

## **Chinese EFL Academics' Experiences of Aligning Researcher Identity (Re)-Construction with University Policy Practices of a National Research Policy**

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### **Abstract**

While the past two decades have witnessed a surge of studies on the researcher identity of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) academics, research on how the intertwined connections between EFL academics and the larger ecological system within an institution affect their researcher identity construction remains relatively scarce. Utilizing a three-tier system framework, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring how EFL academics (micro level) in China navigate the complexities of aligning their researcher identity (re)construction with institutional practices (meso level) of a national policy (macro level). Adopting a case study design, this study collected and triangulated data from three sources: semi-structured interviews, narrative frames, and document analysis. Data analysis revealed that there were (mis)alignments between EFL academics' research expectations of national research policy and interpretations of research policy at the institutional level, and participants adopted different responses in re-adjusting their research practices to align with research policy. The study implies the need for university administrators to take into account academics' disciplinary features, research values, and needs when implementing institutional research policies. Such an orientation provides more opportunities and resources to shape, rather than break, the researcher identities of EFL academics and ultimately facilitate the sustainable development of higher education.

**Keywords:** EFL academics, higher education, macro-level policy, meso-level practices, researcher identity

In recent years, university ranking has been the primary indicator of quality, even though it may not always accurately reflect the actual quality of education services. China has also embraced the quest for world-class universities in the last decade (Gao & Zheng, 2020). Efforts by Chinese universities have successfully placed them in top positions in the global ranking exercises (Ware & Mabe, 2015). Research excellence is emphasized not only at the national but also at the institutional level (Tran et al., 2017). To continue climbing the rankings, universities adopt a managerial system in which administrators assess academics based on quantifiable categories, specifically the number and level of research grants and paper publications (Yuan et al., 2022). As a result, academics are compelled to plan their career paths based on the norms in the performativity culture (Huang & Guo, 2019). While some studies have tapped into the research engagement (e.g., Bai, 2018; Bao & Feng, 2022; Li, 2023) and research practices of university EFL teachers (e.g., Nakata et al., 2022; Peng & Gao, 2019; Yang et al., 2022), a growing body of studies has turned to focus on academics' responses to the managerialism of higher education and their identity formation or negotiation in such contexts (e.g., Ahlers & Christmann-Budian, 2023; Huang et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Lei & Medwell, 2020; Shams, 2019). The conceptualization of teacher identity, according to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), should focus on teachers' perceptions of what it means to be a teacher. Accordingly, researcher identity can be defined by three key elements: "thinking about what a researcher is," "performing as a researcher," and "being thought about as a researcher" (Teng, 2019, p. 32).

In the EFL field, tertiary EFL teachers are viewed as language instructors or language service providers to other disciplines rather than productive academics (Zeng & Fickel, 2021). As such, EFL academics were previously expected to teach well rather than research well. Expecting EFL academics to publish extensively has arguably placed them in a disadvantaged position (Huang & Guo, 2019). Given the current waves of managerial practices in global higher education, this study on disadvantaged EFL teachers may be of relevance to academics in similar contexts worldwide. Following the ecological turn in teacher education (Chu et al., 2021), this study adopts a three-tier system framework adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to comprehensively understand the formation and development of EFL academics' researcher identities in the context of managerial practices in higher education. Regarding the three-tier ecological systems framework, this study redefines the higher education industry with sociocultural factors at the macro level, university management at the meso level, and EFL academics at the micro level. The three levels interconnect, interact, and impact each other dynamically, and they all play an important part in the sustainable and healthy growth of the entire ecological system in higher education. Given that the institutional level, as the meso level, serves as the key factor in the ecological system, with functions dependent on both the broader macro and narrower micro level factors, this study takes the approach of investigating the impact of the institutional level (meso level) on individual academics (micro level). As such, this study specifically aims to explore, under the performativity culture and national policy (macro level), how university policy practices (meso level) affect EFL academics' (micro level) researcher identity (re)construction through (mis)alignments, and how EFL academics respond to university policy practices.

Despite notable achievements in research outputs resulting from China's quest for world-class universities, a new national research policy breaking the "Five-Only" has been released to curb the increasing overemphasis placed on research excellence at the expense of teaching quality deterioration (Fu, 2020). This national research policy has had a direct impact on research

demands at the institutional level across the country, with far-reaching implications for individual academics working at Chinese universities. By representing the voices of EFL academics from a Chinese university, this study attempts to broaden the understanding of identity (re)constructions among academics whose core responsibilities are teaching-related but are expected to strive in research while maintaining their teacher responsibilities. Two research questions guided the present study:

1. What are the (mis)alignments between EFL academics' researcher identity (re)construction and meso-level practices of macro-level policy?
2. How do EFL academics (re)align their researcher identity (re)construction with meso-level policy practices?

## **Literature Review**

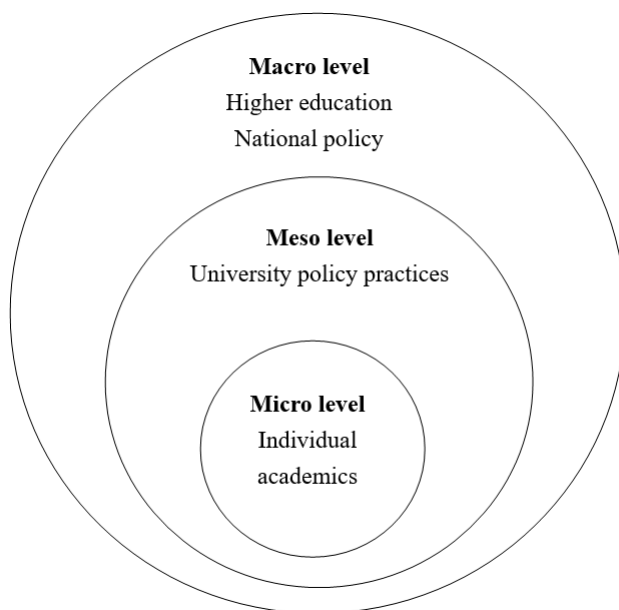
### **Conceptualizing Ecological Systems Model in Higher Education**

The ecological systems model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) is a systematic investigation of the mutual interaction and accommodation between a developing individual and the environment or the settings that the individual is in. The four environmental levels in this model, i.e., the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem, represent the individual's immediate setting and embedded community, interconnections to other systems, and the situated broad cultural values. All the levels interact and exert different impacts on the development of the individual in the circle (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecological approach has also been adopted in studies in the field of applied linguistics. Based on years of work on language teaching and curriculum design, van Lier (2004; 2010; 2014) claimed that the ecological perspective may explore various educational contexts as networks of interdependence among all the fundamental components and elements in specific settings. For example, in his study on language classroom observation, van Lier (Duff & Van Lier, 1997) discovered that the complexities of interactions in a language learning classroom can be unraveled from the inside out; thus, the ecological perspective presented in his work viewed the classroom as a complex network of interacting organisms with a focus on learners' processes of meaning-making within this network.

