Journal of Teacher Education and Educators
Volume 14, Number 3, 2025, 260 – 281
Original Article

Balancing Teaching and Research: Multimodal Insights into Novice EFL Lecturers' Identity Development in China's Performance-Driven Academia

(Received on May 26. 2025 – Accepted on December 30, 2025)

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Abstract
This study examines how novice English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) lecturers at a Chinese second-tier university construct professional identities as they navigate competing institutional expectations for teaching and research. Situated within the broader context of neoliberal higher education reform, the study draws on three rounds of video-recorded interviews with four early-career EFL lecturers. Using Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis, it identifies four evolving identity trajectories: (1) embodied resistance, where participants reject dominant research imperatives to preserve a teaching-centred ethos; (2) strategic adaptation, in which individuals align with institutional expectations for research advancement; (3) strategic balancing, characterised by efforts to integrate teaching and research through institutional collaboration; and (4) aspirational resistance, where participants desire a research-oriented identity but are constrained by insufficient support structures. The findings demonstrate that identity is not only discursively negotiated but also performed through embodied modes, such as gaze, gesture, and spatial positioning, across three interrelated levels: institutional, relational, and individual. These insights shed light on the complex and situated nature of teacher identity formation in under-researched, non-elite higher education contexts, underscoring the importance of mentoring, workload reform, and evaluation systems that foster the development of multidimensional identities.

Keywords: teacher identity, novice EFL lecturers, multimodal (inter)action analysis, identity trajectories, institutional support

Introduction

Amid intensifying global competition in higher education, universities are increasingly prioritising research output as a key measure of institutional prestige and success, aligning with global academic benchmarking and ranking systems (Lu & Zhang, 2023). In response to these pressures, many Chinese universities have revised promotion and evaluation criteria for English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) lecturers, placing greater weight on research outputs than on teaching performance (Dai et al., 2021). While teaching once played a central role in EFL lecturers' assessments, under the new system, research publications, grants, and citations have become primary indicators of career advancement (Gu & Levin, 2021). This shift has significantly increased competition among academics, who must prioritise research to secure promotions and funding. As a result, institutional management has increasingly incentivised research productivity, intensifying workload and competition for early-career academics. For EFL lecturers in particular, this shift often generates

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identity tensions by pulling them between pedagogical commitments and research-based metrics of legitimacy (Nickel & Crosby, 2022). Furthermore, the growing influence of a market-driven academic model has exacerbated this pressure, forcing academics to navigate the tension between traditional educational values and performance-driven institutional demands (Elkington & Lawrence, 2012). For early-career academics, this negotiation often involves an ongoing transition between the competing identity positions of educator and researcher. These formative experiences shape their long-term professional self-concept (Sang, 2022). Such identity fluidity is particularly evident among novice EFL lecturers, who frequently struggle to reconcile the pedagogical demands of language instruction with institutional expectations for research productivity. In doing so, they must navigate a complex and often conflicting set of professional roles (Khalid & Husnin, 2019).

Despite increasing research on academic identity, significant gaps remain in understanding how early-career EFL lecturers in China navigate their professional roles. This study sheds light on early-career EFL lecturers working in Chinese second-tier universities, a demographic often overlooked in academic identity research. Their experiences offer critical insights into how neoliberal academic pressures unfold outside elite institutions, challenging assumptions about where such tensions are most visible. This group is especially significant given the vast scale of English language education in China: nearly all university students are required to take College English, and the number of EFL lecturers exceeds tens of thousands across higher education institutions (Wen & Zhang, 2020). As such, understanding their identity formation is theoretically relevant and essential for improving language education nationwide. First, existing studies often treat early-career EFL lecturers as a relatively homogeneous group, leaving the diversity of identity trajectories under-documented. While some researchers enthusiastically embrace their role, others struggle with the tensions between institutional demands and personal pedagogical commitments (McAlpine et al., 2014). However, these varied pathways, from seamless integration of dual roles to persistent identity conflict, remain insufficiently documented. Second, there is a lack of integrated analysis on how institutional policies, academic networks, and personal agency interact in shaping identity. Existing studies examine structural pressures (e.g., publish-or-perish mandates) separately from interpersonal and individual responses, thereby missing the complex interplay among macro, meso, and micro levels (Huang et al., 2018; Lu & Yoon, 2024). Finally, a methodological gap exists in the study of academic identity, with most research relying on interviews and textual narratives, neglecting the multimodal aspects of identity construction. Identity is expressed verbally and enacted through gestures, gaze, posture, and spatial interactions in everyday academic life (Dailey-O'Cain & Sluchinski, 2023; Mondada, 2016). The absence of multimodal analysis limits our understanding of how identity is performed and negotiated in practice, particularly in high-stakes professional environments. Addressing these gaps, this study employs Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis (MIA) to analyse the verbal and non-verbal expressions of academic identity development among four novice EFL lecturers. MIA provides a novel and embodied perspective on identity negotiation, addressing recent calls for more material and interaction-sensitive approaches in professional identity research. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question:

How do novice EFL lecturers in a second-tier Chinese university construct and negotiate academic identities within a performance-driven institutional environment?

Literature Review

Academic identity: a reflexive and fluid construct

Academic identity is widely conceptualised as a reflective and fluid construct shaped by the interplay between individual agency and socio-institutional structures (Dugas et al., 2020; Laiho et al., 2022). It evolves as academics navigate the overlapping domains of teaching, research, and service, often balancing intrinsic motivations, such as pedagogical commitment and intellectual curiosity, with

extrinsic institutional demands, including performance metrics and accountability reforms (Henkel, 2005; Marino, 2021). A critical dimension of identity negotiation lies in the teaching-research nexus, where academics face conflicting priorities. While teaching is traditionally recognised as a social mission (Fernández-Fernández & Fraile, 2016), contemporary reforms increasingly privilege research output as the primary marker of professional legitimacy (Collins et al., 2022). This tension manifests as a misalignment between identity-in-discourse (institutional narratives of the "ideal academic") and identity-in-practice (lived experiences of balancing roles) (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015; Perkins, 2019). For instance, teaching-focused academics often encounter systemic barriers, such as limited access to research networks and institutional marginalisation, which fragment their professional identities (Zeng & Fickel, 2021). Conversely, prioritising research can lead to pedagogical disengagement, revealing a core paradox of performance-driven academia: metrics intended to boost productivity may undermine holistic professional identities (Bak & Kim, 2015). Standardised demands and evaluation pressures often produce moral conflict and self-alienation, as educators struggle to align their teaching practices with their professional values, resulting in a cumulative emotional toll (Fleming, 2019).

