

# Discovering and Developing Research Interests: A Narrative Inquiry into Three Doctoral Students' Experiences

Araştırma İlgi Alanlarını Keşfetmek ve Geliştirmek: Üç Doktora Öğrencisinin Deneyimlerine Yönelik Anlatısal Araştırma

Magdalena Keskin 

School of Foreign Languages, Bursa Technical University, Bursa, Türkiye

## Özet

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki üç doktora öğrencisinin araştırma ilgi alanlarını nasıl keşfettiklerine dair daha derin bir anlayış kazanmak için öyküsel sorgulama yaklaşımı uygulamıştır. Anlatı araştırması, verilerin dikkatli bir şekilde incelenmesini ve ardından katılımcıların yaşanmış deneyimlerinin sürükleyici ve ayrıntılı bir temsili oluşturmak için kronolojik olarak sıralanmış anlatılara dönüştürülmesini içerir. Araştırmacı, katılımcıların ilgilerini geliştirme ve sürdürme sürecini kolaylaştıran ve engelleyen faktörlerle de ilgilenmiştir. Derinlemesine görüşmeler yoluyla toplanan veriler, doktora öğrencilerinin doktora çalışmalarına başlamadan önce araştırma ilgi alanlarının farkında olduklarını ortaya koydu. İlgi alanlarının kişisel deneyimleri ve öğretmenlik uygulamalarıyla net bağlantıları vardı. Zorlayıcı ders çalışmalarının, gerekli donanım eksikliğinin ve araştırma makalelerini yayınlama baskısının, araştırma ilgilerinin gelişmesine zarar verdiği ve öğrencileri ilgilenmedikleri konularda çalışma yapmaya zorladığı görülmüştür. Danışmanların özerklik ve eylemlilik duygularını ihlal etmemeleri koşuluyla, danışmanların, öğrencilerinin araştırma ilgilerini geliştirmekte önemli bir rol oynadıkları bulunmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** araştırma ilgi alanları; doktora öğrencileri; Yüksek öğretim; araştırma katılımı

## Abstract

The present study implemented a narrative inquiry approach to gain a deeper understanding of how three doctoral students in Türkiye discovered their research interests. Narrative inquiry involves a careful examination of data and subsequent restorying it into chronologically ordered narratives to create an immersive and detailed representation of the participants' lived experiences. The researcher was also interested in factors which facilitated and hindered the process of developing and sustaining the participants' interests. Data gathered through in-depth interviews revealed that doctoral students were aware of their research interests prior to beginning their doctoral studies. Their interests had clear connections with their personal experiences and teaching practice. Demanding coursework, lack of necessary equipment and the pressure to publish research articles were found to be detrimental to the development of research interests forcing the students to conduct studies on topics they were not interested in. Finally, supervisors were found to play an essential role in fostering their students' research interests on condition that they do not infringe on their supervisees' autonomy and sense of agency.

**Keywords:** research interests; doctoral students; higher education; research engagement

Studies exploring doctoral students' experiences have been gaining momentum among researchers interested in their researcher identity development (Barkhuizen, 2021; Caskey et al., 2020; Qaleshahzari et al., 2020; Rahimi et al., 2019; Xu, 2021; Ye & Edwards, 2017), their research conception (Rahimi et al., 2021), the sustenance of their motivation (Pyhältö et al., 2020) as well as the challenges they need to overcome on the way to becoming independent researchers (Bakhshi, 2019). For novice researchers, doctoral studies are often the first

opportunity to fully engage in research and as they progress in their studies, they gradually build a new professional identity (Colbeck, 2008; Mantai, 2017). Even doctoral students who have conducted research during their BA or MA studies are forced to realign their researcher identities with the expectations of producing high quality research with more depth and expertise (Gardner, 2008). Rahimi et al. (2019) approached the concept of researcher identity from three different perspectives: an MA student, a PhD student, and a novice university lecturer.

### İletişim / Correspondence:

Magdalena Keskin  
School of Foreign Languages, Bursa  
Technical University, Bursa  
e-posta: magdalena.keskin@btu.edu.tr

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ORCID: M. Keskin: 0000-0002-4017-4326



They uncovered a serious dilemma their participants faced balancing between researching issues they found to be important and the pressure to produce and publish multiple research articles. Doing research with a sole aim of fulfilling academic or occupational requirements took a toll on their participants' development as researchers. Similar tensions were observed in Barkhuizen's (2021) study of a doctoral student torn between pursuing her interest in classroom research and trying to solve actual pedagogical problems and the pressure exerted by her lecturers to conduct research just for the sake of publishing it. The ability to offer tangible solutions to actual problems in the educational context is the most common type of contribution doctoral students would like to make (Rahimi et al., 2021). They also value research which addresses unexplored issues and original ideas, often describing conducting research they feel passionate about as a professional "awakening" (Edwards & Burns, 2016, p.741).