Given the multilayered nature of interaction in the education system and its impact on developmental outcomes, this ecological systems model could serve as a useful approach for framing EFL academics' experiences of professional identity (re)construction in the complex higher education system. EFL academics do not construct their professional identities in a vacuum. Their identity formation and development are subject to not only individual factors (e.g., personal beliefs and values) but also a range of contextual factors (e.g., national policy and institutional culture) in their broad socio-institutional contexts (Yuan, 2017). Adopting this theoretical model allows researchers to present an organic account of the interrelation and interaction among the ecosystems within a context, including the micro, meso, and macro levels in the system. In this study, we adapt the ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to sketch out certain aspects that are critical to academics' identity (re)construction, including the higher education industry with national policy at the macro level, university management at the meso level, and individual academics at the micro level. This study focuses on how macro, meso, and micro influences shape the meanings, opportunities, and constraints associated with different identities among EFL academics and how these influences can facilitate or constrain the process of identity construction. Understanding identity construction

as a nested phenomenon, as suggested by Stets (2021), helps to recognize the complex interplay between individual agency and the broader social context in shaping identity transformations.

In the adapted model, the higher education industry, with sociocultural factors at the macro level, establishes the guiding research policy; institutional practices at the meso level implement the macro level's research policy and have a direct impact on individual academics at the micro level. Individual academics' professional development and research output, in the long run, also have an impact on the development of the entire higher education industry. This ecosystem perspective allows researchers to view EFL academics' research practices and researcher identity (re)construction as influenced by the totality of the interconnected layers of the ecological system in higher education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective also emphasizes the reciprocal interaction among the various layers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words, individual academics are influenced by the ecological system but also exert influence on it. Thus, it is necessary to investigate individual EFL academics' responses to the impact of university policy practices of national research policy on their research practices and identity (re)construction. The adapted three-tier model is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. The Three-Tier Ecological Systems in Higher Education (Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979)**

In the field of teacher education, the ecological perspective has been used in research on language teachers' professional identity construction and negotiation (e.g., Bowen et al., 2021; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Goodnough, 2010; Kamali & Nazari, 2023; Nazari et al., 2023). For example, in Edwards and Burns' (2016) study on the emergence and negotiation of teacher-researcher identities among language teachers, participants developed strong conceptual selves through action research despite ecological constraints. Kamali and Nazari's (2023) study took an ecological perspective that views the classroom as micro, the institution as meso, and the sociocultural environment as macro. Their study revealed that transnational language teachers experienced contextually invoked emotional conflicts that positioned them in a vulnerable state across the three ecologies. In order to build strong professional identities, Kamali and Nazari (2023) advocated for transnational language teachers to become contextually adaptive to the

three ecologies. Likewise, Nazari et al.'s (2023) study on Iranian English language teachers found that three levels in the ecological system of teaching influenced the participants' emotions and identities, namely, micro-in-class, meso-institutional, and macro-sociopolitical ecologies. Each of the three teaching ecologies shaped the identity formation of English language teachers.

Notably, existing literature has paid insufficient attention to how the university policy practices of national research policy influence the individual EFL academics' researcher identity (re)construction in a higher education context. In the teaching profession, EFL teachers often encounter educational reforms with policy changes (Yip et al., 2022). While such changes may present opportunities for EFL teachers to create new professional identities, these changes may also cause challenges for teachers to negotiate their preferred identities with new requirements and norms. In light of such complexities, it is thus necessary to explore individual EFL academics' identity (re)construction experiences with (mis)alignments and negotiation in higher education with policy changes.

### **Managerial Practices of “Publish-or-Perish” in Higher Education**

In the era of performativity, institutional managerial practices are the various measures with quantitative performance requirements that universities take as means of incentives and punishments to drive academics to invest in their work and pursue performance excellence (Gao & Yuan, 2021). The growing managerial practices in global higher education (Deem & Brehony, 2005), which prioritize efficiency and effectiveness with market-based values in university governance and management (Deem et al., 2007), have led to accountability measures such as implementing contract-based employment and adopting appraisals of faculty's performance and productivity with quantitative indicators (Sutton, 2017; Vidovich et al., 2007). One distinct example is universities' adoption of an appraisal system for academics' research productivity, and universities in China are no exception. Many higher education institutions in China have since jumped onto this bandwagon of managerial practices by introducing stringent requirements on academics' research output in the fierce quasi-market competition (Huang et al., 2018; Tian & Lu, 2017). As a result, academics' promotion, contract renewal, performance evaluation, and professional development are all closely linked to their research productivity (Dai et al., 2021; Gao & Yuan, 2021).

An emphasis on managerialism has caused academics' core responsibilities to shift from teaching to research, as productivity is measured by research output (Ahlers & Christmann-Budian, 2023). This shift has led to three negative consequences in higher education in China. First, under the mounting pressure of meeting research assessment standards (Gao & Zheng, 2020), many academics have been reported to prioritize research over teaching (Tian & Lu, 2017). Second, the adoption of managerial practices has resulted in academic freedom restrictions (Henkel, 2005), as academics may give up significant research topics that require a long time to explore and turn to topics that produce quick outcomes to meet external demands (Kim et al., 2018; Tian & Lu, 2017). Third, overemphasis on research may even lead to a deterioration of the academic environment (Laiho et al., 2022) because the social and moral process of producing such research output tends to be overlooked and thus has a demoralizing effect on academics (Sutton, 2017). As such, there is a need to unpack how management practices play a role in Chinese academics' identity (re)constructions, as the practices are interconnected with academics' career-related decisions.

## **EFL Academics in Higher Education in China**

In China, a solid command of the English language is widely recognized as not just a basic skill in many professions but also a pathway to well-paying positions and, in some cases, a requirement for college graduation (Xu, 2014). With such a high regard for English as a helpful tool, the majority of EFL academics at the tertiary level are engaged in teaching courses on English language proficiency. Their major responsibility is to help students enhance their overall level of English language knowledge and pass nation-scale standardized EFL tests, such as the College English Test (CET) (Coniam, 2014). Therefore, when these EFL academics are recruited by universities, the main criteria for recruitment are their English language knowledge and proficiency, while their research capability is largely ignored (Wang, 2018).

