From teachers to researchers: A phenomenological study of Indonesian EFL teachers' research experiences

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While research has the potential to improve teaching practices and instructional decision-making, the shift from classroom practitioner to researcher remains underexplored in academia, particularly within secondary school contexts. Guided by Schön's (1983) reflective practice and Yazan's (2024) language teacher identity frameworks, this study addresses the gap by examining the personal and contextual experiences of Indonesian EFL teachers involved in research activities. The data were obtained through in-depth interviews with three Indonesian EFL teachers who are currently enrolled in a masters program in English language education at a private university in Indonesia. The findings indicate that teachers, especially those with a literature-oriented background, underwent substantial conceptual and practical adjustments when moving from teaching roles to educational research. Many participants initially faced challenges stemming from limited familiarity with research methodologies, academic reading, and scholarly writing. Major constraints included time pressures, insufficient institutional support, and difficulties in adhering to academic writing conventions. Nevertheless, participation in research activities contributed to a more profound understanding of classroom practices, enhanced critical reflection, and sustained professional development. Moreover, research engagement allowed teachers to remain up to date with contemporary pedagogical developments, facilitating a transformation in professional identity from routine instructors to reflective, research-engaged educators. The findings suggest the transformative role of research in reshaping EFL teachers' professional identities and self-understandings within educational settings.

Introduction

> "At first, I wondered why teachers had to do research like lecturers…"
> (P2 personal communication, January 2025).

Building on the above-cited excerpt from one of our participants, this study seeks to unpack the subjective experiences of three Indonesian EFL teachers in engaging with research during their masters studies. We discuss the relationship between research and EFL teacher professional development, challenges involved in the transition from teacher to researcher, existing gaps in the literature on teacher research engagement, and the need for a phenomenological investigation of EFL teacher research experiences.

Currently, the role of research in the professional development of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers has gained increasing attention in recent years (Floris et al., 2024; Rahimi & Weisi, 2018). Engaging in research allows teachers to reflect on their teaching practices critically, contribute to the wider field of education, and improve their teaching strategies. Through research, teachers can engage with new pedagogical theories, experiment with innovative teaching methods, and evaluate the effectiveness of their approaches, thus promoting continuous professional growth. However, the transition

from a classroom practitioner to a researcher is often fraught with challenges (Alhassan & Ali, 2020). These challenges include a lack of institutional support, limited access to research training, and tensions between research responsibilities and other professional duties, such as teaching and administrative tasks.

Despite the potential benefits of engaging in research, the process of becoming a researcher remains largely unexplored, especially from the perspectives of English teachers in secondary schools pursuing a masters degree for professional careers. Much of the existing research (see Li et al., 2024; Li & Xu, 2024; Rahimi & Weisi, 2018) has focused on the outcomes and impacts of such research, such as improvements in teaching practice or student performance, rather than on the complex process that teachers go through to become researchers. In addition, this existing research often fails to address the unique challenges faced by English teachers in schools who work in diverse cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts. To the best of our scholarly knowledge, the most recent study that explicitly examined teachers' research engagement and its underlying processes was conducted by Floris et al. (2024). However, a notable limitation of this study is that it focused exclusively on teachers in higher education institutions.

Despite this growing body of research, there is also a lack of phenomenological studies that explore the subjective experiences and specific contexts of English language teachers as they engage in research during masters studies. A phenomenological lens helps illuminate how teachers navigate the process of becoming researchers and the associated emotional, intellectual, and identity-related transformations (Hashemi Moghadam et al., 2019; Hong et al., 2020). In addition, given that English teachers' professional identities are shaped by a variety of factors, including their personal experiences, teaching contexts, and interactions with students, understanding how research affects their sense of self is critical to fostering effective professional development (Ubaidillah et al., 2024a, 2024b).

