices.

7.5 Chapter summary

Through the lens of identity construction, this chapter offers a comprehensive account of how Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' engagement with their doctoral activity systems has generated impact on their engagement with their professional activity systems. Specifically, I have examined the tools that they have obtained through their doctoral studies as well as how these tools have been adapted and used in their professional contexts to motivate changes. Drawing upon my integrated theoretical framework of identity-in-activity and identity-in-discourse, the participants' narratives are analyzed as their recounting of how they draw upon tools to mediate their relationships within their professional world on the one hand and as discursive resources to construct their identities on the other hand. Overall, a wide array of tools, including symbolic, conceptual, material, and social tools, are acquired through doctoral studies, and are adapted and used by the participants to enhance their professional legitimacy, address their research quandaries, and enhance their teaching practices. Micro-level discourse analysis reveals that the participants reshape their self-positionings through these experiences, re-envisioning themselves as (quasi-)legitimate members in the higher education community, researchers in the making, and informed teachers.

The findings in this chapter manifest how boundary-crossing in PD programs creates spaces for the participants to address the perennial tensions in their professional development in higher education and innovate their long-established habitual professional practices, adding empirical evidence to the importance of "horizontal movement, exchange and hybridization between different cultural contexts" (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 2) in resolving systemic tensions and innovating practices within single activity systems. By explicating the participants' changes in their professional practices, the findings in this chapter also contribute empirical insights into the international contestation over the role of PD programs in fostering the practice-research nexus and shed light on potential pathways to the teaching-research nexus in language education.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

This chapter begins with a summary of the major research findings in relation to the three research questions. It then explains the significance of the research and proposes implications for key stakeholders involved in EFL teachers' professional development through in-service teacher education and development programs. The chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations of the thesis and offers suggestions for future research.

8.1 A summary of the major findings

Through the lens of identity, the study set out to explore the experiences of mid-career Chinese tertiary EFL teachers doing professional doctorate as a means of achieving professional development. Specifically, it was guided by three research questions focusing on Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' motives and projected identities in choosing to pursue a professional doctorate; their negotiations of identities in navigating the dual activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies; and the impact of doing a doctorate on their identity configurations as tertiary EFL teachers. To answer these questions, I adopted an integrated conceptual framework which comprised identity-in-activity and identity-in-discourse, integrating third-generation activity theory with a discourse analytical framework. Guided by my conceptual framework (see Figure 3.4), I collected and analyzed multiple sources of data gained from twelve participants using a narrative case study design. The findings, presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, illuminate how EFL teachers' motives and projected identities in pursuing a professional doctorate, their navigation of doctoral studies, and their professional development throughout the process are shaped by a complex interplay of sociocultural, institutional, and personal factors.

8.1.1 Motives and projected identities

The study found that EFL teachers' motives of pursuing a professional doctorate were largely instrumental, reflecting a pragmatic trade-off between career advancement, doctoral admission opportunities, and the realities of their professional contexts. On the one hand, for mid-career EFL teachers without a doctorate, carving out a niche for career security and sustainability amid the current milieu of increasing credentialism proved challenging. This difficulty stemmed from the historical paucity of doctoral programs in language and education-related fields (Wang, 2018), as well as the challenges faced by in-service teachers in enrolling in full-time doctoral programs. As a result, the professional doctorate emerged as a strategic alternative to traditional PhD programs in response to the multiple contextual constraints. On the other hand, influenced by the prevailing institutional logic that prioritizes research outputs over teaching excellence, teachers recognized that career security and progression were largely contingent upon research productivity. As a result, their pursuit of a professional doctorate was motivated by a desire to enhance their research competence to meet promotion requirements and to establish professional legitimacy within the professional context of higher education, rather than to integrate research with teaching or to foster a deep practice-research nexus. Their projected identities were characterized more as credential-seeking researchers than as the researching professionals/teachers envisioned by professional doctoral programs. Overall, these motives and identity projections reflected systemic shortcomings within teachers' institutional settings. Critical gaps, such as limited access to research resources, insufficient mentoring, and a lack of institutional support for in-service teachers' further doctoral education, significantly influenced teachers' orientations.