Rather than viewing this tension as inherently harmful, recent scholarship has reinterpreted it as a site of potential reflexive identity integration. Mägi and Beerkens (2016) demonstrated that intrinsic engagement with both teaching and research, rather than mere research productivity, predicts innovative pedagogical practices. Similarly, Uaciquete and Valcke (2022) proposed a reciprocal enrichment model, suggesting that teaching informs research questions while research deepens curricular content, indicating that the fluidity of academic roles can itself become a source of professional resilience. These findings underscore the need to reconceptualise academic identity not as a zero-sum competition for roles, but as a reflexive process of meaning-making across interconnected scholarly activities. However, much of this work is either conceptual or based on high-resource institutions, offering limited insight into how integration is enacted under constrained support and policy-intensive conditions.

Academic identity in Chinese higher education: policy pressures and identity paradoxes

In China, academic identity construction is uniquely shaped by global neoliberal trends and localised policy regimes. The "Double First-Class initiative", a national policy introduced by the Chinese government to elevate selected institutions and disciplines to world-class status, and the "up-or-out" evaluation system, which mandates early-career academics to meet strict research benchmarks within fixed periods or face dismissal, epitomise the quantification of scholarly worth, reducing academic legitimacy to publications in high-impact journals (Teng, 2024; Wu, 2025). Such policies create a schism between academics' pedagogical values ("good practice") and managerial imperatives ("good metrics"), forcing early-career scholars into survivalist strategies—from passive compliance to strategic hybridisation of roles (Bao & Feng, 2023).

However, these pressures are not evenly distributed. Disciplinary and institutional contexts shape policy impacts. For instance, EFL lecturers encounter distinct challenges in reconciling national research mandates with institutional realities, often resorting to fragmented adaptations (Gu et al., 2025; Lu & Tang, 2025). Meanwhile, regional universities exacerbate inequities by prioritising "quick wins" (e.g., publication quotas) over sustainable support systems, leaving early-career EFL lecturers isolated in their negotiations over teaching and research (Lai et al., 2014). Paradoxically, the very constraints imposed by these systems can also generate opportunities for identity reconfiguration. For instance, Ni and Wu (2023) demonstrated that the policy-induced tension between teaching and research can lead to reflexive identity reconfiguration, rather than passive compliance. Their study shows how educators actively reclaim professional legitimacy by integrating teaching and research practices.

Nevertheless, while structural pressures in Chinese academia have been increasingly documented, less is known about how novice EFL lecturers enact and embody academic identities in everyday professional contexts. In particular, the interaction between institutional mandates, collegial environments, and moment-to-moment multimodal performances remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps through MIA, providing a situated account of how academic roles are performed, contested, and redefined in interaction.

Teacher education and the development of academic identity in EFL contexts

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that teacher education plays a central role in shaping novice EFL lecturers' academic identity—particularly in contexts where professional legitimacy is tied to both research productivity and pedagogical excellence. While early-career academics often experience identity tensions due to competing institutional expectations, effective teacher education programs can provide essential scaffolding to support this process of identity development.

Trautwein (2018) conceptualised identity development as a dynamic progression through three phases: "taking on the teacher role," "settling into the teacher role," and "finding a new role as a teacher." This phased model highlights identity construction as a longitudinal process that profoundly influences the success of teaching development initiatives. Three key forms of support essential to this process were proposed, including apprenticeship into academic roles, participation in communities of practice, and structured development of scholarly competencies such as academic writing and publication (White et al., 2014). Lopes et al. (2014) proposed an ecological approach to the research-teaching nexus, arguing that differing constructions of "practitioner identity" among EFL lecturers shape how they integrate teaching and research. Their work highlights that teacher education should consider diverse identity positions and disciplinary expectations when designing professional learning pathways. Moreover, in the institutional context, Flecknoe et al. (2017) stressed the importance of mentorship, recognition, and transparent career progression pathways, particularly for educators in Education-Focused (EF) roles.

Collectively, these studies suggest that identity development is embedded in structural, relational, and pedagogical environments, not merely an internal process. However, few studies examine how such scaffolding operates in performance-driven systems such as China's, where institutional priorities may undervalue teaching identities. The present study contributes to this gap by examining how novice EFL lecturers negotiate academic identity through multimodal and discursive practices over a semester of teaching.

Theoretical Framework: Identity in Sociocultural and Social-Semiotic Perspective

This study conceptualises academic identity as discursively and materially constructed within sociocultural activity. It draws on Goffman's (1983) notion of the interaction order, Scollon's (2001) mediated discourse theory, and Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) social semiotics, which together foreground how identities emerge through participation in socially mediated practices. Within this view, identity is not a fixed attribute, but an ongoing accomplishment shaped by institutional structures, cultural tools, and individual agency. These perspectives provide the theoretical grounding for examining how early-career EFL lecturers make sense of and perform their roles in a performance-driven academic environment.

Analytical Framework: Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis (MIA)

This study employs MIA (Norris, 2004, 2019, 2020) as its analytical framework to investigate the development of academic identity among early-career university academics. Norris (2011, 2019) conceptualises (inter)action as social actors(s) acting or interacting with others, the environment and/

or objects. In this study, social actors refer to individuals, and mediational means include semiotic and material resources such as language, the body, artefacts, and institutional discourses. Figure 1 illustrates the philosophical and theoretical background of this approach.

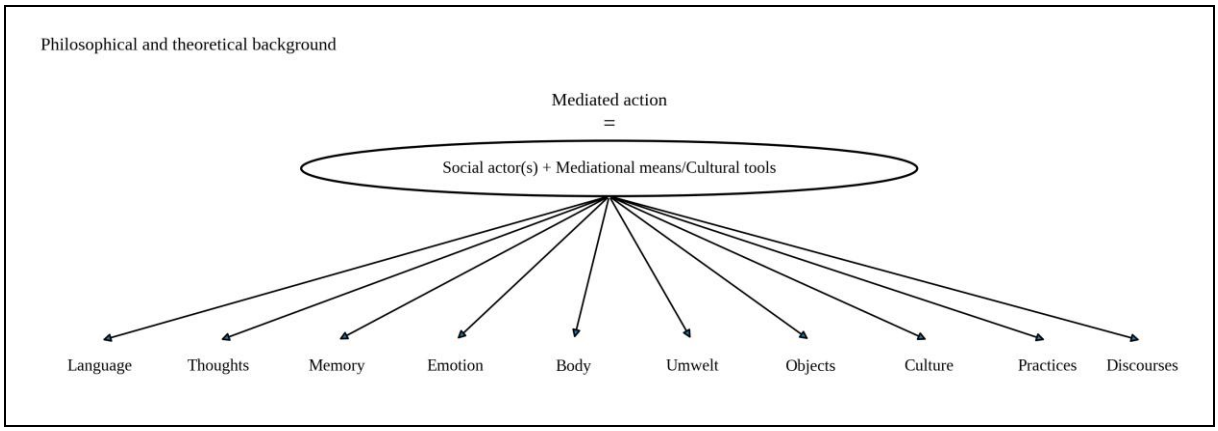

Figure 1: The Philosophical and Theoretical Background of MIA (Norris, 2019:39)