Therefore, the absence of phenomenological investigations highlights the need to critically explore the motivations, challenges, and transformative impact of research on English teachers' professional identity during their masters studies. Findings from this study are expected to support teachers' journeys towards becoming researchers, which can ultimately improve their teaching practices and contribute to the wider educational community (Kowalczuk-Walędziak & Ion, 2024). Thus, our study seeks to uncover the personal and professional transformations that occur when EFL teachers engage in research. To guide this exploration, the study is organised around the following research questions:

1. What experiences do EFL teachers have when they engage in research?
2. What challenges do EFL teachers face during their research journey?
3. How does involvement in research impact the professional development and identity of EFL teachers?

Theoretical frameworks

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is a key concept in understanding how professionals, including educators, engage in continuous learning and development. As Schön (1983) mentioned, reflective practice highlights the importance of critical self-reflection in improving practice. He distinguished between two forms of reflection.

Reflection in action
This refers to the ongoing real-time reflection process while performing a task. For EFL teachers, this may involve adjusting teaching strategies or classroom management techniques during the lesson based on direct observation and reflection.

Reflection on action
This takes place after the action has been completed. Teachers may review their lesson or interaction with students, critically evaluate its effectiveness, and consider alternative approaches for future practice.

Schön's framework highlights how reflective thinking can lead to professional growth. In the context of English language teachers, engaging in research can deepen this reflective process, as teachers critically examine their practice through the lens of research findings and methodologies. Research, therefore, becomes a tool for questioning assumptions, experimenting with new strategies, and refining teaching practices. The use of reflective practice theory in this study allows for the understanding of how research engagement can encourage EFL teachers' deeper reflection, which contributes to the teachers' ongoing professional development.

Language teacher identity

In her seminal work, Norton (2013) defined identity as a dynamic notion that explains how individuals understand themselves across time and space. Identity has its own roots in Wenger's (1998) idea of community of practice, where individuals attempt to attain membership in their community. Individuals, according to Wenger, construct their identity by aligning with the community they belong to. Such assumptions have largely inspired applied linguistics scholars to study the identity of language teachers. According to Yazan (2024), language teacher identity focuses on the dynamic and multifaceted nature of teachers' professional identities, which are shaped by personal experiences, professional roles, and socio-cultural contexts. He argued that teacher identity is not fixed but develops over time as teachers engage with a range of influences, including their teaching experiences, interactions with colleagues, and wider societal expectations. In relation to this idea, Barkhuizen (2017) added an interesting remark in his work that language teacher identity is also shaped by teacher narratives.

In the context of our study, teacher identity theory is highly relevant to understanding how EFL teachers' involvement in research can affect their professional identity. Research

offers teachers the opportunity to reconsider their roles, not only as educators but also as active contributors to the academic field. Through research, EFL teachers can transform their sense of self and balance their identities as practitioners and researchers. This process of identity transformation can lead to changes in the way teachers perceive their professional roles, their relationships with students, and their sense of belonging within the academic community (Ubaidillah et al., 2024a).

Recent gaps in teacher research engagement

Much has been reported with regard to teacher engagement in research. However, more specific findings are needed to understand the process of teacher research engagement through their subjective experiences. Engagement in research among teachers has been widely recognised as an essential component of professional development. Various studies highlight that teacher research promotes reflective practice, improves instructional quality, and contributes to the professionalisation of teaching (Pham et al., 2024). However, most existing research emphasizes the outcomes of teacher research, such as improved pedagogical strategies or student achievement, with limited focus on the process of becoming a researcher, especially for English teachers (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2024).

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, engagement in research is often influenced by external and internal factors. External factors include institutional support, access to research training, and opportunities for collaboration (Li & Xu, 2024). Internal factors include teacher motivation, self-efficacy, and previous research experience. Despite these influences, English teachers often face challenges, such as balancing research with teaching responsibilities, navigating unfamiliar research methodologies, and overcoming language barriers in academic writing (Ubaidillah et al., 2024b).