Considering the sociocultural and historical embeddedness in activity systems, these systemic shortcomings can be traced back to the broader neoliberal higher education landscape, where market-driven imperatives and competitive appraisal systems have redefined the *object*

of higher education, shifting the original goals of educating the future generations and generating knowledge towards priorities such as measurable outputs, institutional rankings, and research competitiveness.

8.1.2 Identity negotiations in navigating dual activity systems

A central focus of the thesis was the negotiation of identities as teachers navigated the dual demands of their professional work and doctoral studies. As summarized in Table 8.1, teachers encountered a series of challenges arising from multi-level misalignments between activity components both within and across activity systems. To address these challenges and manage their dual roles, they employed agentic strategies, leveraging and adapting tools and resources across their professional work activity systems and doctoral studies activity systems, as well as beyond these dual systems. Discursive analysis further revealed salient identity (re)formation patterns at the micro-discursive level. Overall, throughout the process of using and adapting tools to address ongoing challenges, teachers reconstructed themselves as resilient navigators of the dual activity systems, autonomous doctoral researchers, and open-minded beginners in academia.

Table 8.1 A brief summary of identity negotiations in navigating the dual activity systems

Challenge	**Coping Strategies**	**Emergent Identities**
Time-related challenges	Personal time investment; external resource use; delaying/changing doctoral paths	*Resilient navigators*
Supervision-related challenges	Proactive communication; long-distance relationship management; collaboration beyond the doctoral space	*Autonomous doctoral researchers*
Subject-related challenges	Self-directed learning; reflexivity; academic networking	*Open-minded beginners*

Time-related challenges were identified as the most pervasive obstacle, primarily due to the conflicting objects within teachers' professional activity systems, as well as the conflicting objects across their professional activity systems and doctoral activity systems. In brief, institutions' object to enhance staff qualification metrics by pushing non-doctoral mid-career teachers to return to time-intensive education conflicted with their simultaneous object to maximize EFL staff's teaching productivity. Accordingly, for teachers undertaking further doctoral studies, the object of successful and timely completion of their doctorate was often at odds with the object of fulfilling their professional responsibilities. Teachers responded to these challenges by investing significant personal time to juggle both work and doctoral studies, relying on the conceptual tools of resilience and time management to persevere in their dual roles. They also drew upon tools and resources beyond their professional and doctoral activity systems, such as support from family and friends, highlighting mid-career teachers' pursuit of further doctoral education as a complex endeavor mediated by affordances and constraints that extend beyond the institutional and sociocultural settings (Bao, 2025). When competing priorities cannot be resolved, teachers often prioritized their professional work, leveraging the rules of doctoral activity systems as tools to negotiate a workable balance. Specifically, they relied on the flexible study modes and extended study periods permitted by doctoral programs to adjust their doctoral study plans, accommodating their professional work arrangements while striving to find an optimal way to complete their doctorate amid multiple professional duties.

Supervision-related challenges were also prevalent, particularly in the context of long-distance supervision and limited physical access to supervisor-led research communities and doctoral peer networks. These challenges stemmed from misalignments between the object and the division of labor, as well as between the object and the rules within the doctoral activity systems. Specifically, achieving the goal of graduating competent doctoral researchers within

required intensive supervisory guidance, collaborative interactions, and close supervisor-student relationships. However, the division of labor, characterized by the inordinate number of supervisees assigned to supervisors, and the rules, marked by the widespread endorsement of part-time, long-distance study modes, could potentially hinder the attainment of the object of timely completion. Facing these challenges, teachers actively sought available resources and developed an array of tools to facilitate their doctoral progress and their researcher identity development. Many of the tools they utilized extended beyond their doctoral activity systems and were creatively adapted and retooled. In particular, they drew upon their conceptual tools, such as their mindsets, habitus, and insider knowledge developed through years of work experience, to take the initiative in supervisory communications, maintain pleasant and effective supervisor-student relationship, and seek research collaboration opportunities beyond their doctoral activity systems.