Aligning research with researchers' interests is a predominant theme in many studies, proving its benefits for the development of researcher identity. Edwards and Burns (2016) described how a teacher researcher was able to successfully blend his teacher and researcher identities by pursuing action research on teaching speaking. Furthermore, Qaleshzari et al. (2020) proved that the relationship between teaching practice and research practice is bidirectional. Through conducting research focused on classroom practice, teacher researchers develop their researcher identity and simultaneously refine their own classroom practice. Even though teaching practice is an important source of interest among doctoral students, many of them view their research as an opportunity to make contributions outside of the classroom (Caskey et al., 2020; Roulson et al., 2013; Vekkaila et al., 2013). For example, Caskey et al. (2020) implemented visual data in the form of doctoral students' drawings to capture how their researcher identity developed during one academic year. They observed a gradual transition from a desire to conduct research for academic purposes such as passing a course, to focusing on topics which can make a meaningful contribution to the academic field and the general society. Participants in Xu's (2021) study also acknowledged the social responsibility of being a researcher and the importance of disseminating their findings to the public. Doctoral students' research interests and the contributions they would like to make are often connected with their personal experiences (Roulston et al., 2013; Soong et al., 2015). For instance, as an international doctoral student in Australia, Soong (Soong et al., 2015) described how her experience of migration shaped her research interests and helped her make sense of her lived experiences. Another researcher involved in this study attributed the development of her researcher identity to the combination of her experiences as a mother, international student and intercultural scholar.

Another strand of literature on doctoral students' experiences explored the role of supervisors and academic lecturers in postgraduate education (Bakioğlu & Gürdal, 2001; Çapa-Aydın et al., 2011; Ezebil, 2012; Lessing & Schulze, 2003; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2013; Özmen & Aydın Güç, 2013; Sever & Ersoy, 2017; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Pertaining to doctoral students' research interests, Sverdlik et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive review of studies focusing on doctoral students' experiences and found a match between supervisors' and supervisees' research interests to be a crucial condition for their academic success. Similarly, in a phenomenological study of Turkish, doctoral students Sever and Ersoy (2017) provided ample evidence of how a mismatch between doctoral students' and their advisors' perspectives on research can inhibit students' academic development. This is said to occur if an advisor refuses to branch out of their field of study or field of interest in order to accommodate for their doctoral students' area of interest. According to Sever and Ersoy (2017), such behavior may be dictated by the desire on the advisors' part to be in control of the mentoring process and avoid entering areas of knowledge they do not have enough expertise in. Even if students agree to compromise their choices of research methodology, they are rarely willing to abandon their research interests to fit their supervisors' preferences (Ives & Rowley, 2005; Sverdlik et al., 2018). This finding stands in stark contrast to a number of other studies concerned with the student-supervisor dynamic. For example, Rahimi et al. (2019) exhibited how PhD students can prioritize their supervisors' interests and preferences over their own. Vekkaila et al. (2013) observed an increased tendency of novice doctoral students to adapt to established scholarly practices in their academic community instead of assuming more agency over their research. The boundary between offering guidance and controlling supervisees is crossed if a sense of agency and ownership of a research study is skewed (Kelly & Ling, 2001). For instance, supervisors might pressure their students to research and co-publish on topics they specialize in to increase their recognition in the field (Rahimi et al., 2021). As a result, Phillips and Pugh (2000) emphasized the importance of doctoral students displaying initiative in their studies and being able to challenge their supervisors' opinions and suggestions. Even if a supervisor's and supervisee's interests or specializations do not match, Lessing and Schulze urged supervisors to respect their students' preferences (Lessing & Schulze, 2003). The issue of ownership has also been addressed by researchers focusing on the Turkish context (Özmen & Aydın Güç, 2013; Sever & Ersoy, 2017). The relationship between doctoral students and their advisors was metaphorically compared to the relationship between a pilot and a co-pilot or an estate agent and a prospective buyer (Sever & Ersoy, 2017). Taking the latter metaphor as an example, an estate agent (a doctoral advisor) should support the buyer with information about the house (a doctoral thesis), but the final decision about the purchase belongs solely to the buyer (a doctoral student).