In the past few decades, the performativity system, along with managerial practices, has been widely adopted in Chinese universities (Gao & Zheng, 2020). Individual academics have been substantially impacted by such educational change. One distinct example is the frequent teaching reforms that EFL academics need to adapt themselves to in order to meet the socio-institutional requirements to advance pedagogical innovations. EFL academics have been compelled to engage in an ongoing process of negotiating and interacting with contextual factors in professional identity (re)construction (Yuan, 2017). For example, Yip et al. (2022) conducted a study on identity and emotion of university EFL teachers during curriculum reform in China. They found that congruence between EFL teachers' self-identities (e.g., "the traditional teacher" and "the autonomous teacher") and the identities imposed by the reform (e.g., "technical worker" and "follower") could lead to teachers' positive emotions and vice versa. However, due to rapid changes in educational policy and stressful teaching performance evaluations, the curriculum reform has mostly caused EFL teachers' negative emotions and changes in their professional roles. Similarly, in Jiang and Zhang's (2021) study, EFL teachers who were implementing a new curriculum manifested distinctive professional identity changes, such as changing their old identity from "competent general English teacher" to "unqualified English for specific purposes teacher" in the context of teaching reform.

Moreover, the prevalence of performativity and managerialism in higher education institutions (Deem & Brehony, 2005) has had a profound impact on the other professional activities of EFL academics. Many Chinese universities are increasingly requiring EFL academics to conduct research on the assumption that research may guide EFL academics' pedagogical judgments, improve teaching effectiveness, and advance their careers (Borg & Liu, 2013). Research has thus become a new central dimension of EFL academics' professional work. In universities with managerial practices, EFL teachers are now subject to the same research requirements as academics in other disciplines (Peng & Gao, 2019; Yuan, 2017) despite their teaching-focused background. Therefore, EFL teachers who traditionally assume the identity of English teachers would have to now engage in a dynamic process of professional identity (re)construction to accommodate new socio-institutional expectations (Ai, 2019; Huang & Guo, 2019).

## **EFL Academics' Researcher Identity**

With its dynamic and multifaceted nature (Beijaard et al., 2004), teacher identity can be constructed and reconstructed with multiple professional roles or sub-identities throughout the course of a teacher's career. In this study, both EFL academics' language teacher identity and researcher identity are sub-identities of their professional teacher identity.

The literature shows that there has been a surge of studies on EFL academics' researcher identity and research engagement in the past two decades. Scholars have noted that becoming a researcher is a challenging obligation for EFL academics, given their teaching-focused disciplinary background and weak research tradition. Various studies have reported that EFL academics in China tend to have heavy teaching workloads (Wang, 2018), moderate research engagement (Bai, 2018; Ni & Wu, 2023), inadequate research competence (Bao & Feng, 2022; Yang et al., 2022), mainly external research motivations (Peng & Gao, 2019), and a lack of collaborative research culture (Ai, 2019; Xu, 2014). How to become a researcher is a prominent issue in studies on the professional identities of EFL academics. Using identity as an analytical lens, Yuan (2017) looked into how a novice EFL teacher constantly constructed and reconstructed his professional identities in his research practices and eventually developed his language teacher-researcher identity despite contextual obstacles. Long and Huang (2017) also explored the dynamic identity construction of EFL teachers. Their study reported different trajectories of EFL teachers' researcher identity construction at various career stages, constrained by the broad socio-institutional context in China.

The theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) is another extensively used analytical lens in investigating the identity development of EFL academics. According to Teng (2020), understanding language teachers' identities should be situated in the teachers' embedded communities. Teng (2020) used narrative inquiry to investigate how an English language instructor in his Ph.D. studies negotiated participation and membership in the academic community, eventually crossing community borders and becoming a researcher in the process. Similarly, Bao and Feng (2022) drew upon the framework of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) to examine the dynamics of a group of EFL teachers' identity reconstruction in a domestic visiting study program. They unveiled three distinctive trajectories of researcher identity development, with the research dimension either activated or reinforced in EFL teachers' professional identity reconstruction.

In addition, some scholars have explored EFL teachers' researcher identities from the perspective of emotion. For example, Yuan et al. (2022) adopted the emotion of "vulnerability" as an analytical lens to investigate two Chinese EFL scholars' research practices. They found that vulnerability motivated the two EFL academics to increase their academic literacy about English writing and micropolitical literacy about publication, ultimately assisting them in becoming productive researchers. Zhang et al. (2022) investigated the identity development of an EFL teacher in a research-oriented educational system. They discovered that, despite experiencing both positive and negative emotions, the participant was able to create a researcher identity through an intense emotion structure and thus finally solved his identity crisis.

Regardless of the different theoretical frameworks, many previous studies have all reported the importance of agency in assisting EFL teachers to become researchers. In both Yuan's (2017) and Teng's (2020) works, EFL teachers' agency helped them cross academic community boundaries, develop research capacities, and construct a novice researcher identity. By investigating the responses of a group of EFL academics to power relations, Lu and Yoon (2022) also found that EFL academics exerted their agency to enhance research competence in research practices such as research grant applications and manuscript writing and publishing. As Nguyen and Ngo (2023) stated, in EFL teachers' professional identity development, which

is fraught with tensions and challenges, agency could enable EFL teachers to resolve tensions and construct their preferred professional identity.

While the personal factor of teacher agency has been acknowledged, the development of EFL academics' researcher identities is also influenced by a variety of socio-institutional factors, such as policy changes. Tran et al. (2017) discovered that when English language teachers were placed in a changing context with the implementation of a new research policy, they reconstructed their identities into four types as responses to the new policy: accommodators, supporters, followers, and performers. In a similar vein, Huang et al. (2018) found that university academics had a variety of identity-related responses to managerial reforms, such as defensive and stressed faculty with complaints. Yang et al. (2022) further discovered that only a few university EFL academics were able to integrate their teacher and researcher roles amidst institutional changes and managerial practices. More EFL teachers experienced identity tensions when trying to integrate their roles in this managerial context. In a more recent study, Ni and Wu (2023) highlighted the importance of a supportive sociocultural environment. They reported that a Chinese EFL teacher successfully navigated the teaching-research contradiction within such a supportive socio-institutional context. Consequently, the EFL teacher achieved professional development in both teaching and research.

While the existing literature offers rich insights into the complex experiences of EFL teachers in professional identity (re)construction in higher education, there is a scarcity of studies examining how the institutional implementation of national policies influences individual EFL academics' researcher identity (re)construction. This study aims to investigate how meso-level managerial practices, guided by macro-level policies, impact the researcher identity (re)construction of EFL academics from a Chinese university, along with their responses.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a case study approach as the design allows an in-depth investigation of a representative individual, a specific situation, event, or program in life (Holley & Harris, 2019). A case study provides realistic and detailed descriptions, which can allow researchers to capture and unpack the complexities of the investigated cases. In this study, a "case" refers to an individual EFL academic from a non-elite Chinese university. This study uses a case study design to explore university EFL academics' researcher identity (re)construction under the influence of meso-level practices of a macro-level policy.