Furthermore, the concept of mediated action was proposed by Wertsch (1991) and is largely based on Vygotskyian psychology. Based on that, Scollon (2002) argues further that '[t]he mediated action (within a dialogical chain of such social actions as well as within a hierarchy of simultaneously occurring practices) is the focus of mediated discourse analysis. Norris (2004b: 11) divides mediated actions into three categories that together form the analytical basis of MIA:

Higher-level actions (HLAs) are complex activities, such as interviews or class sessions, bracketed by openings and closings, and composed of chained lower-level actions. For instance, an EFL teacher discussing her perception of being a researcher constitutes a higher-level action. Lower-level actions are the smallest units of interactional meaning, including micro-gestures, gaze, or brief vocal shifts. Frozen actions refer to material artefacts such as posters, drawings, or classroom objects, which retain traces of prior mediated actions and identity expressions. This study focuses primarily on the higher-level actions of novice EFL lecturers to understand how academic identities are constructed through extended verbal and embodied performances.

In addition, Norris (2011, 2019) discusses the notion of vertical layers of discourse, which operate simultaneously across identity formation. Figure 2 illustrates an example of vertical layers of discourse that produce elements of academic identity. The outer layers of discourse contribute to the general identity of a social actor, where macro-discourses (e.g., institutional policies prioritizing research outputs) enforce external expectations, aligning individual identities with organizational goals. The intermediary layers of discourse, composed of meso-level networks (e.g., mentorship, peer collaborations), produce a continuous identity by providing ongoing guidance and support, thereby fostering professional growth and a sense of belonging. Finally, the central layers of discourse construct the immediate identity through micro-interactions and mediated actions (e.g., the participant's personal actions of balancing teaching and research roles), reflecting moment-to-moment identity negotiations. Together, these layers capture the dynamic interplay of structure and agency in academic identity formation.

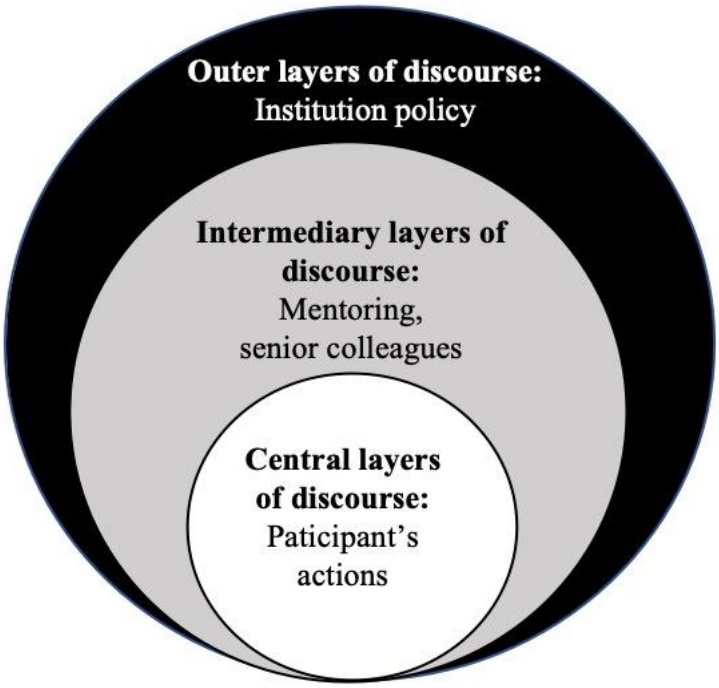

Figure 2: Example of Vertical Layers of Discourse Producing Academic Identity Elements

MIA has emerged as a robust framework for capturing the embodied nature of identity construction in educational settings. Unlike traditional discourse analysis, MIA examines how speech, gesture, gaze, and spatial arrangements work together to produce identity in interaction (Norris, 2011; Norris & Matelau-Doherty, 2022). It is particularly effective for tracing how individuals construct narrative coherence over time (Geenen, 2023) and how embodied stance-taking enacts professional roles in classroom contexts(Haataja et al., 2025). Prior research has applied MIA to teacher education (Christensson, 2019), intercultural collaboration (Liaw & Wu, 2021), and identity shifts in reflective narratives (Ahn, 2019), affirming its value in analysing layered identity performances. In contrast to traditional linguistic or discursive approaches, the multimodal perspective enables researchers to capture the embodied and material dimensions of identity in interaction.

This study employs MIA to analyse how participants' academic identities are produced and negotiated across various discursive layers through interviews. This enables a multilayered understanding of how early-career EFL lecturers in China perform, contest, and reconstruct their professional identities in response to competing institutional expectations.

Research Design

Research site and participants

This study was conducted at a second-tier university in Anhui Province, China. Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committees of the researchers' home institutions and the participating university (AUTEC Ref: 22/243). To address ethical concerns related to power dynamics and participant vulnerability, the study prioritised reflexivity and participant protection; all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Four early-career EFL lecturers were initially recruited based on the following three key criteria: (1) they were novice EFL lecturers within the first five years of their teaching careers; (2) they were voluntarily participating in the study; and (3) they were teaching the College English curriculum at the research site. These criteria ensured consistency in institutional and pedagogical contexts while respecting participant agency. Such alignment enabled the meaningful comparison of identity trajectories across shared teaching practices. Table 1 gives a brief description of the four participants.

While the study initially recruited four early-career EFL lecturers to capture diverse academic identity trajectories, MIA was conducted across all four participants to ensure theoretical saturation. Using Norris's (2011, 2019) framework of vertical discourse layers, the study identified recurring patterns of identity tension—particularly between teaching-focused values and research-oriented institutional expectations—across all cases. These patterned responses, though varied in form, indicated analytic adequacy for tracing identity development processes within the given institutional context. In qualitative research, sample sufficiency is determined not by numerical representativeness but by the richness, relevance, and explanatory power of the data (Yin, 2009). Thus, the selected four participants were deemed sufficient to generate deep, theoretically grounded insights into the multimodal enactment and negotiation of academic identities in Chinese EFL higher education.

Table 1
A Brief Description of the Participants

Name	Major	Background	Duration of Teaching
Yable	Linguistics	Master' s degree in Linguistics, 985 University (2018)	From September 2018
Caroline	Translation	Master' s degree in Translation, UK University (2018)	From September 2019
Daisy	Translation	Master' s degree in Translation, Chinese University (2019)	From September 2019
Mandy	Literature	Master' s degree in Literature, 211 University (2021)	From September 2021

Data collection

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. In addition, participants provided separate consent for the use of identifiable images (e.g., facial footage) in academic publications, in line with AUTEC protocols for visual data.