Apart from supervisors, the pressure of succumbing to the “publish-or-perish” culture and tight course deadlines are seen as obstructive factors in the development of research interests. Limited time might prevent doctoral students from submitting research they find to be meaningful (Rahimi et al., 2021). For example, doctoral students might be dissuaded by their supervisors from conducting qualitative studies which are perceived to be too lengthy and difficult to complete within an assigned time frame (Roulston et al., 2013). Returning to the Turkish context, Özmen and Aydın Güç (2013) enumerated various challenges faced by Turkish doctoral students and classified lack of time and tight deadlines as serious obstacles in doctoral education. Moreover, studies which address a context-specific problem, although meaningful and interesting for a doctoral student, can be discouraged since they are not likely to be published in international journals (Rahimi et al., 2021).

Despite the extant studies, Mantai (2017) noted a scarcity of research on experiences in students' doctoral journey which are of significance in their transformation into researchers. Furthermore, discovering research interests and topic selection were classified by Neumann et al. (2008) as a missing piece necessary for a deeper understanding of the doctoral students' experience. Consequently, Roulston et al. (2013) called for more studies to explore the process of how doctoral students develop research topics. Pertaining to the context of the present study, although doctoral education experience of Turkish students has been addressed in extant literature (Burakgazi & Yıldırım, 2017; Capa-Aydın et al., 2011; Çepni et al., 2018; Ersoy, 2015; Ersoy & Öncül, 2016; Özmen & Güç, 2013; Sever & Ersoy, 2017) it has not focused its lens on the issue of developing research interests. The aim of the current study is to address the gaps in extant literature and contribute to a growing understanding of doctoral students' experiences by answering the following research questions:

- How did three doctoral students studying at Turkish universities discover their research interests?
- What factors contributed to the development of their research interests during their doctoral studies?

## Method

In the exploration of doctoral students' discovery and development of research interests the researchers adopted a narrative inquiry approach. Narratives are particularly effective in identity studies since they allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of their participants' “narrative construction of self” (Bamberg, 2004, p.368). What is more, narrative inquiry studies have a potential to represent knowledge “from the bottom up” (Canagarajah, 1996, p.327) since stories are a tool we use to make meaning of and reflect on our lived experiences (Kramp, 2004).

It should be noted that narrative inquiry transcends beyond “just telling stories” (Bell, 2002, p.207) and can be seen as an integral part of the “person centered turn of applied linguistics” which recognizes “the humans in our research as opposed to representing them as abstractions or bundles of variables” (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021, p.4).

## Participants

All participants are PhD students at ELT departments at three state universities in Türkiye, with each participant studying at a different university. They are also ELT lecturers at the same preparatory school of a university in Türkiye. At the time of the study, Leyla and Pelin were about to finish their first year of doctoral studies while Sara was finishing her second year. The decision to include students in their first and second year of doctoral education was dictated by the fact that in later years doctoral students are substantially occupied with their doctoral theses which, in turn, drastically limits the range of conducted research. During her MA and PhD studies Leyla conducted 8 studies on issues such as error correction, reflective teaching and emergency online learning. She has published one article in a national journal. Pelin has conducted 10 different research studies mostly focusing on young learners but also blended learning and learner autonomy. Sara has completed 15 research studies and managed to publish 8 of them in national and international journals. Her topics ranged from special needs students, bilingualism, immigrants, and textbook analysis.

## Research Context

Context plays an essential role in any narrative inquiry since the stories told by participants are never experienced in a void and the way we narrate and tell our stories is constructed with respect to local communities and institutions and even broader national or international contexts (Barkhuizen, 2016). Consequently, in order to gain a deeper insight into the participants' experiences, it is necessary to place their narratives in a wider context in a process referred to as “broadening” (Wei, 2020). A review of doctoral research trends in ELT departments of Turkish universities revealed that two dominating areas of research include teaching English as a foreign language and teacher education with an overwhelming majority of researchers focusing on issues related to pre-service teachers (Özmen, 2016). It was also revealed in the study that the positivist paradigm is prevalent among Turkish academia which explains the dominance of mixed-method and quantitative designs and a low percentage of purely qualitative studies (5%).

Doctoral students in Türkiye are not required to publish research studies in order to pass their courses, but they need to publish at least one research article in an academic journal (national or international) in order to be able to graduate.