Subject-related challenges arose from teachers' dual roles, which exemplified the novice-experienced paradox. As experienced teachers with well-established professional identities and practitioner mindsets, some found it difficult to reengage with the evolving research community as novices after years of academic disruption. These challenges were addressed through teachers' agentic self-directed learning by drawing upon resources both within and beyond the doctoral program, which helped compensate for their knowledge gaps resulting from their prolonged absence from academia. They also drew upon the conceptual tool of reflexivity to examine their preconceptions and embrace new possibilities and leveraged doctoral networks to renew their perspectives and facilitate their readaptation to academic life. Notably, they endeavored to make the most of the tools they developed through their work and life experiences, while consciously avoiding overreliance on prior experiences in order to negotiate their re-entry into student life and re-assimilation into the current academic culture.

8.1.3 Identity reconfigurations through professional doctorate

Responding to the underexplored yet important question of whether and how professional doctoral studies can impact experienced practitioners' professional development, particularly in terms of curating renewed identities that integrate practice with research (Burnard et al., 2018), the study indicated that doctoral studies provided teachers with a diverse array of tools, including symbolic, conceptual, material, and social tools, to reimagine and reconstruct their professional identities. The process of boundary crossing between doctoral and professional activity systems created opportunities for teachers to address longstanding tensions in their professional development and to re-envision their roles within the professional context of higher education. As summarized in Table 8.2, teachers drew upon and adapted the tools and resources they attained through their doctoral studies to establish a foothold in higher education and achieve professional development in terms of both research and teaching. Micro-level discourse analysis further revealed their emergent identities as (quasi-)legitimate members in higher education, researchers in the making, and informed teachers.

Table 8.2 A brief summary of identity reconfigurations through professional doctorate

Mediation	**Adaptation**	**Emergent Identities**
Doctoral title; doctoral candidate identity	Reified marker for professional legitimacy	*(Quasi-)legitimate members in higher education*
Doctoral research; competence and habitus; networks	Directions and groundings for continuing research development	*Researchers in the making*
Doctoral knowledge and perspectives	Critical re-examination of teaching; reference for pedagogical designs	*Informed teachers*

Gaining a doctoral title or being admitted to a doctoral program was regarded by teachers as an important pathway to legitimacy in higher education, which enhanced their

career security and sustainability, alleviated their feelings of imposter syndrome, and increased their opportunities to participate in institutional research and teaching-research projects. This is primarily due to the symbolic capital associated with a doctorate in academic careers, particularly amid the rapidly increasing credentialism in the current educational milieu.

In alignment with teachers' projected identities in pursuing a doctorate, doctoral studies provided them with a range of research-related tools, including their ongoing doctoral research, research competence and habitus, and research networks, that facilitated their researcher identity development. They leveraged and adapted these tools to chart directions for their future research and lay the foundations for their budding research careers. Of note is that while solid research outputs had yet to be achieved, the research-related tools acquired through doctoral studies made future research development conceivable.

It is interesting to note that while strengthened teacher identities were not projected by teachers in pursuing a professional doctorate, the tools and resources they gained from their engagement with the doctoral activity systems ultimately fed back into their teaching practices. What they learnt, experienced, and observed during their doctoral studies brought them new knowledge, perspectives, and mindsets to critically re-examine their long-established teaching practices, systemize and rationalize their teaching designs, and develop new teaching practices beyond EFL teaching. These findings revealed how engagement with the doctoral activity systems helped renew long-established practices in the professional activity systems and invigorate professional innovation, underscoring the importance of horizontal learning through boundary crossing (Engeström, 2015).