Each participant engaged in three semi-structured interviews across the semester (March–July 2022). Interviews were conducted in Chinese to avoid second-language interference (Tsui, 2003), each lasting approximately 60 minutes in private settings. All sessions were audio-and video-recorded. Interview questions (see Appendix A) were designed to elicit reflections at different points in time, aligning with the MIA framework (Norris, 2011, 2019).

The researcher guided participants and elicited their responses, contributing to the intermediary layer of discourse in the identity formation process (Pirini, 2017). While the interaction may have sparked reflections on identity development, it was not the focus of the study. Member checking was used to validate participants' intended meanings to enhance trustworthiness.

Data analysis

Data were analysed in four interconnected phases, following the theoretical and methodological principles of MIA (Norris, 2019).

In Phase 1, the researcher closely read interview transcripts to identify and categorise HLAs related to academic identity development. This involved segmenting the data into meaningful utterances and interpreting their functions in terms of identity work, with each action linked to a specific discourse layer—outer (institutional and societal), intermediary (community and collegial), or central (individual experience). For example, "personal actions" are associated with the central layer, illustrating how self-reflection and personal narratives shape academic identity.

Building on this foundation, Phase 2 quantified the frequency of general, continuous, and immediate identity elements shaped by different layers of discourse. For instance, institutional pressures negatively shape Caroline's continuous academic identity. This phase highlights how discourse layers mediate identity trajectories. Following this, Phase 3 involved selecting five representative excerpts that exemplify how different layers of discourse interact to shape participants' academic identity development. These excerpts illuminate individual trajectories and serve as focal points for the subsequent multimodal analysis.

Finally, in Phase 4, the researcher conducted a detailed micro-analysis of video episodes to explore how participants enact HLAs through various modes. A mode is defined as "a system of mediated action with regularities" (Norris, 2020: 16), and this analysis reveals how discourse and practice are embedded in mediated actions within specific sites of engagement (Matelau & Sagapolutele, 2023). The study focuses on transcribed modes, including spoken language, layout, gesture, gaze, head movement, and facial expression, each of which contributes to constructing meaning and identity in classroom settings. Spoken language was transcribed using Norris's (2019) multimodal conventions, incorporating prosodic features such as intonation and loudness through waveforms and font variations. Layout reflects the spatial arrangement of classroom elements (Norris, 2019: 205); gesture involves the use of hands and arms in instructional interaction (Norris, 2019: 240); gaze reveals attentional focus (Norris, 2019: 243); head movement indicates instructional shifts (Norris, 2019: 245); and facial expression conveys emotional stance and interpersonal dynamics (Norris, 2019: 248). These four phases provide a comprehensive and layered understanding of how academic identity is discursively and multimodally constructed across social, institutional, and individual contexts.

To enhance credibility and reduce subjective bias, two external researchers with training in multimodal interaction analysis independently reviewed 20% of the transcriptions and modal coding. Intercoder reliability (Cohen's Kappa=0.85) was calculated, ensuring interpretive reliability. Discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached, ensuring intercoder reliability. Member checking was conducted with both focal participants after preliminary findings were produced, allowing them to comment on interpretations and adjust any misrepresentations of intent.

Findings and Discussion

This section examines how four early-career EFL lecturers in China navigate tensions related to academic identity across three discourse layers: outer (institutional/societal), intermediary (community/network), and central (individual/interactional). A multimodal analysis of interviews reveals four evolving identity trajectories: (1) embodied resistance, where participants reject dominant research imperatives to preserve a teaching-centred ethos; (2) strategic adaptation, in which individuals align with institutional expectations for research advancement; (3) strategic balancing, characterised by efforts to integrate teaching and research through institutional collaboration; and (4) aspirational resistance, where participants desire a research-oriented identity but are constrained by insufficient support structures.

Trajectory 1: Embodied Resistance – Caroline

Caroline's academic identity is marked by persistent resistance to the researcher role and a strong attachment to teaching. Across all three interviews, she views research as a psychological burden that detracts from her pedagogical focus and frames the pursuit of a PhD as a forced necessity rather than a personal goal. Her disengagement is compounded by a lack of institutional support and collegial collaboration, which leaves her navigating research expectations in isolation. This sustained disconnect reinforces a fragmented identity misaligned with institutional ideals.

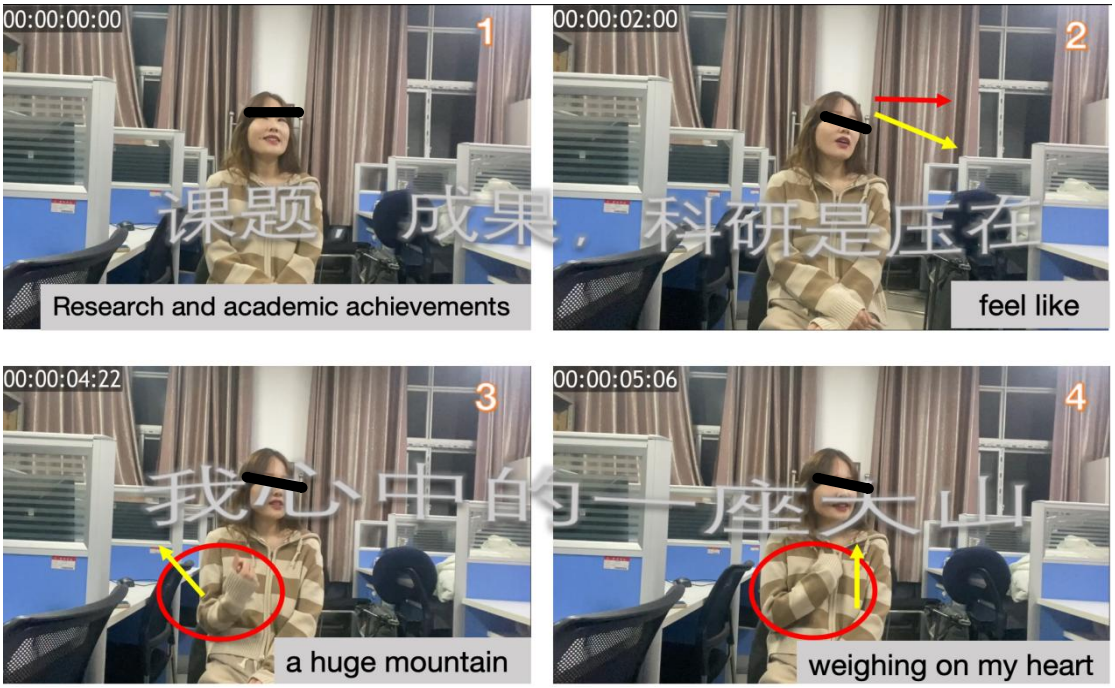

Figure 3: Conflict between Caroline's general academic identity element and immediate academic identity element