The participants of the current study attend three different state universities in Türkiye. All the universities have an almost identical system of doctoral studies in ELT. Doctoral students are required to complete mandatory and elective courses in about two years before they can take an official proficiency exam and start to work on their doctoral dissertation. Students are usually required to conduct one research study for each of their courses and the final grade is calculated by assessing a research paper submitted at the end of each course. Before conducting any study required to pass their courses, students are expected to discuss the topic they would like to research with their lecturers.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the current study was collected in a form of in-depth individual interviews ranging from 45-60 minutes and shorter informal conversations conducted after the data analysis process. During the interviews the participants were asked about their past and current research projects with a particular emphasis on the initial stages of their research studies in order to elicit information about why and how they decided to pursue them and the factors which influenced these decisions. Even though most of the questions asked by the researcher revolved around the participants' academic experience, they were free to go back in time as much as they saw fit in their answers in order to trace the origins of their research interests. As a result, their narratives differ greatly in their time span, with one participant going back as far as her childhood years.

In line with the stages of a thematic analysis, data from the interviews were transcribed and reread multiple times with an aim to gain an initial understanding of the participants' experiences. Chunks of narratives were labeled and assigned codes which were later organized into broader themes (Creswell, 2005). Minor themes were subsequently organized into broader themes in the process of layering the analysis (Creswell, 2005). In vivo codes were used where possible in order to represent the participants' voices to the fullest extent (Creswell, 2005). A vital stage of data analysis in narrative inquiry involves the process of restorying during which the researcher creates shorter narratives based on the participants' accounts with a consideration of previously identified themes. The narratives were shared and discussed with the participants during informal follow-up meetings in order to increase their validity (Liu & Xu, 2011). However, it should be noted that the reliability of the current study is achieved by a detailed narration of the participants' experiences and its analysis, not by the "absolute consistency or authenticity of events" in an objective manner (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). In the end, the principal aim of the researchers was to reflect "the experiences of both the participants and researcher and the way these stories of experience are embedded within social, cultural and institutional narratives" (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p.544)

### Results

A number of themes were identified by the researcher upon the completion of the data analysis stage. The themes were classified into three main groups: individual-related, work-related, and academic-related. The participants' personal experiences and their personality characteristics were classified under the first label. Work-related themes included teaching practice and observations made by the participants about their students' needs. Finally, participants' relationship with their lecturers, external constraints such as lack of necessary academic resources and the emphasis on research publication encompassed the last theme.

#### Pelin's Story: Where There is a Need, There is Research

Pelin never dreamt of becoming a preschool or a primary school teacher. She had her career trajectory carefully planned: BA, MA degree, securing a teacher position at a university, obtaining a PhD degree and finally settling down as a university lecturer working with pre-service teachers. Towards the end of her BA degree, all students needed to choose a school to complete their mandatory teaching practice in. Despite her wishes she was sent to teach in a primary school. Pelin was against it because she felt teaching children would pull her away from her dreams of becoming a lecturer, but she was not in any position to argue with her supervisors. To her surprise, she quickly realized that working with children gives her incredible amounts of professional and personal satisfaction. During her classes, she made an interesting observation. She noticed that students whose parents were more involved in their education performed better than other students. During her teaching practice, Pelin decided to conduct a research study about parental involvement in primary school students' foreign language education to help her students achieve their full potential.

- I saw that there was a need to somehow guide the parents because they played an important role in the students' language learning process.

She became a full-time teacher at the primary school she was sent to during her BA education and continued to develop her interest in studying young learners throughout her MA but she also started to grow more and more restless working in the primary school and decided to start work at a university.

- I think this is like a step for me to start my dreams in terms of academic career. If I had gone on working in the primary context, I would have lost my enthusiasm for becoming a lecturer at a university.



Changing her working context after approximately four years of teaching at a primary school deeply influenced her research interests. She no longer had access to young learners so continuing research in this area would be challenging and time-consuming. After starting her PhD education, she felt pressure to complete research studies in a limited time, so she turned to participants who were readily available to her, university students. As a researcher, she was not particularly excited about studying this age group. She found teaching them to be predictable and routinized. Despite these misgivings, she made an effort to actively search for topics to research in the university context. For example, Pelin noticed that her students struggled with developing learner autonomy, and she felt she needed to conduct a research study in order to understand the problem and help her students. She was also able to recognize her own limitations in the use of ICT and conducted a study in this area to develop her own knowledge. In other words, she modified her research interests depending on what she was experiencing as a teacher in her classroom. However, the role of immediate working context was not strong enough to make her forget about her initial interest in young learners. She feels lucky that her PhD advisor shares her interest and passion for studying pre-school and primary school students and encourages her to go back to her original interests. Pelin's supervisor even offered to help her find participants for her research projects. Thanks to the support she continues to receive from her supervisor, Pelin decided to do a research study with young learners for her doctoral dissertation.