8.2 Significance of the research

The study has empirical, methodological, and theoretical significance. Empirically, it offers a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of mid-career

university teachers pursuing further doctoral education, a widespread trend among non-doctoral EFL teachers in Chinese higher education that has received conspicuously little attention in the research literature. The study revealed that the journey of achieving professional development and career advancement through a professional doctorate is a transformative identity project, shaped by systemic tensions both within and across dual-status teachers' professional activity systems and doctoral activity systems, as well as by their agentic adaptions of the tools across the interacting activity systems. In relation to the wider literature, the study enriches existing scholarship on the professional development of teaching-focused academic staff within the current neoliberal climate of higher education, the curation of the teaching-research nexus in TESOL and higher education, the doctoral trajectories of non-direct-pathway and mature doctoral students, and the actual impact and role of professional doctoral programs in bridging the practice-research gaps.

Methodologically, the study employs case study and narrative inquiry as embedded methodologies. This methodological combination offers "a novel approach to qualitative research" (Sonday et al., 2020, p. 4). While the case study approach enables a contextualized, in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of in-service teachers pursuing further doctoral education, narrative inquiry captures the meanings teachers assign to their experiences and provides a discursive, dialogic space for teachers to narrate and construct their identities. Multiple sources of data (e.g., narrative frames, interviews, social media posts, and artefacts) were collected and analyzed using multiple methods, including thematic analysis, activity systems analysis, and discourse analysis, to achieve both nuance and systematicity in interpretation and to allow for the convergence and synthesis of different lines of evidence.

Theoretically, the study proposes an integrated conceptual framework that integrates identity-in-activity and identity-in-discourse. This integrated theoretical focus, actualized through macro-level activity systems analysis and micro-level discourse analysis, generates

new insights into how teachers' identities are dynamically constructed and negotiated through both their practical engagements within and across different activity systems and their discursive meaning making of these experiences. By bridging two strands of theoretical perspectives in identity research (i.e., identity as experiential and identity as discursive) (Varghese et al., 2005), the study advances the understanding of identity as a practical and linguistic phenomenon closely embedded in sociocultural contexts. The framework proposed in this study can be adapted to investigate various forms of learning and identity development across diverse educational settings.

8.3 Implications for key stakeholders

The findings of the thesis have important implications for key stakeholders involved in teachers' professional development, professional doctoral programs, and policymaking within higher education.

For in-service teachers who aspire to achieve continuing professional development through further teacher education, and more specifically through doctoral education, agentic adaption of tools across and beyond their situated professional and doctoral activity systems is crucial for navigating their multiple commitments as dual-status teachers/students and for addressing ongoing challenges arising from a series of historical, institutional, and sociocultural factors. In addition to resilience, they need to creatively maneuver and retool the contextual particularities to foster productive interactions between their professional work and further studies. Horizontal 'hybridization' (Engeström & Sannino, 2010) is needed to introduce novel perspectives and approaches to resolve tensions within individual activity systems and create mutually informative interactions between multiple activity systems.

For designers and administrators of professional doctoral programs, the study highlights the need to acknowledge program-takers' established practitioner identities and to

tailor the programs accordingly. Informed by the growing call for identity-oriented teacher education and professional development programs, professional doctoral programs can consider "pedogogizing identity" (Yazan & Uştuk, 2025) in their program design by acknowledging program-takers' existing professional identities and creating meaningful induction sessions to facilitate their transition from experienced practitioners to novice research students. Such sessions can provide opportunities for collective and mediated reflection on existing professional experiences, encourage dialogue about the challenges and affordances of dual roles, and facilitate the negotiation of viable pathways towards the goals of professional growth and scholarly development through the doctorate. It is also noteworthy that, while teachers in this study managed to navigate the challenges in their doctoral studies, such as supervision-related difficulties, to advance their doctoral progress and achieve integrated professional development that incorporates both teaching and research, these positive transformations are largely self-driven. This underscores the need for structured support through programmatic initiatives. For example, it is crucial for programs to cultivate a large pool of qualified supervisors to address the potential lack of supervision caused by the lack of supervisors. In particular, programs need to have more supervisors with expertise in guiding practice-based research. Incorporating systematized tasks and reflective activities that bridge theory and practice into the curriculum is also needed to strengthen the proclaimed practice-research nexus in professional doctoral programs.