Furthermore, the role of teacher identity is also critical in understanding engagement in research. Yazan (2024) argues that professional identity is shaped by teachers' experiences, values, and interactions with their professional community. Engagement in research can lead to a redefinition of this identity as teachers adopt the dual role of practitioner and researcher. In fact, for English teachers, this transformation, which is absent from current literature, is further complicated by the cultural and institutional contexts in which they work. Lastly, phenomenological research in education has provided valuable insights into teachers' lived experiences, especially in understanding how they deal with professional challenges and transformations (Tai & Chung, 2024). However, phenomenological studies focusing specifically on the research experiences of EFL teachers are scarce, particularly among EFL teachers in Indonesia.

Method

Research design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers on their journey to becoming researchers. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that aims to uncover the essence of

human experience by focusing on how individuals understand and give meaning to the reality they experience. Rooted in the philosophical traditions of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, phenomenology emphasises understanding phenomena as they are experienced without imposing pre-existing theories or frameworks (Bonyadi, 2023). This approach is particularly appropriate for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences of EFL teachers, capturing the situatedness of their motivations, challenges, and transformations when transitioning into the role of researcher. This design also allows the researchers to explore the complexity of their journeys and explain the relationship between personal, professional, and contextual factors.

Research contexts

This study was situated within the MEd program with a specialisation in English language teaching (ELT) in a private university in Malang, Indonesia, designed for both recent graduates and in-service teachers who seek to enhance their knowledge and expertise in teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia. The curriculum combines theoretical coursework with practical research training to develop the students' pedagogical competence and academic literacy among its students. Within this context, teachers are exposed to various research methodologies, academic writing conventions, and critical reflection practices, which serve as essential foundations for engaging in educational research. For many participants, particularly those with a literature-oriented background, the program represents a transformative space where classroom experience intersects with formal research training. The program's structure, comprising seminars, assignments, and research projects, also creates opportunities for teachers to explore their instructional practices, critically examine educational theories, and develop a professional identity that integrates both teaching and research roles.

Participants' profiles

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling to capture a diverse range of professional and academic backgrounds among EFL teachers. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) participants were practising EFL teachers teaching at either primary or secondary educational levels; (2) they had a minimum of five years of teaching experience to ensure sustained professional engagement with classroom practices; (3) they were concurrently enrolled in a masters program in English language education at a private university in Malang, Indonesia, which positioned them as teacher–students navigating both professional practice and postgraduate academic training; (4) they demonstrated varying levels of research experience, ranging from beginner to intermediate, in order to represent different degrees of familiarity with academic research; and (5) they were teaching in different geographical contexts, including urban and rural settings, to reflect contextual diversity. An overview of the participants' demographic and professional profiles is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant data

Participant ID	Gender	Teaching level	Length of teaching experience	Research experience	Geographic location
P1	Female	Primary educ.	5 years	Beginner	Urban
P2	Male	Secondary educ.	10 years	Medium	Rural
P3	Female	Secondary educ.	8 years	Beginner	Urban

Initially, five teachers meeting these criteria were recruited from different educational contexts. However, two participants withdrew from the study due to personal reasons prior to data collection. Consequently, three participants completed the in-depth interview process and constituted the final sample for analysis.

Data collection

To explore the lived experiences of EFL teachers, this study employed in-depth interviews as the main data collection method. It allowed participants to share their experiences, motivations, and challenges in their own words. Interviews in this study were conversational using participants' national language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, guided by open-ended questions to generate rich and in-depth responses. For example, participants were asked to describe the factors that motivated them to engage in the research or the barriers they faced during the process. The flexibility of this approach ensured that participants could freely discuss the aspects of their journey that they considered most important. To ensure accuracy and facilitate analysis, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Data analysis

This study used thematic analysis to analyse the data obtained from interviews, which was in line with the phenomenological approach applied in this study. The analysis process was conducted iteratively and systematically, focusing on identifying themes that described the essence of the participants' experiences. Firstly, the third and fourth authors immersed themselves in the data by reading and rereading the interview transcripts. This process aimed to deeply understand the content of the data and helped the researchers identify patterns and initial insights that emerged from the participants' experiences.