### Leyla's Story: Seeking a Purpose

It all started with a book about neurolinguistics bought on a trip to Cambridge. At that time, Leyla didn't know what drew her to purchase it but it was the only book out of hundreds of different titles that she left the Cambridge bookshop with. That's how her interest in neurolinguistics started but it was far from a smooth journey. She searched for PhD courses in neurolinguistics but the only course she could find was in a different city. On top of that, she knew the realia of her country too well- even if she decided to study neurolinguistics there were no facilities, laboratories or even machines necessary for such research available in Türkiye. Taking all this into account, she decided to start a PhD course in ELT in her own city, knowing very well that they do not offer any classes on neurolinguistics. As a PhD student she became frustrated with the subjectivity of research and the inability of theories and findings to be proven without any doubt.

- I have seen that there are too many theories about language learning and teaching. This is something you cannot prove because you are working with people and psychological and social aspects are in it. I cannot prove it so why do I do research on it? Results can be different for people living in this country or in this city, even in this school the results change and they vary.

She could not see the purpose of conducting studies whose findings are context-sensitive. That is why neurolinguistics appealed to her. She viewed it as objective, universal and scientific. As her PhD journey progressed, she became more and more bitter and frustrated with the idea of doing research. She conducted research on emergency online teaching and error correction, but her heart was simply not in it. Her professors suggested these areas as they were very popular at the time and many articles on error correction and online learning were being published in international journals. Leyla felt her creativity was stifled by her lecturers' insistence on adhering to a rigid structure when writing articles. She found implications to be the most vital part of research articles and yet nobody, including her professors, seemed to pay any attention to it.

- So, what's the point of research then? You look for good methods and stuff but you don't tell me how to apply it in the classroom. That should be the main purpose.

Soon research became merely something she had to do in order to pass her courses and ultimately become a teacher educator. She still nourishes her interest in neurolinguistics by joining an online course on the subject, but she does not consider it to be a viable research study topic for herself.

### Sara's Story: The Voice for the "Different"

Even as a primary school student Sara felt that she was different from her peers. Being an introvert, she enjoyed her own company and had trouble making friendships.

- For a long time, when I was growing up, I thought something was wrong with me. Because people, they were very good at making friends, they were always talking, they were never afraid to raise their hand in the lesson and I thought "Am I socially awkward or something?"

Some of her classmates had learning difficulties. Other students excluded them from games and although nobody really understood where their learning difficulties came from, everyone could sense that they were not the same as the rest of the class. As a pre-service teacher, she was sent to a vocational high school. Even on her first day, she quickly understood that there was a great divide between the teachers and their students.

- When I got in the teachers' room, teachers were not very happy to be there because the students were not responsive at all. And these students were also labeled as "poor intelligence students."

In contrast to the teachers' views, Sara did not consider her students to be less intelligent. She understood that their behavior in class did not stem from lack of intelligence, but their social background.

Coming from working class families from the less-developed eastern part of Türkiye, they did not enjoy the same opportunities students from richer, more educated families had at their disposal. One day she asked her students if they planned to continue their education after finishing high school. To her shock, only one person out of thirty raised her hand. Another day she took her students to a computer lab and realized that most of them had no idea how to operate a computer.

- And now we are thinking this is the 21st century, but what are we seeing? We are seeing only our own world. These people felt like they were unattended. So there I realized that actually before content knowledge, we need to have knowledge of a human.