## **Research Context and Participants**

This study was conducted at a public university in central China. This university is a typical non-elite public university, similar to the majority of higher education institutions in China (Wang, 2018). The first author had access to the university to conduct the study (Hatch, 2002). To promote its national ranking and foster development, the university has implemented several managerial practices. These include a research-oriented promotion system, a three-year key performance appraisal system, and an annual performance evaluation emphasizing performativity and accountability. In recent years, China has released a new national research policy, breaking the "Five-Only." The objective of the new policy is to reduce the importance and priority given to academics' educational credentials, academic ranks, paper publications, research awards, and honorary titles within the higher education evaluation system (Fu, 2020). Following the national trend, this university incorporated the new national research policy into its institutional documents. This was achieved by supplementing the original research



requirements with additional educational research obligations, showcasing the university's steadfast commitment to research productivity. Hence, EFL academics in the School of Foreign Studies at the university started integrating research into their professional activities. Their aim was to enhance research capacity and generate sufficient output to fulfill institutional requirements.

Maximum variation was used to select participants for this qualitative study (Patton, 2014). After profiling the 90 EFL academics at the university, eight participants were selected based on years of research experience, research achievements, and academic ranks. All eight EFL academics were actively engaged in both teaching and research practices. They have all spent years teaching English language proficiency courses to university students while also engaging in research activities such as research grant applications and paper writing. Based on an examination of their academic profiles, awarded research grants, and publications, we found that the eight academics' research topics also varied substantially, ranging from cross-cultural communication and translation to teacher education. Among the eight academics, two were professors, two were associate professors, and four were lecturers. After being informed of the data collection methods (one narrative frame, one semi-structured interview, and document analysis), all eight academics agreed to take part in our study. However, shortly after completing their narrative frames, one professor transferred to another university, and an associate professor withdrew due to a busy schedule, leaving us with six participants. The detailed background information on the remaining six participants is presented in Table 1. Both ethical approvals from the School of Foreign Studies and the participants' written consent forms were obtained at the commencement of the study. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

**Table 1. Background Information of the Participants.**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Academic rank</b>	<b>Research area</b>	<b>Years of doing research</b>
T1	Female	Early-50s	PhD	Professor	Cross-cultural communication and translation	15
T2	Male	Late-40s	Master	Associate Professor	English language teaching and learning	22
T3	Male	Mid-40s	PhD	Lecturer	Corpus linguistics	10
T4	Male	Late-30s	Master	Lecturer	Second language acquisition	5
T5	Female	Early-40s	Master	Lecturer	Neurolinguistics	4
T6	Female	Late-30s	Master	Lecturer	Teacher education	3

### **Data Collection**

Given that the focus of this study was on EFL academics' researcher identity (re)construction in their embedded socio-institutional context, we primarily collected data on the participants' professional identity work related to researcher identity and research practices rather than their

teaching practices. Nevertheless, the perceived relationship between teaching and research was also asked in the interview to gain a better understanding of the participants' responses to their research engagement and professional identity negotiation.

Data were collected and triangulated from three sources: narrative frames, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. A narrative frame, as defined by Barkhuizen (2014), is a written story template with prompts that participants use to share information about their storied experiences and reflections. This tool is valuable for collecting information to gain insights into teachers' experiences in their specific professional contexts (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). Additionally, as a complementary method to interviews, narrative frames can function as both a preliminary data collection tool and a verification tool for research findings obtained through interview data (Barkhuizen, 2014). Thus, a narrative frame adapted from Xu's (2014) was used to elicit basic information about the participants' research experiences. This adapted narrative frame covered several themes, including the participants' personal backgrounds, research engagement and motivations, general views on research and institutional research requirements, attitudes toward institutional research requirements, and storied experiences in research practice. As identities can emerge from the narratives people share about themselves and their lives (Barkhuizen et al., 2013), data collected from narrative frames can shed light on the various identities stemming from the participants' research practices.

Guided by the research questions, our ecological perspective, and information collected from the narrative frames, we formulated interview questions aimed at extracting information about the participants' responses to the three ecological levels within the system, critical events related to university management, and how these events impacted the participants' research work and the (re)construction of their professional identity. In this study, alignment between identities is defined operationally as the congruence between participants' self-positioning identity and the imposed identity by their institution, while misalignment refers to the incongruence between these two. The first author conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with the participants in a face-to-face manner. During the interviews, participants were initially asked personalized follow-up questions based on their general responses in the narrative frames. Then, they were encouraged to express their thoughts regarding the three levels of the ecological system: individual academics' research work at the micro level, institutional management at the meso level, and national research policy at the macro level. Specifically, at the micro level, we asked the participants about their self-positioning concerning researcher identity, research motivations, challenges in becoming researchers, perceived relationships between teaching and research, as well as possible changes in their professional identities and reasons behind those changes. Moving to the meso level, participants were encouraged to express their perspectives on institutional research requirements, the influence of institutional research policies on their research practices, and any (mis)alignments between their preferred identities and those imposed by their institution. At the macro level, we invited the participants to air their thoughts on China's new national research policy and how the national policy and institutional practices affected their research work. Key questions were posed to explore the aspects of conducting research at their institution that participants enjoyed the most and least, as well as (mis)alignments between their preferred identities and those imposed by the institution. Their responses to the managerial context naturally emerged during the course of their answers. The interviews, lasting 40 to 60 minutes each, were scheduled at the participant's convenience, conducted in Chinese (the mother tongue of both the interviewer and the interviewees), audio-recorded with the

participant's permission, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The transcriptions were also sent back to the participants for accuracy verification.

Finally, with the permission of the dean of the School of Foreign Studies, we collected relevant institutional documents from the university's website. These documents included university research policy documents outlining requirements for faculty research output for promotion, three-year key performance appraisal policy documents, and annual evaluation system documents. Data collection methods and duration are presented in Appendix 1.

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative inductive approach (Miles et al., 2018) was adopted in thematic data analysis. First, we repeatedly reviewed the participants' interview transcripts and written narrative frames to familiarize ourselves with the data. Then, during the initial coding phase, we paid particular attention to the possible influence of meso-level policy practices and the participants' responses. This opening coding process resulted in a wide range of codes related to the alignment and misalignments between the meso-level managerial practices of the macro-level policy and the micro-level academics' preferred identities (e.g., "outcome-oriented policy practices and academics' desire to become productive researchers," "stringent research environment vs. longing for lenient research atmosphere," "demanding requirements on both teaching and research vs. expectation of a focused researcher identity," "outcome-oriented research policies vs. dislike of being utilitarian researchers who pursue hot topics," "quick research outcomes with quantifiable indicators vs. desire for becoming growing researchers," "first/corresponding authorship recognition vs. tendency for collaborative research"). Following that, the various codes arising from each participant were further compared and contrasted (Merriam, 1998), yielding the following main themes: "Alignment: striving to become productive researchers," "Misalignment: focused researcher vs. versatile at everything," "Misalignment: growing researcher vs. paper generator," and "Misalignment: collaborative researcher vs. struggling alone." As for the coping strategies, the two themes, "becoming agentive and active researchers" and "becoming complying researchers aiming for survival," emerged as the participants responded differently to the managerial practices in their researcher identity (re)construction.