For institutional policymakers, the study underscores the need for supportive measures that facilitates mid-career teachers' participation in further education and professional development programs. Compared with fresh PhD graduates hired as faculty, mid-career teachers have accumulated massive experiential knowledge (Bao & Feng, 2023). Supporting their continuing professional development, especially in addressing their relative weakness in research due to historical reasons, is likely to strengthen the teaching-research nexus in higher

education, benefiting students and contributing to the sustainable advancement of higher education as a whole. For teachers who choose to remain teaching-focused roles, intuitions should move beyond the one-sided appraisal frameworks that prioritizes research alone and instead provide alternative pathways for promotion and career advancement. By recognizing and valuing the unique expertise of mid-career teachers and supporting their professional development, institutions can foster a more inclusive and dynamic academic community that leverages diverse forms of knowledge and expertise.

8.4 Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the empirical insights, methodological innovations, and theoretical contributions, the study has several limitations. First, due to its narrative design, the study mainly relies on self-reported data from the participants. Although several field visits were conducted to supplement and contextualize these accounts, the lack of observational data makes it difficult to examine how teachers actually engage in navigating the dual activity systems of professional work and doctoral studies, as well as how they transfer and adapt the tools gained through doctoral studies to inform their professional practice. Future research could embed an ethnographic design and incorporate more observational data to provide a richer understanding of this phenomenon.

Second, the study did not delve deeper into the participants' neighboring activity systems beyond their doctoral activity systems and professional work activity systems. Given that teachers' investment in learning and professional development is a complex, multilayered sociocultural phenomenon (Bao, 2025), often shaped by factors beyond the institutional and professional contexts, future research could explore how interactions with other activity systems, such as family and social networks, influence teachers' pursuit of further education. Such investigations will offer a more holistic understanding of the factors shaping teacher learning, professional development, and the dynamics of professional identity negotiations.

Appendix I Information Sheet and Consent Form

You are invited to participate in the above project conducted by BAO Jie, who is a PhD student of the Department of English and Communication at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The project is supervised by Dr William Feng and Professor Guangwei Hu.

The aims/objectives of this project are to explore the identity construction of professional doctoral students, who straddle the academia and the workplace, and have to coordinate multiple subject positions during their doctoral journey. Your participation will involve completing a survey of narrative frames which may take no more than 25 minutes. At the end of the survey, you are invited to participate in an interview which will probably take 30 minutes. Moreover, participants are invited to share the artefacts related to their doctoral study and professional engagements (e.g., reflective journals, published articles, posts on social media), on a voluntary basis.

There is not any expected risk of participating in the survey and interview. All information related to you will remain confidential. All the data will be kept in a password-protected laptop that only the researcher can access and will be used solely for purposes of research. The data you contribute will be anonymized and analyzed statistically along with other participants' data. Therefore, you cannot be identified in any publications based on this research, which may include journal articles, books, conference presentations, and so on.

If you would like to get more information about this study, please contact BAO Jie (email address: amy-jie.bao@), Dr William Feng (email address: will.feng@) or Professor Guangwei Hu (email address: guangwei.hu@).

In the event you have any complaints about the conduct of this research study, you may contact Secretary, PolyU Institutional Review Board in writing (institutional.review.board@polyu.edu.hk) stating clearly the responsible person and department of this study as well as the Reference Number.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Identity construction of tertiary EFL teachers doing professional doctorate

I ---------- hereby consent to participate in the captioned research project conducted by BAO Jie under the supervision of Dr William Feng and Professor Guangwei Hu at the Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

I understand that all information related to me will remain confidential. All the data will be kept in a password-protected laptop that only the researcher can access and will use solely for the purposes of research.