Figure 3 presents a transcribed excerpt from Caroline's first interview, in which she reflects on her experience with academic research. In frame 2, when mentioning "feel like", she gazes at the interviewer, revealing her emotional load. Studies on nonverbal emotional signalling in professional settings suggest that gaze direction and facial expressions are mechanisms for projecting vulnerability and seeking collegial validation (Haataja & Salonen, 2025). In frame 3, Caroline employs a metaphoric gesture (raising her hand) and a slower speaking rate to describe research as "a huge mountain." According to Cienki and Müller (2008), metaphoric gestures, especially those involving vertical hand movements, are frequently used to convey psychological burden and institutional pressure. McNeill et al. (2015) further argue that such gestures are not merely add-ons but integral to discourse, serving as visual representations of abstract challenges. This suggests that Caroline's raised-hand gesture is a nonverbal manifestation of her perception of research as an insurmountable challenge. Moreover, Caroline's deictic gesture (pointing to her chest in Frame 4) while saying "weighing on my heart" further emphasises the personal toll of research expectations. Such inward gestures are closely linked to self-reference and identity construction, especially in contexts of vulnerability (Hart, 2024). The deictic gesture is a multimodal expression of internalised stress, revealing how identity is shaped through embodied response to academic pressure. The transcript illustrates that Caroline's professional identity remains fragmented, situated between a teaching-oriented self-concept shaped by the central layers of discourse and the institutional pressures arising from the outer layers of discourse. Her multimodal actions—especially gesture, gaze, and vocal modulation—underscore the dissonance between institutional mandates and her personal pedagogical values. This case reflects a deeper conflict between her general academic identity, aligned with institutional expectations, and her immediate identity, grounded in everyday professional experience and self-perception.

Caroline exemplifies an embodied resistance trajectory, where institutional research discourse is experienced as misaligned with personal values, and multimodal data reveals an emotionally and physically expressed rejection of academic norms.

Trajectory 2: Strategic Adaptation – Daisy

Daisy also grapples with institutional research pressures but responds differently. Throughout three interviews, her attitude towards research shifts from viewing it as a peripheral obligation hindered by heavy teaching loads to acknowledging its necessity for career advancement amidst increasing pressures, such as doctoral recruitment policies. Initially, she attributes her limited research engagement to a busy teaching schedule and her own lack of initiative, framing research as a low priority despite its potential benefits for teaching. Over time, she internalises institutional expectations, although her research efforts remain solitary due to limited collaboration, reinforcing her sense of isolation. By the third interview, Daisy pragmatically accepts her dual role as a teacher-researcher, adapting to institutional demands while grappling with the tension between her teaching-focused values.

Figure 4: Conflict between Daisy's general academic identity element and immediate academic identity element

Figure 4 presents a transcribed excerpt from Daisy's second interview, discussing her perception of institutional policies. In Frame 3, Daisy raises her hand, saying "recruiting doctors". This gesture marks the beginning of a mediated action and highlights the institutional policy being referenced. In Frame 5, Daisy places her left hand on her right elbow, stating, "It's a pressure for me." This self-adaptor gesture, a category of nonverbal behaviour often associated with emotional regulation and anxiety management, functions as a self-soothing mechanism (Maki & Sekine, 2024). It reflects her internalisation of institutional pressure and reveals an effective response to the increasing expectations she faces. In frame 9, her vocal emphasis on "me," marked by increased volume, further signals personal struggle. Paralinguistic shifts, such as volume changes, often express strong emotion or highlight key points (Xu & Armony, 2021). Daisy's embodied actions and vocal modulation illustrate the tension between competing identity narratives. On the one hand, she aligns with a pedagogical ethos grounded in teaching as a social mission; on the other, she is compelled to conform to an institutional logic driven by research output and performance metrics. This conflict illustrates a tension between her general academic identity, aligned with institutional goals of research productivity, and her immediate identity, shaped by her pedagogical values and everyday teaching practice.