Regarding the documentary data, we conducted an analysis based on the themes emerging from the narrative frames and interview data. The institutional documents' data were constantly revisited to triangulate with the other two sources and enrich our understanding of the (mis)alignment between participants' preferred identities and the imposed identities. Drawing on the multiple identities revealed from the narrative frame and interview analysis, we reviewed the documentary data to identify relevant institutional factors that could contribute to the participants' identity formation. For example, based on the research requirements in the institutional three-year key performance appraisal system, faculty were required to produce paper publications with certain quality and quantity every three years, reflecting the imposed identity of "researchers with quick research outcomes" on EFL academics by the institution. However, this imposed identity was, in fact, a misalignment with the participants' preferred identity, "growing researcher." Such data further evidenced the participants' efforts to pass the key performance appraisal while striving for academic growth in developing their researcher identities, as revealed from the interview data analysis.

Three strategies were employed to ensure the credibility and confirmability of the findings. First, back-to-back translation was done as the data were collected in Mandarin. A certified translator verified that the translation was accurate. Second, data from three sources were triangulated. Third, the two authors coded the data separately, and the inter-rater reliability was 0.80, indicating substantial strength of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Then, we had several lengthy discussions about the disagreements in coding and eventually reached a consensus on the data analysis results.

## Findings

This section presents findings on the (mis)alignments between meso-level practices of macro-level policy and EFL academics' research practices and identity (re)construction, as well as the participants' coping strategies of (re)constructing their researcher identities with the policy practices.

### **Research Question 1: What are the (mis)alignments between EFL academics' researcher identity (re)construction and meso-level practices of macro-level policy?**

#### **Alignment: Striving to Become Productive Researchers**

As the middle level that links the macro level and the micro level in the ecological system in higher education, the investigated university's policy practices of China's national research policy directly impacted the EFL academics at the micro level. Despite China's national research policy's intention of deemphasizing the importance attached to research (Fu, 2020), it appears that the university still places a high value on research. This is evident from the clearly stated requirements for academics' paper publications and approved research grants in all of the institutional research documents. This has resulted in many misalignments between EFL academics' (re)construction of researcher identity and university practices of national policy. Surprisingly, there was also an alignment displayed by two participants.

Two lecturers (T4 and T6) demonstrated an alignment between their researcher identity construction and the university's practices of China's research policy. They were fully aware of the outcome-orientation essence advocated by the university's leaders and administrators in the institutional implementation of the national research policy, breaking the "Five-Only."

*We lecturers are required to have funded research projects and paper publications. (T4, narrative frame)*

*The current requirements of my university for the research outputs of lecturers like me are two papers published in academic journals and one provincial research grant. (T6, narrative frame)*

The commonality between T4 and T6 was the congruence between the objectives of producing research outputs promoted in the university's policy practices and their research beliefs and commitments.

*Only when you get your papers published can you claim success. If you write a lot but can't get them published, then it's all in vain. (T4, interview)*

*I know the process of research is important because the more time I spend on research, the more likely I am to obtain research outcomes. Nobody can honestly claim that they don't care about research results. (T6, interview)*

Their accounts suggest that T4 and T6 highly valued research outcomes, such as paper publications, which aligned their research commitments with the focus placed on research outputs in institutional policy practices. A review of the university's policy documents revealed that the university only recognized published research work. To some extent, the university's emphasis on research outcomes was perceived as creating a positive impact on T4 and T6's motivations for research. Both T4 and T6 were seeking active opportunities to engage in research.

*My research efforts include writing manuscripts. Non-stop writing. Just keep writing manuscripts and getting them published. Otherwise, how can I meet the institutional requirements? (T4, interview)*

Similarly, T6 asserted that she has constantly made great efforts in her research activities.

*I keep putting a lot of effort into research, like reading a lot of literature, because I need to do some relevant preparatory work for my research. Also, I always apply for research grants whenever I have the opportunity. Only by frequently applying can I boost my chance of receiving. (T6, interview)*

T4 and T6's frequent engagement in various research practices helped them move toward the goal of becoming productive researchers. Their goals aligned with the research requirements espoused by the university's policy practices, as evidenced by statements such as the following:

*I think meeting requirements for research grants can be looked at as motivation because we need papers to report what we find in our research and complete the funded research project. Also, we need papers to pass the key performance appraisal. (T6, interview)*

*According to the requirements for completing approved research grants, the research outputs should be either a monograph or several papers. So, I have desperately written papers in the past few years, and finally, I was able to complete my funded research project with four papers. (T4, interview)*

Generally, both T4 and T6 prioritized research results when developing their researcher identities, suggesting an outcome-oriented research belief and commitment. Their personal research beliefs and values aligned with the outcome orientation demonstrated in the university's policy practices, which coincidentally facilitated the formation of these two lecturers' researcher identities while meeting the institutional research requirements.

### **Misalignment: Focused Researcher vs. Versatile at Everything**

Based on data analysis, there seemed to be some misalignments between university practices of the national research policy and EFL academics' expectations in their researcher identity development. For starters, most participants expressed a desire for a feasible implementation of China's new national research policy, breaking the "Five-Only" policy at their university. Initially, they thought that, with the intention of deemphasizing the sole priority of research in higher education (Fu, 2020), the national research policy could encourage more humane and reasonable research requirements at the institutional level for academics in all disciplines, especially for humanities and social sciences academics: "establish reasonable standards for social science disciplines" (T1, interview); "break the old stringent requirements" (T3, interview). T2 expressed his hope that they would be encouraged to focus more on the quality than the quantity of research work.

*We might be more focused on the quality of our research and our papers; that might be a direction for the future. Maybe we only need to produce representative research work in a few years. (T2, interview).*

It seems that the EFL academics welcomed the release of the national research policy and expected that its implementation at their university would result in favorable adjustments to their research practices, such as reducing the quantity while emphasizing the quality of research work. Such modifications could assist them in maintaining their identification as “a focused researcher” who exclusively conducts research relating to their research topic (T2, interview).

However, they discovered that their university’s previous overemphasis on research has been replaced by the current implementation of a new promotion system and a three-year key performance appraisal. These systems now place emphasis on both the teaching and research outputs of faculty. For example, in addition to their own research area, academics were now expected to conduct educational research with a focus on teachers, students, and teaching practices, which has led to some EFL academics’ feelings of uneasiness.

*My neurolinguistics research is not the same as doing educational research. I need a lot of accumulation before doing educational research, so it’s very frustrating, you know? (T5, interview)*

T5’s frustration with conducting research in an additional area intensified when she spoke of her unsuccessful application for an institutional research grant on educational research. She attributed her failure to a lack of prior experience in educational research.