I also understand that the data I contribute will be anonymized and analyzed statistically along with other participants' data and that I cannot be identified in any publications based on this research, which may include journal articles, books, conference presentations, and so on.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information about the research in the Participant Information Sheet. I understand my participation in this study is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the opportunity to ask questions and can withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Name of participant: ----------

Signature of participant: ----------

The name that you type here will be counted as your

Name of researcher: ……BAO Jie……

Signature of researcher:

Date: ……

Appendix II Narrative Frames

The study aims to explore your experiences and identities as a university EFL teacher concurrently pursuing a professional doctoral degree. Please fill in the spaces below with as much detail as you can. Your information will be anonymized.

1. My professional duties at my work institution include _____.

2. My weekly teaching load is _____, the normal teaching load for EFL teachers in my institution is _____.

3. My biggest achievements at work come from _____. For example, _____.

4. My biggest frustrations at work come form _____. For example, _____.

5. I draw upon _____ to resolve the tensions and challenges I meet at work. For example, _____.

6. As a tertiary EFL teacher, my practiced identity is _____. My ideal identity is _____.

7. I chose to pursue a professional doctorate because _____.

8. Compared with PhD program, the advantages of professional doctoral programs lie in _____, the disadvantages lie in _____.

9. The biggest challenge in my doctoral study is _____. For example, _____.

10. Faced with challenges, I draw upon _____ to deal with the challenges. For example, _____.

11. I _____ (benefited/did not benefit) from my doctoral study. For example, _____.

12. The biggest challenge for concurrent engagements with professional duties and doctoral study is _____. For example, _____.

13. My thesis topic is _____. It is _____ (related/not related) to my professional engagements. I choose this topic because _____.

14. In my doctoral study, I _____ (generated/did not generate) new understandings on teaching.

I generated new understandings on teaching. I used to think teaching is _____, now I think teaching is _____.

I did not generate new understandings on teaching, because _____.

15. I draw upon _____ to resolve the tensions between work and study. For example, _____.

16. In my doctoral study, I consider myself as a/an _____. In the future, I could become a/an _____.

Appendix III Sample Interview Questions

1. In the narrative frames, you mentioned A, B, C, and D, could you please elaborate how each of these shapes your self-perceptions?

2. Can you recount your experiences of becoming as a tertiary EFL teachers? Why do you choose this profession?

3. How do you define working as an EFL teacher in Chinese higher education institutions? What do you think are your major job responsibilities? What are the major challenges you have encountered? How do you deal with these challenges?

4. How do you think about the policy change at your institution as well as the broader higher education landscape? Does the policy change influence your self-perceptions as a tertiary teacher?

5. What motivates you to pursue a doctorate? Have you considered any other types of professional development programs?

6. Can you describe your doctoral studies over the years? What are the major challenges you have encountered? How do you deal with these challenges? Does doing a professional doctorate change you? If so, in what ways?

7. Does doctoral studies bring you any benefits?

8. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing a professional doctorate instead of a traditional PhD?

9. How do you manage both work and doctoral studies?

10. How do you choose your research topic for your doctoral project?

11. Can your doctoral studies inform your professional practice? If yes, how? If no, why?

12. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being an on-the-job doctoral student? How do you leverage the advantages? How do you deal with the disadvantages?

Appendix IV An Example of WeChat Post Collected through Netnographic Observation

Appendix V An Example of the Collected Artefacts – Policy Document

第五部分　教学为主型副教授任职条件

一、具有良好的思想政治素质、职业道德，热爱教学和科研工作。具有较为丰富的教学实践经验，一定的教学管理和指导能力，教学成果显著。在教学改革、专业建设、课程建设、指导学生竞赛等方面做出较大成绩。

二、聘任在教学为主岗位，且主讲 2 门及以上课程，并指导本科生毕业设计或论文（公共基础课教师除外）。

三、完成学校规定的教学环节和教学工作量。公共基础课教师授课时数不少于 14 学时/周，非公共基础课教师不少于 10 学时/周。

四、担任班导师或辅导员，并考核合格及以上。

五、教师教学工作业绩评价均须合格及以上，且获得优秀次数不低于 2 次。

六、获得省级优秀教材（新形态教材、重点教材）（本人撰

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