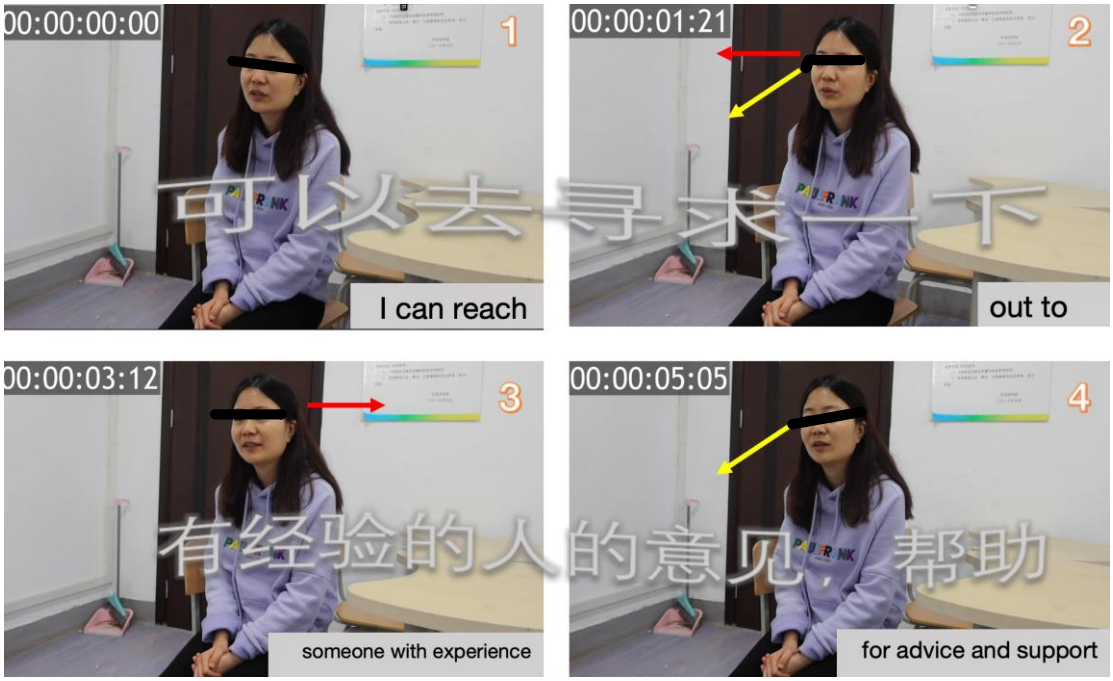

Figure 5: Development of Daisy's integrated academic identity

Figure 5 presents an excerpt from the later part of Daisy's second interview, illustrating the development of her integrated academic identity. Her adaptive strategies emerge as a performative negotiation of institutional constraints, exemplified by her deliberate engagement with mentorship networks and incremental goal setting. In Frames 1-2, Daisy's lateral head movement while stating "I can reach out to..." visualises the metaphor of reaching beyond oneself, signaling a shift from isolation to openness. The gesture embodies intentionality toward seeking support (Bezemer & Kress, 2015). In Frames 3-4, her gaze turns to the interviewer as she adds "someone with experience for advice and support", forming a multimodal alignment that reinforces her willingness to seek guidance and subtly positions the interviewer as a potential source of recognition. This reflects relational scaffolding in identity negotiation, where personal agency is enacted through socially situated interactions (Goodwin, 2018). Daisy strategically navigates institutional contradictions (e.g., research-teaching tensions) by proactively seeking collaborative support from colleagues, transforming structural pressures into resources for identity reconfiguration. Drawing on Arvaja ' s (2018) concept of identity bricolage, Daisy creatively reconfigures institutional tools such as mentorship frameworks to align with her pedagogical values. By seeking help from senior colleagues, she carves out a third path between institutional compliance and resistance. This form of collective agency, grounded in solidarity, allows her to construct an integrated activist teacher-scholar identity and reclaim narrative autonomy within the constraints of a neoliberal academic environment.

Trajectory 3: Strategic Balancing – Mandy

Mandy presents a trajectory where teaching and research are not seen as mutually exclusive. In three interviews, she allocates 80% of her effort to research, described as a "happy and painful sweet burden", and 20% to teaching. Initially, she views research as her passion, finding intrinsic satisfaction in academic achievements despite the challenges that come with it. Over time, she recognises the importance of teaching, evolving from a 90% researcher identity to a more balanced approach. This shift is aided by institutional mentorship, including her mentor's advice on teaching competitions and research projects. By the final interview, Mandy accepts the need for balance, acknowledging that institutional realities require compromise, even as her preference remains for research.

Figure 6: Mandy's perception of balancing teaching and research

Figure 6 illustrates Mandy's perception of balancing teaching and research from the third interview. In frames 2–3, her direct eye contact with the interviewer while stating, "we definitely need to teach, but you…" demonstrates how gaze serves as a tool for asserting confidence and positioning herself within a scholarly community (Brône et al., 2017). The use of "we" connects to the intermediary layer of discourse, signalling solidarity with fellow early-career EFL lecturers who face similar struggles in China's competitive academic environment. This collective stance resonates with her gesture in frame 6, an open-handed movement synchronised with "trying to strike a balance," which visually reinforces her emphasis on equilibrium and mirrors findings that gestures amplify abstract ideas during speech (Oben & Brône, 2015). Together, these multimodal elements—gaze, gesture, and inclusive language—reveal Mandy's negotiation of identity across three levels: her central layer reflects personal research ambitions (e.g., pursuing academic research), while her performance of balance addresses the outer layer's institutional demands (e.g., teaching quotas). This dynamic interplay highlights how early-career academics creatively adapt to structural pressures, resisting simplistic dichotomies between "teacher" and "researcher" through embodied agency.

Mandy's identity development demonstrates strategic balancing—a dynamic, embodied negotiation between personal academic ambitions and institutional expectations that fosters a more integrated academic identity over time.

Trajectory 4: Aspirational Resistance – Yable

Yable's case reveals a divergent path – one marked by progressive detachment from institutional values and a growing commitment to external academic validation. Yable's academic identity is shaped by a progressive disengagement from institutional expectations and a resistant aspiration for external academic validation. Throughout three interviews, she shifts from critiquing the fragmented support offered by institutions, highlighting that "70–80% of progress comes from personal effort," to viewing teaching as a transactional duty ("fulfil responsibility when on duty"), while strategically pursuing a PhD as an escape from institutional metrics. Initially disillusioned by superficial collaborations among colleagues ("no one takes empowerment meetings seriously"), she later prioritises her doctoral studies over job title aspirations, stating that "these things [PhD] are more important." By the third interview, she separates her professional identity from her passion for teaching, characterising it as a "job" that provides "time and social status." Yet, she directs her agency into scholarly autonomy through meticulous organisation of literature for her doctoral preparation.

This trajectory illustrates a tension between rejecting institutional priorities and reclaiming intellectual legitimacy through external academia.