Subsequently, statements, phrases, and quotes deemed significant reflecting the participants' experiences were identified and coded by the first and the last authors. These codes represented specific ideas or concepts relevant to the research questions (Table 2). During the coding process, data segments were grouped into categories (themes) that aligned with the research questions. In addition, the excerpts were translated by a professional translator in our university's research and publication unit, so as to generate representative voices of the participants' experiences. These translated versions were then sent to the participants for member checks and relevancy toward answering our research questions.

Table 2: Sample of data analysis process

Research Qs	Themes	Sample excerpts	Interpretation
RQ1: Teachers' experiences in research	(1) Transitioning from teaching to research; (2) Facing challenges; (3) Evolving perception	P1: "My background was in literature… I had to focus on pedagogy." P3: "Reading journals and writing reports was very difficult." P2: "Research is essential for improving teaching."	Teachers struggled at first due to a lack of research background, but gradually recognised research as valuable for professional growth.
RQ2: Challenges in research	(1) Lack of time and support; (2) Difficulty in academic writing	P1: "We are busy with administrative tasks… no time for research." P2: "Academic writing is really difficult."	Limited time, institutional support, and weak academic writing skills hindered teachers' research engagement.
RQ3: Impact on professional development and identity	(1) Classroom improvement; (2) Growth and reflection; (3) Staying relevant	P1: "Research helps us understand students better." P2: "Without research, we just do routines." P3: "Research keeps teachers updated with new trends."	Research enhanced teachers' classroom practices, promoted reflection, and strengthened their identity as research-informed educators.

For instance, under RQ1 (Teachers' experiences in research), the excerpt "My background was in literature… I had to focus on pedagogy" (P1) was coded as *Transitioning from teaching to research*. Similarly, the excerpt "Reading journals and writing reports was very difficult" (P3) was categorised under *Experiencing research as a challenge*. For RQ2 (Challenges in research), excerpts such as "We are busy with administrative tasks… no time for research" (P1) were coded into the category *Lack of time and institutional support*, while "Academic writing is really difficult" (P2) was placed under *Difficulty in academic writing*.

Finally, for RQ3 (Impact on professional development and identity), the excerpt "Research helps us understand students better" (P1) was categorised as *Classroom improvement*, whereas "Without research we just do routines" (P2) was coded as *Professional growth and reflection*. Another excerpt, "Research keeps teachers updated with new trends" (P3), was included in the category *Staying relevant and updated*. Lastly, to ensure the credibility and reliability of the research, a member-checking process was conducted by asking participants to verify the themes and interpretations that had been developed.

Findings

This section presents the findings that emerged from the narrative accounts of EFL teachers regarding their engagement with research. The data were analysed thematically and organised according to the three research questions that guided the study. The narratives reveal a range of personal, pedagogical, and institutional experiences that shape how EFL teachers perceive, engage with, and are affected by research.

RQ 1: What experiences do EFL teachers have when they engage in research?

Transitioning from teaching to research

Findings from the interview showcase that teachers with backgrounds in literature often faced conceptual shifts when entering the field of educational research. They needed to adapt from literary analysis to pedagogical inquiry as depicted in excerpt 1.

> *Excerpt 1:*
> In the first semester of my masters program, I was introduced to research in English language education for the first time. It was very difficult for me because my background was in literature. My undergraduate research was about analysing novels, but when I became a teacher and started my masters study, I had to focus on pedagogy and teaching. (P1, interview, May 2025).

Furthermore, the participants' first encounters with research were challenging due to their limited prior exposure to educational research practices. This made their teaching-to-research transitions even more difficult.

> *Excerpt 2:*
> I had never done any real research before. I was just teaching because I was a teacher. When I entered the masters program, I was confused by the research assignments, reading many journals, and understanding research reports. Even though my undergraduate thesis was in English education, I still found this first experience very difficult. (P2, interview, May 2025)

Experiencing research as a challenge

Another theme that emerged in the analysis is the fact that the study's participants lacked familiarity with research processes, academic reading, and writing, which made the experience overwhelming.