*Now that the university demands we all conduct educational research, I believe what I am doing in this regard is bogus. I don’t have enough time to read educational research literature, and I’m not sure how to do it effectively. (T5, interview)*

Educational research, in T5’s opinion, was completely different from her original research area. Taking on additional educational research hampered their ability to build a focused researcher identity. According to T5, “the institutional policy actually makes teachers even more at a loss,” as “the institution should permit an academic to excel in one field rather than mandating everyone to be versatile” (T5, interview).

T6 had a similar view on the unrealistic expectation for academics to be “versatile,” notably in the promotion system.

*The promotion standards are actually higher after breaking the “Five-Only” policy. A teacher is not only expected to be good at his or her own research area but also at educational research; in short, he or she is expected to be versatile at everything. I think getting a promotion is going to be more difficult than before. (T6, interview)*

With the institutional expectation of academics to be “versatile at everything,” most academics felt that the university policies fell short of their expectations, leading them to feel that they were “given a three-year KPI assessment in corporate management thinking mode” (T4, interview). Academics also felt that promotion has become more difficult and that they might “lose the chances of promotion” (T6, narrative frame) unless they hit the research target.

*The institutional promotion policy keeps changing. Before breaking the “Five-Only,” it was all about academic research. And now, it’s about both academic research and educational research. These are the objectives that teachers should strive toward. But if the policy continues to change, we teachers will be at a loss for what to do. What will happen next year? Will it impose new requirements on us? (T6, interview)*

Hence, EFL academics felt “a lot of pressure to be a college English teacher now with more things to do” (T6, narrative frame), “lost with the changes in promotion” (T5, narrative frame), and even questioned the whole system.

*The policy of breaking the “Five-Only” is fine, but isn’t it the same thing when you establish a new “Four-Only” or “Three-Only”? Now, we’re given a three-year KPI assessment in corporate management thinking mode. It shouldn’t be like this when doing research, right? So, I think the whole system is problematic. (T4, interview)*

It appears that China’s national research policy breaking the “Five-Only” touched on issues that the EFL academics were concerned about in terms of research criteria; however, university practices of this policy were inconsistent with what they expected, resulting in goal incongruence and identity misalignment with university requirements.

### **Misalignment: Growing Researcher vs. Paper Generator**

One of the changes to the university’s research policies was its adoption of a three-year key performance appraisal system after implementing China’s national research policy, breaking the “Five-Only” policy. According to the institutional policy documents, the academics were required to constantly produce research outputs in quantifiable indicators (e.g., the number and level of publications) to excel in the key performance appraisal every three years. This outcome-oriented managerial approach discouraged EFL academics from conducting long-term research and thus hampered their researcher identity development. The EFL academics all understood that “good research takes time” (T5, interview) and that their growth to be influential scholars, active researchers, or competent researchers also needed time (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, and T6, narrative frames). Their awareness of the time-consuming nature of research was expressed through statements such as the following:

*It took me five years to complete the National Social Sciences Foundation research grant. To pass the experts’ review, I must write high-quality papers and a high-level monograph. I just kept working to meet these requirements. (T1, interview)*

*Good research takes time. Like my first CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) article, it took me two to almost three years from drafting to publishing. (T5, interview)*

T3, like T1 and T5, spent much time on his high-quality research outcomes, and his account of his PhD experience reflected that devotion, as shown below:

*My doctoral supervisor said that becoming a researcher is a lengthy process. After obtaining the PhD degree with four years of hard work, I felt that I could gradually conduct some independent research work. (T3, interview)*

The above quote further testifies that, regardless of the participant's position in their research process, they were all aware of the time-consuming nature of research work and were willing to dedicate sufficient time to conduct high-quality research as growing researchers. Referring to the path to becoming influential researchers, T3 underlined the importance of devoting adequate time to their concentrated research work for their growth:

*There are really no shortcuts to doing research; there is no shortcut at all. If we want to be influential scholars in our field, we will need to put in at least ten years of hard work. (T3, interview)*

As shown in the quote above, T3 and other EFL academics were willing to dedicate up to ten years to focusing on doing high-quality research in their respective areas. This commitment aimed to gradually and increasingly develop their researcher identities. Nonetheless, the quantitative appraisal system at their workplace required them to generate consistent research outcomes every three years, leaving little time for them to grow.

Faced with tight research standards and no departmental or institutional support mechanisms, the EFL academics developed their own strategies to negotiate the pressure of producing quick research results. A common strategy was to undertake small-scale projects in their current research activities that could generate results in a short period of time. T2 lamented that he had hoped to conduct a longitudinal research project that could produce “application values in EFL teaching” (T2, interview), but he also realized that he might risk not meeting the research targets should he conduct such a project.

*I'm hoping to do a long-term research project that will last at least two years. This project is something I enjoy doing, not because of external pressure. But, with the promotion and key performance appraisal, the project is just my hope. For us, institutional policies are batons. We must conduct research as the institution requires. (T2, interview)*

The above quote exemplifies the gap between T2's preferred research project and the institutional requirements. While he desired to concentrate on the quality of his research, institutional policy practices appeared to encourage academics to focus on the quantity of research. Using the metaphor “institutional policies are batons,” T2 admitted that the long-term project was merely a hope, as it could not help him address the institutional demands.

The university's policy practices were also found to influence the participants' research topic selection. The other strategy EFL academics adopted was pursuing hot topics to meet institutional research requirements. T4 and T6 reported that in their research grant applications and article writing, they pursued topics with current sociocultural hot issues, such as the integration of the ideology of Chinese traditional culture into English language teaching. They explained that their intentional switch to such topics was to ensure quick research outcomes.

*If we don't pursue the topics with the hottest issues, no one will publish our work or fund our research. When I failed a research grant application, I was concerned that my research outputs would not be enough to pass the evaluation system. (T4, interview)*

The above quote clearly shows that some EFL academics' pursuit of hot topics was externally motivated by the institutional research requirement. However, giving up their research interests



to pursue areas deemed valuable by the authorities has led academics to feel lost, as they were unable to find their identity as researchers.

*Those who have their own research focus and research findings are competent researchers. I'm not doing research in my field right now. I don't think I'm a researcher in the true sense. (T6, interview)*

Clearly, while pursuing short-term projects and hot topics helped EFL academics produce quick research outputs, these activities did not contribute to their growth in their own research area. This led to an identity conflict between their preferred identity as growing researchers and the paper generator identity imposed by their university.