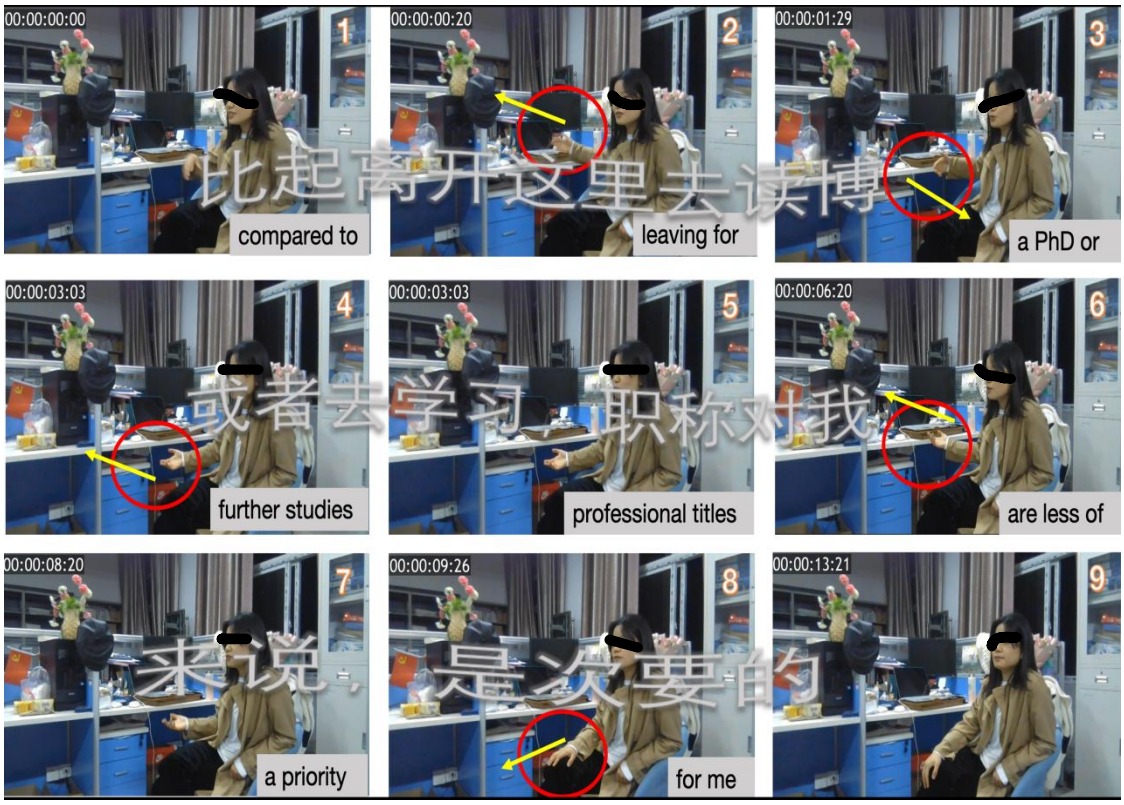

Figure 7: Yable's perception of pursuing a PhD

Figure 7 shows a transcribed excerpt from Yable's second interview, where she shares her perspective on pursuing research. In Frame 2, when she says "compared to leaving for a PhD", Yable extends her hands outward, a metaphoric gesture that spatially represents abstract concepts such as departure and separation (Ferré, 2012). This gesture visually underscores the notion of "leaving", grounding a metaphor of distance and transition (Zdrazilova et al., 2018). In Frame 4, as she adds "or further studies," her hands move inward toward her body, suggesting a moment of reflection. This inward motion contrasts with the previous outward gesture and may signal an emotional or cognitive turn inward, what Cuffari (2012) describes as the gesture's role in enacting unspoken meaning. Here, the gesture supports a shift from external action (leaving) to internal motivation, driven by a desire for growth.

In Frames 5–7, as Yable says "professional titles are less of a priority," she uses an open-palm gesture to visually downplay the importance of institutional ranking (Cartmill & Goldin-Meadow, 2016). In Frame 8, this shifts to a beat gesture as she taps her thigh while stating "for me," emphasising personal conviction. The transition from an expansive to a focused gesture marks a shift from distancing herself from external expectations to affirming internal academic values. These embodied actions align with findings in gesture studies that highlight how gesture shapes meaning in identity negotiation (Masi, 2020; Vignozzi, 2019). Despite these institutional constraints, Yable conveys a strong personal motivation for academic research and pursuing a PhD. This interaction reflects a central layer of discourse, where her academic aspirations and passion for research shape her academic identity. Although she acknowledges structural challenges, her commitment to academic inquiry stems from an intrinsic love for learning and a clear vision for her future academic path. This

contrast between institutional expectations and personal agency highlights the complex, multimodal negotiation of academic identity within higher education.

Yable exemplifies aspirational resistance, her identity is shaped by a desire for scholarly legitimacy and growth, but in tension with the institutional environment. Her multimodal expressions convey a resistant, yet self-motivated trajectory grounded in personal agency.

Cross-trajectory synthesis

Building on the four trajectories identified above, this cross-case synthesis highlights two patterned pairings in participants' predominant identity strategies. Caroline and Daisy struggle to reconcile the conflicting demands of teaching and research, reflecting a teaching-centred identity under pressure. However, Daisy also begins to recognise the need for academic development, gradually shifting from passive resistance to proactive help-seeking, particularly in relation to research engagement. In contrast, while both Mandy and Yable demonstrate a stronger inclination toward research, their approaches diverge: Mandy actively seeks balance and institutional alignment, whereas Yable aspires to a more research-intensive path, driven by a desire for doctoral study and hindered by insufficient institutional support.

Caroline and Daisy: Contrasting trajectories of identity struggle

Figures 8 and 9 visualise the development of Caroline's and Daisy's academic identity elements across the central, intermediary, and outer layers of discourse, as revealed through three rounds of interviews.

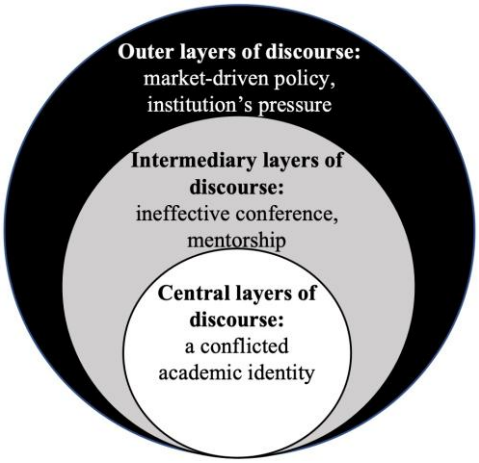

Figure 8: Caroline's conflicted academic identity

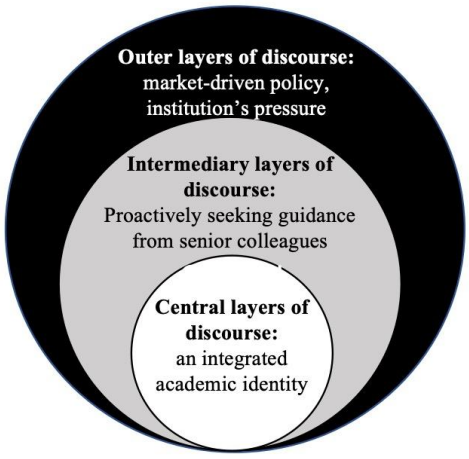

Figure 9: Daisy's integrated academic identity

At the outer layers of discourse, market-driven policies that prioritise research output over pedagogical development force academics into untenable choices (Clarke & Knights, 2014; Sarpong, 2023). Both Caroline and Daisy view their universities as prioritising research metrics over teaching quality and personal aspirations, which reflects findings that managerial reforms reduce academic identity to economic utility (Vican et al., 2020). Caroline's metaphor of research as a "huge mountain" illustrates the identity fragmentation experienced by early-career academics when institutional mandates conflict with pedagogical values (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015).

At the intermediary layer of discourse, access to mentorship and professional networks emerges as a crucial factor in shaping the professional development of early-career academics (ECAs) (Marino, 2021). However, Caroline and Daisy experience these resources as insufficient and poorly aligned with their needs. This disconnect contributes to their growing sense of marginalisation. Recent studies further affirm that inadequate mentorship and fragmented academic networks often lead to

professional isolation and hinder identity formation among ECAs (McNaughton & Billot, 2016; Zemichael, 2020). Yet in Daisy's second interview, her expressed intent to actively seek help, whether through institutional resources or collegial support, marks a key shift at the intermediary layer of discourse. Rather than resisting or internalising the pressure, she begins to engage in support-seeking as a strategy for navigating institutional demands. Such proactive help-seeking has been identified as a catalyst for identity transformation, enabling ECAs to reconcile tensions between institutional expectations and personal academic values (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2024).

At the central layer of discourse, both Caroline and Daisy experience emotional strain as their teaching-centred identities clash with institutional research demands. Caroline describes "research as suffering" and "teaching as passion," highlighting emotional dissonance and job dissatisfaction (Yang et al., 2021). Daisy also struggles with a heavy teaching load, but gradually shifts from passive resistance to proactive engagement, recognizing the need for integrated academic development. Their experiences show how institutional pressure can both constrain and prompt identity transformation.