> *Excerpt 3:*
> During my masters study, I had to read lots of journals and research articles. That was something new and hard for me. I didn't know how to write a good research report. This activity is the most challenging for me when doing research because whether our research projects are good or not depends on the depth of our reading. (P3, interview, May 2025)

Many felt underprepared and insecure in their ability to conduct research effectively, particularly due to the absence of previous research training. This challenge tailors the teachers' experiences in conducting classroom research. It was contended in our interview session as follows.

> *Excerpt 4:*
> As teachers, we are not really equipped with strong research skills or broad research experience. Doing research is not easy, especially when you have no solid foundation.

> But now that I am a graduate student, I realize that I have to face this challenge more seriously. (P1, interview, May 2025)

Evolving perception of research in professional practice

As the participants progressed through their graduate studies and gained more exposure to educational research, their perception of research shifted significantly. Initially seen as a daunting academic requirement, research gradually became recognised as a meaningful and practical tool for professional growth. It was depicted as follows.

> *Excerpt 5:*
> Besides teaching, it's important for teachers to do research so it can be applied in the classroom. Even though research is difficult, I realise now that it's essential for improving what we do as teachers. (P2, interview, May 2025)

For many participants, enrollment in the masters program marked a significant shift in their professional trajectory, particularly in terms of research engagement. Prior to postgraduate study, research had often been perceived as a distant, academic activity reserved for university scholars. P3 shared about such a condition:

> *Excerpt 6:*
> During my graduate study, I had no choice but to learn how to do educational research, even if it was hard. It's part of becoming a better teacher now. (P3, interview, May 2025)

This study uncovers that EFL teachers' experiences in engaging with research are marked by a significant transition from their roles as classroom practitioners to novice researchers. Many, especially those from literary backgrounds, encountered conceptual challenges in shifting toward pedagogical inquiry. Their initial exposure to research was often met with confusion and a lack of preparedness, as they struggled with academic reading, writing, and methodological understanding. Despite these challenges, the experience gradually evolved into a meaningful phase of professional growth. Through their masters studies, the teachers began to recognise the value of research in enhancing their teaching practices and professional identity, ultimately embracing research as an integral part of their development as educators.

RQ 2: What challenges do EFL teachers face during their research journey?

Lack of time and institutional support

The study also reveals that a major challenge faced by EFL teachers in conducting research is limited time and institutional support. Their daily responsibilities, including teaching, administrative tasks, and school ceremonies, significantly reduce the time available for research activities such as classroom data collection and writing as indicated by P1 and P2.

> *Excerpt 7:*
> Time management. As teachers, we are involved in many ceremonial and administrative activities. So, we don't have much time to collect data in the classroom or to write the results. (P1, interview, May 2025)

> *Excerpt 8:*
> Yes, I also don't have much time to do research. There is also no support from the school for teachers to do research. (P2, interview, May 2025)

In addition to time limitations, participants noted the absence of institutional policies or encouragement that promote or support teacher-led research. This made it harder to prioritise research alongside their teaching responsibilities.

Difficulty in academic writing

Some participants expressed difficulty in writing up their research findings, particularly in adhering to academic writing conventions. This included challenges in organising ideas, using formal language, and meeting scholarly standards.

> *Excerpt 9:*
> For me, it's more about how to write academically after doing the research. Academic writing is really difficult. (P2, interview, May 2025)

> Excerpt 10:
> Yes, the most challenging part is writing the research, like presenting the data and analysing it critically in an academic setting. It seems that I have no ideas about how to write academically. (P3, interview, May 2025)

The findings reveal two key challenges faced by EFL teachers during their research journey: lack of time and institutional support, and difficulty in academic writing. Teachers reported that their heavy teaching loads, administrative duties, and limited institutional encouragement significantly hindered their ability to engage in research activities. Additionally, many struggled with the demands of academic writing, including organising ideas, presenting data, and meeting scholarly conventions. These challenges highlight the need for greater institutional backing and capacity-building to support teacher-researchers in educational settings.

RQ 3: How does involvement in research impact the professional development and identity of EFL teachers?