### **Misalignment: Collaborative Researcher vs. Struggling Alone**

In addition to the two misalignments presented above, there appeared to be a misalignment between academics and university management regarding collaborative research. All participants expressed a strong desire to be a part of a research team or to engage in collaborative research with others. Below are some illustrative reactions from them:

*Of course, I would like to collaborate with others. How much research work can just one person complete? (T1, interview)*

*One person's time and energy are very limited. Some research projects necessitate the participation of a group, like some large-scale English teaching projects that require a group of academics to work together to complete them. (T2, interview)*

*I certainly have this idea because I think, after all, collaborative work, especially interdisciplinary collaboration, is a trend of the future. (T6, interview)*

They believed that collaborative work was essential for researchers who sought to progress their careers.

*I worked on an article with the help of others. We wrote in sections. I believe we can continue to work together to complete funded research projects. We can conduct an empirical study, collect data, and write papers together. We can speed up the research process this way. (T5, interview)*

Despite the participants' strong desire to engage in collaborative research, they discovered that conducting such research at their workplace was challenging due to three reasons. First, academics faced challenges in finding collaborators in their research area.

*I used to collaborate with my doctoral supervisor, but there are no good partners for collaboration now. There are virtually no other researchers in my field at our university or in our province. (T1, interview)*

Second, even when they successfully formed a research team, their collaboration did not last long.

*Only a few of my colleagues and I conduct research in my field. We seldom discuss our research with each other, and they no longer do research frequently. We don't have much collaboration or communication right now. (T4, interview)*

T4's observations about his research team falling apart were echoed by T5's comments on the many research teams established in the university's English department:

*I think our department's research teams are quickly becoming phony. None of them have a central research objective, and none are truly collaborative. (T6, interview)*

Third, there seemed to be a lack of communication and deep collaboration among the research team members. Some participants disclosed that, in the absence of strong leadership, their so-called collaboration did not truly amount to research collaboration.

*Our team's collaboration may not be as close as we would like. Basically, our team leader does his own research, and we members just take charge of our own things. When I was writing a paper or applying for a research grant, I would occasionally ask them for advice if I wasn't sure about something, but this should not be considered a deep collaboration. There isn't a lot of communication, nor is there deep collaboration among us. (T6, interview)*

As a result, "the research team is just a formality" (T3, interview), even when the EFL academics formed research teams. The participants' accounts disclosed that the English department has set up four research teams based on teachers' research interests in the past two years. However, most teams did not produce abundant research outcomes as expected, suggesting that EFL academics' preferred identity as collaborative researcher was not successfully constructed in their embedded institutional context.

On the other hand, teachers' difficulties in collaborative work are understandable, given the university's research assessment and evaluation policies. Despite the fact that the essence of China's research policy breaking the "Five-Only" was to reduce the tendency to prioritize solely research outcomes such as paper publishing and research funds, the university's actual policy practice appeared to be contrary to the policy's intention. The institution placed such high importance on research outcomes that it enforced a strict rule regarding research credit recognition. A review of the institutional documents reveals that only those who host research grants and publish papers as the first or corresponding author receive full credit in the performance-based evaluation system. Although such first- or corresponding-authorship-based research assessment could drive every teacher to be actively engaged in research activities and produce an abundance of research outputs to improve the national ranking of this non-elite university, teachers' enthusiasm for collaborative research was diminished by the complete discrediting of those who contribute as team members or co-authors.

*Only those who are the first author or corresponding author of a paper are acknowledged in the institutional policies; the other co-authors are not recognized. This also increases the difficulty of finding collaborators. (T1, interview)*

The above quote reveals that EFL academics were aware that the institutional research policy increased their difficulty in obtaining research collaborators and performing in-depth collaborative research. Constrained by the credit recognition rules in the institutional system, individual academics were preoccupied with solo research work with the intention of getting credit from the institution. As T3 shared,

*The institution's policymakers simply treat teachers as soulless machines. There are no supporting measures, only requirements. I'm struggling alone, with no help from the institution. The institution is a mud puddle, a research mud puddle. (T3, interview)*

Overall, the EFL academics' accounts and experiences of collaborative research appeared to reflect a misalignment between their researcher identity development and institutional research policy practices. Constrained by the discouraging research credit recognition system, the participants gradually lost faith in becoming collaborative researchers and eventually ended up "struggling alone" in their research work.

## **Research Question 2: How do EFL academics (re)align their researcher identity (re)construction with meso-level policy practices?**

### **Becoming Agentive and Active Researchers**

The participants responded differently to the misalignments, even though they were all affected by the impact of the university's implementation of the national research policy. This impact was mainly manifested through misalignments between the meso-level practices of macro-level policy and academics' expectations in research practices. Senior academics who had research experience of more than ten years reconstructed their identity as agentive and active researchers by exercising self-agency to find a way out of the constraining research environment.

Both T1 and T3 aspired to be influential scholars (T1, T3, narrative frames), so they worked hard to achieve their own objectives while meeting the institutional managerial requirements. Their accounts in the interviews, however, showed that they were generally critical of their institution's policy practices.

*Even after the implementation of breaking the "Five-Only" policy, the institution's recognition for high-level research work is not enough. It awards only 2000 RMB for a CSSCI paper. (T1, interview)*

The above quote reveals that T1 was unsatisfied with the financial reward for academic publications under the institution's recognition criteria, especially given that "there are only a few CSSCI papers from the entire university every year" (T1, interview). Thus, the institution's current recognition criteria evoked a sense of discontent about the institution's research support system.

Similarly, T3 expressed his criticism by questioning the effect of the university's implementation of breaking the "Five-Only" policy:

*The university's high-level paper publications did not increase following the breaking of the "Five-Only" policy. So, what's the point of the implementation of this policy? (T3, interview)*

Although the university's policy practices aroused negative views about the institutional research culture, T1 and T3 believed that these policy practices had no substantial impact on their research engagement. T1 reported that she was undergoing a full transition to translation teaching research. Despite changes in the university's policy practices, she has actively attempted to shift her research area to translation and culture studies related to her teaching. Clear evidence of T1's intrinsic research motivation emerged as she applied for and received

four institutional research grants on translation teaching last year, all driven by her interest in conducting research related to her teaching. She also discovered a sense of fulfillment during the active transformation process.

In the classroom, I sometimes share my research with students. It gives me a sense of fulfillment through sharing. Besides, research on translation and culture provides high-level teaching content in class, so my research can help my teaching. (T1, interview)

The above quote shows that T1 had a genuine passion for teaching-related research, which promoted her to agentively seek opportunities to fulfill her research vision, that is, to become an influential scholar in her field. Meanwhile, her agentive and active research engagement assisted her in producing research outputs that met institutional research demands.

Likewise, T3 has engaged in some active actions. Despite holding the professional title of lecturer at present, T3 explicitly expressed his lack of concern regarding a promotion. His sole aspiration was to uphold his responsibilities as a conscientious EFL university teacher and to eventually establish himself as a distinguished scholar in the future (T3, narrative frame). His commitment to research was such that he aimed to persist without regard for promotion.