As a child, teenager and later in her teaching career, she came across people who were called “different” by others, who were misunderstood just because they behaved in a way that deviated from social norms because of their limited mental capabilities (primary school classmates) or difficult family and living conditions (vocational student). As a researcher, she decided to become their advocate. She hopes that by gaining an understanding of their situation and writing it down for others to read she can remove or at least decrease the stigma her participants live with every day. That is how she developed an interest in critical pedagogy. After she started to work at a university, she no longer had direct contact with students who suffered from mental disabilities or came from disadvantaged areas of Türkiye. While still maintaining her desire to be a spokesperson for groups of people who are not considered to be a norm by the society, she broadened her research interest to include all people with “different” life experiences such as bilingual students, immigrants and students who study abroad. She felt lucky to have members of such groups in her own social circle, which allowed her to find participants for her studies with much ease. Even though her PhD supervisor has been incredibly supportive of her research interests, Sara feels pressured to pursue a different avenue of research. She feels that her interest in human experience cannot be adequately explored using quantitative research methods. Unfortunately, she feels that there is a strong favoritism for quantitative research over qualitative methods among Turkish academicians. She remembered one time she sent her qualitative research study to a Turkish journal and was rejected because her paper was “just words, without any tables”.

## Discussion

According to Cooper and White (2012) there is a strong connection between researchers’ life experiences, both personal and professional, and their research interests. Consequently, research interests are very often formed before students embark on their doctoral journey and they are not directly connected to the content of their lessons (Llamas & Boza, 2011).

This observation has been corroborated by the findings of the current study. Although the participants’ research interests were influenced by a number of factors which will be discussed later in this article, they were all able to discover their interests before becoming doctoral students. Sara traced her interest in marginalized and misunderstood individuals to her difficult childhood experiences of not fitting in with her peers. Pelin discovered her interest in studying young learners when she was still an undergraduate student. Leyla became aware of her fascination with neurolinguistics on a trip to a library in Cambridge before she even considered pursuing a PhD degree. Roulston et al. (2013) conducted a retrospective study with graduates of a doctoral program in the USA and observed a significant correlation between their participants’ personal interests and the topics of their doctoral dissertations. Their participants had a clear understanding of what they wanted to study before starting the program, but they were not able to articulate their interests in academic terms and transform them into well formulated research questions. However, becoming too personally involved in one’s research topic can blur the boundary between a researcher’s objectivity and subjectivity (Roulston et al., 2013). Nevertheless, conducting research studies on issues of personal or professional significance is a powerful factor in facilitating higher levels of engagement in scholarly work (Vekkaila et al., 2013). In other words, a genuine interest in a researched topic can positively contribute to researchers’ vigour, dedication, and absorption in research (Schaufeli et al., 2002). On the other hand, a limited ability to pursue one’s academic interests can substantially deteriorate doctoral students’ levels of satisfaction and attrition (Capa-Aydin et al., 2011; Golde, 2000; Sever & Ersoy, 2017).

The relationship between research interests and engagement is, however, not a panacea for achieving sustainable motivation to conduct research and resilience in the face of difficulties. As evident from the participants’ narratives, a number of factors forced them to temporarily (Pelin) or permanently (Leyla) abandon their research interests and limited them in their exploration (Sara). The pressure of meeting course deadlines combined with difficulties of reaching potential participants, forced Pelin to turn her interests to university students, a group that she did not find to be as interest-provoking as young learners. Convenience was also one of the reasons why Leyla abandoned her ambition to conduct studies in neurolinguistics. Lack of equipment and professional and academic support proved to be too great of an obstacle for her to overcome.

Xu (2014) observed that limited access to necessary resources combined with lack of time were among the most common challenges experienced by university students in China. Postgraduate students in Iran also listed time constraints created by course deadlines as a factor hampering the quality of their research studies (Rahimi et al., 2021) as did doctoral students in Türkiye (Özmen & Güç, 2013). Research produced under time constraints is often described as shallow and lacking depth which can only be achieved by careful, detailed, and time-consuming analysis (Rahimi et al., 2019).