Research as a tool for classroom understanding and improvement

Based on the findings, the participating teachers perceive research as a method to systematically understand their classroom environment, students' needs, and teaching effectiveness. It enables them to gather empirical data that informs their practice and drives professional improvement.

> *Excerpt 11:*
> Conducting research helps teachers gain deeper insights into classroom conditions, students, and teaching practices. This requires scientific data. From journal articles and research findings, we as teachers can grow more professionally. (P1, interview, May 2025)

> *Excerpt 12:*
> I feel that by doing research, I can understand my class well and students' condition. For example, when I explored the effectiveness of a technology in my class, I concluded that my students learned better from this tool. So, yeah, doing research for me as a teacher is very important." (P3, interview, May 2025)

The excerpt above details that research is seen not as a theoretical or abstract activity by the participants but as a practical tool that grounds teaching in evidence and enhances responsiveness to classroom realities.

Research as a catalyst for professional growth and reflection

Engaging in research promotes continuous professional learning and prevents teachers from falling into routine practices. It challenges them to think critically about their work and fosters a reflective, growth-oriented mindset.

> *Excerpt 12:*
> At first, I wondered why teachers had to do research like lecturers. It turns out that research helps develop our teaching skills and insights. Without it, we feel like we're just doing routines without any scientific data. (P2, interview, May 2025)

> *Excerpt 13:*
> I feel lucky to continue my studies in a masters program. From this, I can learn more about research and how it influences the way I teach in the class. So, I think research is important for us as teachers. (P3, interview, May 2025)

This study reflects a shift in perception, from scepticism to realisation that research contributes to meaningful professional development by encouraging reflection and avoiding stagnation.

Research as a means of staying relevant and updated

The study also found that the participating teachers view research as essential for keeping up with pedagogical developments and student dynamics. Without engaging in research, they feel disconnected from current trends and best practices.

> *Excerpt 14:*
> If we teachers don't conduct research, it feels like we'll be left behind regarding teaching methods and students' classroom conditions. So, the role of research for teachers is very important. (P1, interview, May 2025)

> *Excerpt 15:*
> When we do research, we must read a lot of current literature in our area of focus. These conditions force me as a teacher to stay updated with the recent phenomena in English language teaching, like translanguaging. Previously, I just knew code-mixing, but now research has found many new things that teachers need to read. (P3, interview, May 2025)

The findings indicate that engaging in research significantly shapes the professional development and identity of EFL teachers. First, research is viewed as a practical tool for understanding classroom dynamics, improving instruction, and meeting students' needs. Second, it serves as a catalyst for reflection and continuous growth, helping teachers move beyond routine practices and develop a more critical, informed approach to teaching. Lastly, research keeps teachers professionally relevant by connecting them with current educational trends and innovations. Through these processes, teachers begin to see themselves not only as practitioners but also as reflective, adaptive, and research-informed professionals.

Discussion

This study set out to explore EFL teachers' experiences with research, the challenges they face, and the impact of research engagement on their professional development and identity. The findings reveal that research engagement functions not only as a professional task but also as a powerful identity-forming and transformative process, embedded within reflective practice and shaped by contextual and personal factors (Kaasila et al., 2023). This discussion draws on the theoretical lenses from language teacher identity theory (Yazan, 2024) and reflective practice (Schön, 1983) to make sense of the narratives shared by participants. The findings suggest that research participation is initially unfamiliar or even intimidating for some teachers, yet it becomes a transformative experience over time (Zólyomi & Széll, 2025). Teachers described themselves as becoming more analytical, self-aware, and open to innovation. This reflects what Idris et al. (2024) mention, that reflective practice allows for deeper reflection in the nexus of teaching and research.

According to Barkhuizen (2017), identity is constructed through narrative and lived experience. In this case, the research journey allows teachers to construct new narratives of themselves, not only as knowledge users but also as knowledge generators. These experiences mark a shift from a practitioner identity to a more scholarly-practitioner identity, positioning teachers as active agents in their professional development. For instance, participants highlighted how research made them more attentive to student learning, more confident in their pedagogical decisions, and more connected to broader educational discourses. These narratives echo Norton's (2013) and Ubaidillah et al.'s (2024a) views of identity as dynamic, multiple, and negotiated across time and contexts.