Mandy and Yable: Constructing Research-Oriented Academic Identities

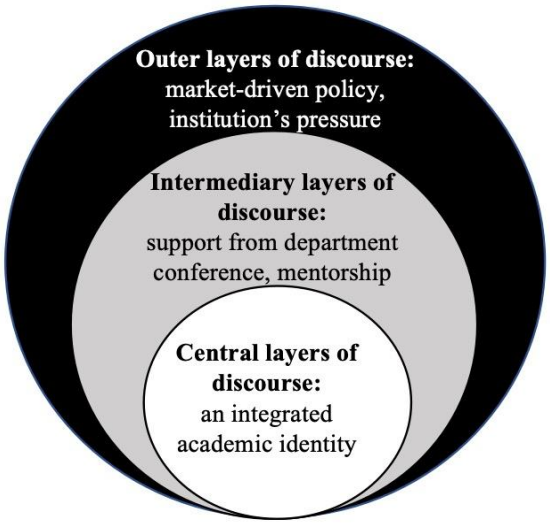

Figure 10. Mandy's integrated academic identity

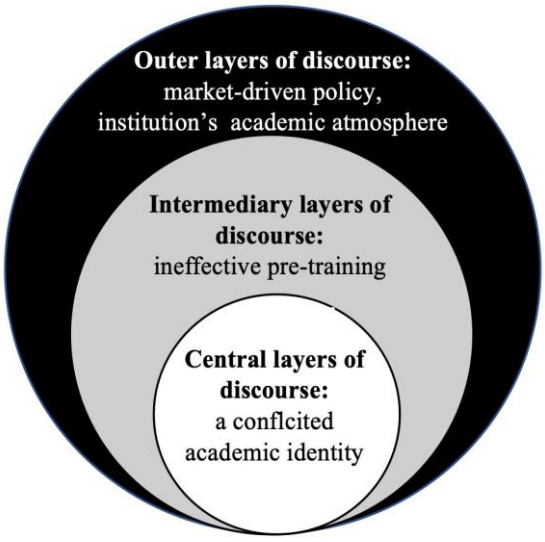

Figure 11. Yable's conflicted academic identity

At the outer layers of discourse, although both encounter the same institutional devaluation of teaching, their responses diverge. Mandy strategically aligns with research networks, leveraging international collaborations to build an integrated academic identity, a tactic consistent with studies on ECAS' strategic compliance (Zhang & Gong, 2024). In contrast, Yable's frustration with inadequate research infrastructure (e.g., conferences, training) reflects findings on how institutional neglect fuels attrition (Othman & Aljuhaish, 2021).

At the intermediary layers of discourse, Mandy's participation in international academic communities enhances her professional development, providing external validation and reinforcing a research-focused identity (Meihami, 2023). Her experience highlights the vital role of academic networks in bridging institutional gaps, giving alternative spaces for professional growth and identity negotiation (Huang & Guo, 2019). In contrast, Yable faces growing institutional pressures without adequate support or mentorship. Although she strives to meet teaching and administrative responsibilities, she increasingly experiences academia as a transactional space, rather than one of intellectual fulfilment. This finding is consistent with research on EFL lecturers retention and career trajectory shifts in under-supported environments (Crosswell & Beutel, 2017). Over time, her desire to pursue doctoral studies intensifies, not only as a career move but also as an attempt to reclaim a

meaningful academic identity, a pattern consistent with transition narratives among unsupported early scholars (Stratford et al., 2024).

At the central layers of discourse, Mandy benefits from departmental support, academic conferences, mentorship, and peer connections, which enable her to balance teaching and research. Through these experiences, she gradually realised that her academic life need not be defined by an either/or binary between teaching and research. Instead, she developed an integrated academic identity that allowed her to harmoniously and sustainably integrate both domains(Lu & Peng, 2025; Yin & Mu, 2023). In contrast, Yable's central layer of discourse reveals a conflicted academic identity that differs significantly from Caroline's. Whereas Caroline's identity tension arises from a value-based commitment to teaching in a research-driven environment, Yable's conflict stems from institutional barriers that hinder her pursuit of a research-focused career. Yable's experience illustrates how institutional inadequacies can disrupt personal motivations and professional commitment, potentially altering career trajectories (Lieff et al., 2012). This dual commitment, while challenging, demonstrates that mentorship and institutional support are essential for navigating early academic challenges (Rachmajanti et al., 2021; Sargent & Rienties, 2022).

These findings, along with the above cross-case synthesis, collectively address the research question by illustrating how novice EFL lecturers navigate complex institutional expectations and construct academic identities through embodied, strategic, and relational practices.

Conclusion and Implications

By examining novice EFL lecturers in non-elite Chinese universities, this study shows that academic identity is negotiated through both discourse and embodied action across interrelated outer, intermediary, and central layers. Across the four cases, the analysis identifies four trajectories—embodied resistance (Caroline), strategic adaptation (Daisy), strategic balancing (Mandy), and aspirational resistance (Yable)—highlighting how performance-driven research imperatives intersect with uneven support structures to shape early-career identity work.

This study contributes to EFL teacher education in three key ways. First, it moves beyond binary typologies (e.g., teacher vs. researcher; see Xu, 2014) by conceptualising identity as fluid trajectories, addressing recent calls for dynamic models of novice teacher development (Lu & Zhang, 2023). Second, it introduces a multi-layered identity framework that maps how institutional constraints, collegial relationships, and personal agency interact, extending ecological models of teacher identity (e.g., Chen, 2024). Third, methodologically, it innovates by applying MIA to the Chinese EFL context, integrating discourse and embodied modes of identity performance. Its focus on non-elite institutions fills a critical research gap and offers practical implications for teacher education, including the need for structured mentorship, emotional support, and more balanced evaluation systems (Li & Zhang, 2025).

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Appendix A

Three rounds of interviews will be conducted during the research period, and five questions will be posed during each round of interviews.

The first round of interview questions:

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself, focusing on your educational background and working experience?

2. Why choose to be a university/English teacher?

3. Do you have any plans or goals this term about teaching?

4. What problems have you encountered during the first class? And what have you enjoyed about teaching during the past week?

5. Please use several words to describe yourself as a teacher and explain why.

The second round of interview questions:

1. Who are some qualified EFL lecturers whose work you admire? And why?

2. How about your process of planning or goals for teaching?

3. What kind of help did you get from the school, mentors, workshops or experienced EFL lecturers ?

4. What kind of help did you give to other novice EFL lecturers ?

5. How do you think of your teaching life at this period?

The third round of interview questions:

1. Can you tell me about moments from the term that were significant for your teaching, positive or negative?

2. How about the outcome of your plans or goals for teaching?

3. Please use several words to summarise yourself after a term of teaching and explain why.

4. Do you have any future goals for teaching?

5. If you have a second chance, will you continue being a teacher, and why?