Pelin and, in particular, Leyla suffered from decreased motivation because they were not able to conduct research on their interests. A study of postgraduate students by Rahimi et al. (2021) also emphasized the significance of being interested in one's research for sustaining motivation. However, Appel and Dahlgren (2003) pointed out that conducting research on issues of personal interest is a privilege, not something that can be taken for granted as evident from the findings of the current study. This privilege is especially hard to obtain in situations where students' interests are not part of their advisors' area of expertise (Sever & Ersoy, 2017). Whereas the possibility of pursuing one's interests strengthens researchers' motivation, engagement and autonomy, lack of freedom in the choice of study topics hinders researchers' development (Lessing & Schulze, 2002; Rahimi et al., 2018; Rahimi et al., 2021; Vekkaïla et al., 2013; Xu, 2014). A study of Finnish doctoral students' engagement reported a correlation between students' experience as researchers and the type of engagement they feel towards their research (Vekkaïla et al., 2013). Similarly to Leyla, novice student researchers usually engage in an "adaptive form of engagement" which constitutes adjusting their own research practice to the expectations of their academic communities (Vekkaïla et al., 2013, p.22). While this stage is perfectly natural for novice researchers, Leyla's story shows that it can also diminish novice researchers' agency, autonomy and ownership of their work (Kelly & Ling, 2001; Lessing & Schulze, 2002; Phillips & Pugh, 2000). Ownership was also one of the central themes in the study of Turkish doctoral students conducted by Sever and Ersoy (2017). Echoing Leyla's experience, the participants of that study felt that the line between support and control should not be crossed by the supervisors. Students whose supervisors adopted a controlling and direct approach in leading their PhD candidates suffered from decreased levels of agency, diminished confidence, and overall dissatisfaction with their studies. Barkhuizen (2021) provided a vivid illustration of a doctoral student who, as a result of the pressure to produce and publish research, lost her purpose and motivation as a researcher. Her original aim, similarly to the participants' of this study, was to conduct meaningful research that could make a real contribution to her community. Soon, her attitude to research underwent a change and she started to prioritize doing research solely for the sake of completing course requirements or getting published.

Rahimi et al. (2019) cautioned doctoral students against becoming "producers of published research articles" rather than "real ELT researchers". However, as depicted in the current study, doctoral students often succumb to the pressure exerted by external factors and lose track of their research interests.

Unlike Leyla and Pelin, Sara did not report any difficulties with finding participants for her studies. She also did not require specific equipment to conduct her studies like Leyla. The factor that negatively affected the development of her research interests was the resistance of her local and, in a broader context, national academic community to her research methodology.

Özmen et al. (2016) conducted a comprehensive review of doctoral research in the field of ELT at Turkish universities and found a strong inclination for quantitative methods over purely qualitative studies. According to their analysis 24% of dissertations adopted a fully quantitative design and 71% of submitted dissertations adopted a mixed method design. Although the prevalence of the mixed method design might, at the first glance, point to a wide acceptance of qualitative data, it is overwhelmingly used only for "academic garnishing", not as a stand-alone source of data (Özmen et al. 2016). An interesting point of view on the matter was provided by Turkish PhD students who took part in an intensive, international Erasmus programme on research methodology (Ersoy & Öncül, 2017). The participants of this study noticed a significant gap in how qualitative research is perceived and taught in Türkiye and abroad. The Turkish perspective was reported to be much shallower and more focused on qualitative data collection and analysis with a disregard for ontological and epistemological assumptions behind it. Favoritism of quantitative data is also a common feature in Iranian universities (Bakhshi et al., 2019; Rahimi et al., 2021). Among the reasons, lack of clarity associated with qualitative data analysis, low writing proficiency of doctoral students and convenience are all listed in both national contexts (Bakhshi et al., 2019; Özmen et al., 2016). The argument of convenience is closely linked to the previously discussed influence of course requirements. Quantitative data collection and analysis are said to be less time-consuming, which allows researchers to submit the required number of research studies on time (Rahimi et al., 2021). Quantitative studies are perceived to have clear and prescriptive structure which eases writing anxiety and the necessity of relying on one's intuition rather than a recipe (Roulston et al., 2013). As a result, even though the apparent "messiness" of qualitative research is an important step in a researcher's development, many doctoral students show a proclivity for collecting and analyzing quantitative data (Maxwell, 2005). In fact, Turkish doctoral students who took part in Ersoy's (2015) study admitted to having a strong bias against qualitative research design deeming it simple and easy. Only upon the completion of their training in qualitative research methodology were they able to grasp the complexity and depth of the collection and analysis of qualitative data.

However, it is important to note that in the case of Sara, the preference for quantitative research was not exhibited by her, but by her lecturers as well as editors in national journals. Özmen et al. (2016) attributed this to the prevalence of the positivist paradigm among Turkish academia, which stands in direct opposition to Sara's ontological stance triggering a conflict between her research practice and the preferences of scholars and publishers in her national context.