The second research question revealed a set of challenges that shaped and sometimes constrained identity formation: lack of time, limited institutional support, unfamiliarity with research methodologies, and emotional struggles such as self-doubt and fear of failure. These challenges add to the current complexities of Indonesian teacher research

engagement as previously unveiled by Floris et al. (2024) and Prabandari et al. (2024). Teachers must navigate such conflicting demands between being practitioners and novice researchers, often without the scaffolding provided in academic environments.

From the lens of reflective practice, these difficulties also signal points of professional and emotional growth. Schön (1983) noted that it is in the face of uncertainty and complexity that reflection becomes most valuable. Teachers' struggles with research-related challenges provoke reflection-in-action, forcing them to re-examine their beliefs, roles, and assumptions about teaching and learning. These identity struggles, though difficult, also become the catalysts for identity reconstruction, pushing teachers to redefine their professional roles in light of new learning and skills.

Involvement in research ultimately led to a sense of empowerment and repositioning. Participants reported feeling more professionally competent, informed, and relevant, which signals that research can be used as a catalyst for solving classroom problems, as indicated in the previous research (Dang-Tran, 2026). They began to see themselves as contributors to knowledge, rather than passive recipients of top-down policies or theories. This also aligns with Ubaidillah et al.'s (2024a, 2024b) research, which revealed that language teacher identity is shaped by the way teachers are involved in their community to attain membership and legitimacy. Apparently, teachers' research involvement allowed them to re-position themselves within their schools and professional communities, not just as implementers of curriculum, but as informed decision-makers and reflective educators.

Research also helped teachers maintain relevance in a fast-changing educational landscape. However, our findings signal that research is not fully transmitted to the teachers as part of their professional development. The findings highlight that teachers moved closer to the centre of professional and academic discourse communities, gaining legitimacy and voice. This has also been discussed in the previous research (see Cassandra et al., 2024), albeit focusing on teacher educators. Furthermore, the professional identity transformation described by participants was mediated through reflective cycles of inquiry, analysis, and practice modification, demonstrating the centrality of reflective practice in identity development.

This study yields several implications for EFL teachers and school leaders in Indonesian and similar settings. First, teachers are encouraged to see research as a reflective practice emerged in their teaching profession. This tenet helps teachers grow professionally through undertaking classroom research as they reflect on every moment of the class session. Second, school leaders are encouraged to provide a positive research environment for the teachers. This can be done by offering recognition and incentives for teachers who conduct research. In addition, the school leaders could also provide access to time and resource allocation for teacher research during working hours in schools.

Conclusions

This study examined the research experiences, challenges, and identity development of EFL teachers as they engaged in educational research during their postgraduate studies. Using a phenomenological approach, the findings reveal that EFL teachers undergo significant transitions as they shift from classroom practitioners to teacher-researchers. Initially, many faced conceptual and practical difficulties due to limited exposure to research and academic writing. Despite these challenges, engaging in research ultimately fostered professional growth, reflection, and a stronger sense of agency in their teaching practice.

While the study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of EFL teachers, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample size was limited to a small number of participants, which may affect the generalisability of the findings. Second, all participants were enrolled in the same graduate program, which could result in contextual bias. Third, the study relied on self-reported narratives through interviews, which may not fully capture the complexity of participants' research engagement over time. Future research could expand by including a larger and more diverse group of EFL teachers from different institutions and regions to better capture a range of research experiences and challenges. Longitudinal studies could also provide deeper insight into how research engagement influences teachers' professional identity development over time. Additionally, studies could explore institutional and policy-level factors that support or hinder teacher-led research, including mentorship, training programs, and school culture. Finally, incorporating classroom observations or document analysis (e.g., research reports, lesson plans) could enrich the understanding of how research directly informs teaching practices.

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