Pelin and Sara received a lot of support and guidance from their academic supervisors. Lessing and Schulze (2002) explored postgraduate students' expectations towards their supervisors and found that they are expected to balance a thin line between offering guidance and respecting students' autonomy and creativity. Supervisors are also perceived as sources of emotional and psychological support (Mouton, 2001). For example, one of the metaphors for the doctoral advisor-advisee interactions used by doctoral students in Sever and Ersoy's (2017) study was the relationship between an older (an advisor) and a younger sibling (a doctoral student). This comparison is evident of the amount of emotional support that the participant expected from her advisor. In contrast, other participants in the same study voiced a need for the doctoral advisor-advisee relationship to be strictly professional and focused solely on research, without attending to students' emotional needs. The fact that such contrasting views were present even in a relatively small sample is a powerful indicator of how different doctoral students' expectations from their advisors can be. Pelin and Sara's supervisors fulfilled all their expectations. They not only encouraged their students to follow their interests, but also offered vital support in locating potential study participants. They allowed them to take the initiative of suggesting research topics rather than impose their own preferences for topics or research methods (Lessing & Schulze, 2003; Phillips & Pugh, 2000). Unlike Leyla, who became stuck in the "adaptive form of engagement" stage, Pelin and Sara were given an opportunity to "become autonomous and work on their own terms" which is characteristic of the "agentic form of engagement" (Vekkaila et al., 2013, p.23).

Apart from being embedded in the participants' life and work experiences, their research interests were also motivated by making a meaningful contribution to their respective communities. Leyla sought to develop universal solutions to pedagogical problems which would be applicable to many different contexts and could be shared with other ELT practitioners. Similarly, Pelin's motivation for developing an interest in young learners' education was to address challenges she faced in her classroom. The extant literature lists several benefits of teachers focusing their research on classroom practice. It is said to increase their autonomy and agency as they progress from following general pedagogical prescriptions to actively testing them in the space of their own classrooms (Nunan, 2003).

It also allows them to self-reflect on their teaching practice which indirectly benefits their students' performance (Dikiltaş & Hanks, 2018). However, Barkhuizen (2021) observed that classroom research can be a source of inner identity conflict if this kind of research is not welcomed by doctoral students' supervisors. Contrary to his

findings, supervisors mentioned in the current study full-heartedly supported classroom research and went as far as to impose it on their students as Leyla's case illustrates. Adopting a broader, national perspective, it is clear to see that classroom research is among the most popular areas addressed by Turkish doctoral students with researchers testing the effectiveness of new strategies and approaches to language teaching (Özmen et al., 2016). Unlike Leyla and Pelin who focused their impact on ELT practitioners and students, Sara desired to make an impact on the wider socio-cultural understanding and acceptance of marginalized individuals. Similarly to Sara, doctoral students in Caskey et al. (2020) and Xu's (2021) studies conceptualized their role as researchers in terms of contributing to a larger society, transcending far beyond actual classroom practice. However, as Xu (2021) and Qaleshahzari (2020) observe, having research published and accessible to a wider audience is a prerequisite for making such a contribution which, as evident from Sara's narrative, can encourage doctoral students to prioritize publishers' preferences over their own.

## Conclusions

The current study narrated three doctoral students' stories of discovering their research interests. The findings further strengthened the link between doctoral students' life experiences and their research interests as previously observed in extant literature (Cooper & White, 2012; Roulston et al., 2013; Soong et al., 2015). The participants' stories revealed several external factors which inhibited the development of their research interests. Lack of access to necessary equipment and potential study participants can force doctoral students to abandon their interests in favor of topics which are more convenient for them to study. Changes in research interests dictated by convenience allow doctoral students to fulfill course requirements but can be very damaging to their long-term research motivation. Furthermore, if supervisors' insistence on doing research that they perceive as easily publishable conflicts with doctoral students' research interests or ontological beliefs, their research autonomy and self-efficacy is seriously compromised creating a researcher identity dilemma (Barkhuizen, 2021). On the other hand, the present study illustrated that supervisors can also play an instrumental role in fostering their students' research interests if they approach their role with adequate care and respect for their supervisees' interests.

The findings of the study have important implications for different stakeholders. Doctoral students should strive to discover and nurture their research interests as the findings of the study corroborated claims that it strengthens their motivation and engagement (Roulston et al., 2013; Vekkaila et al., 2013).



Academic supervisors should be mindful of their importance in doctoral students' researcher identity development. Attempts at guiding their supervisees with an ultimate goal of having studies published and no consideration for the students' research interests can hinder their development as independent researchers. Future studies on doctoral students' research interests can contribute to the field by expanding the scope of the analysis and comparing how students in different countries and different systems of doctoral studies experience the process of discovering and developing their research interests. Finally, longitudinal studies tracing students' research interests until the completion of their studies or even beyond that point can shed more light on the long-term development and sustenance of doctoral students' research interests.

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