I no longer value promotion. There is only a financial loss. It makes no difference whether I have it or not. My heart is in research. I place it in a very noble and pure position. I just want to keep doing it for the rest of my life. (T3, interview)

Driven by his intrinsic motivation, T3 has been actively reaching out to his PhD supervisor and peers to have collaborative work while he had “no support from the institution or department” (T3, interview). He completed a monograph with his doctoral supervisor within one year as a result of his unwavering efforts.

Unlike T1 and T3, who wanted to become influential scholars, T2 wanted to resume his active researcher identity after a period of stagnation in his associate professorship (T2, interview). He acknowledged the impact of the institutional research policy on teachers in the system.

One is that such a system pushes us to do research. It is something that we have to do. Two, it may impose some constraints on us. Our research area should not deviate from our professional field; otherwise, our research output may not be recognized. (T2, interview)

T2 kept working on applying for numerous research grants on topics related to English language teaching and learning that piqued his interest.

English language teaching is definitely worth researching. There are many topics to write about. In addition, our research will extend our teaching viewpoint and make us more confident in the classroom. (T2, interview)

T2's interest in conducting research on English language teaching and the benefits it can offer him is expressed in the preceding quote. Consequently, T2 was actively engaged in research activities, such as applying for research grants and writing manuscripts in his research area. His recent success in obtaining an institutional research grant and publishing two papers on such topics in international peer-reviewed journals demonstrates his efforts to reclaim the identity of an active researcher.

Regardless of the type of researcher they wanted to be, the senior academics were all actively choosing research topics and conducting research activities, allowing them to break free from the contextual constraints of their situated managerial environment.

### **Becoming Complying Researchers Aiming for Survival**

Unlike senior academics, novice researchers (those with research experience of no more than five years) are facing a new promotion system with more stringent requirements. Thus, they were under greater pressure to produce research outputs. Furthermore, according to the university's policy documents, failing the key performance appraisal poses a threat to the job security of early-career teachers. The institution stipulates that young teachers who fail may be demoted or transferred to non-teaching positions. The three novice researchers, T4, T5, and T6, showed their reluctant acceptance of the university's policy practices, as they were questioning the universal research demand for all teachers.

I don't think it's necessary to ask all college English teachers to conduct research. Most of us just teach students English language proficiency courses. But it's also impossible to ask the university not to require faculty to do research. (T4, interview)

Now, the university requires us to apply for research grants for educational research. So, now we have another task to complete. (T6, interview)

Perceiving research as an unavoidable aspect of their role, novice researchers have adopted a survival strategy by conforming to institutional, managerial practices in their research engagement. For example, T4 honestly admitted that he aimed to "pass the research assessment" despite his belief that "the whole system is problematic" (T4, interview).

The sole purpose of my research grant application and paper writing is to pass the research assessment. Otherwise, who would like to do research? In fact, it is a system constraint. We can't avoid research; it is something we have to do. (T4, interview)

The above quote reveals that T4 was conducting research primarily to comply with institutional rules in order to survive in the system. Similarly, T5 expressed her compliance with taking educational research as an additional research area.

Yes, we now need to do educational research. I think that the external reason is actually greater than the internal reason. I only do it because I am under external pressure; otherwise, why should I do it? I'd be content to be a teacher with my own research area, right? (T5, interview)

According to T5, it was unreasonable for the university to require all academics to conduct educational research. Academics needed to invest their full research commitment in their own research areas. Despite her reservations about the research requirement, T5 began undertaking educational research, as it was mandatory in both the university's promotion and key performance appraisal systems. She stated that she was conducting this new research area mostly for "external reasons."

T6 also admitted that she was conducting research mainly for "meeting school requirements or for promotion" (T6, narrative frame). Situated in an outcome-oriented research environment with tight managerial practices, she tried to navigate her negative feelings.

There has been a lot of pressure from the university's demanding requirements, but we need to look at it in a positive way. Try to turn pressure into motivation.  
(T6, interview)

With such a pragmatic mentality, despite her unwillingness, T6 was actively engaged in numerous research activities, including seeking advice from experienced academics, reading literature, attending academic conferences, applying for research grants, and writing manuscripts on a regular basis (T6, narrative frame). As a result of her frequent research engagements, she received one institutional research grant and had one paper published last year, which helped her pass the most recent three-year key performance appraisal.

The responses of the novice researcher participants show that they all endeavored to conform to institutional requirements by forcing themselves into research engagement or taking on a new research area as required. Despite their negative emotional responses, such as “feeling particularly pressured in recent years” (T6, interview) and “the research process is painful” (T4, interview), passing the key-performance appraisal appeared to be their priority. Facing challenges in their professional identity (re)construction, they made every effort to survive in the performative system by becoming complying researchers with adherence to the institutional rules.

## **Discussion**

Institutional implementation of research policies with managerial practices plays a crucial role in the participants' research practices and thus influences the development of their researcher identity (re)construction. The findings of this study are in line with previous studies showing that academics' professional practices and identity negotiation were under the influence of their embedded socio-institutional contexts (Ai, 2019; Kim et al., 2018), particularly with educational reforms (Yip et al., 2022) and policy changes (Tran et al., 2017). The macro-sociocultural, meso-institutional, and micro-individual ecologies all interrelate and interact in higher education's three-tier ecological system, exerting joint influence on language teachers' professional identity development (Edwards & Burns, 2016; Kamali & Nazari, 2023; Nazari et al., 2023). Institutional management at the meso level is strategically important in higher education's ecological systems because it implements macro-level research policies and has a direct impact on micro-level academics. One of the most apparent impacts is increased research pressure on university EFL academics. The participants at this non-elite university, whether senior academics or novice researchers, almost all felt pressured to (re)construct their researcher identity in a demanding environment with managerial practices (Gao & Zheng, 2020; Gao & Yuan, 2021; Tian & Lu, 2017). Hence, they expressed dissatisfaction with the stringent research requirements and anticipated a more lenient research environment with the implementation of China's new research policy, breaking the “Five-Only,” such as “reasonable standards for social science disciplines” (T1, interview) and “lower research assessment” (T4, interview).

However, this study found that there were more misalignments than alignments between the participants' expectations and the institution's implementation of the national research policy. Only two participants demonstrated some degree of alignment between their research beliefs and the objectives of university policy practices. T4 and T6, two novice researchers aspiring to be productive researchers, demonstrated their priorities in research outcomes rather than research process in their accounts, which coincidentally aligned with the outcome-oriented

objectives of the university's research policies. However, this alignment did not eliminate T4 and T6's displeasure with university policy practices, as they consistently stated that research was more "a system constraint" to them, something they were mainly externally driven to do.

For the participants, there were distinctive misalignments in their researcher identity (re)construction and the university's implementation of China's national research policy. Breaking the "Five-Only" policy meant no longer valuing papers solely for the participants. They thought that with the emphasis removed from research output, they might be able to produce "a representative work in a few years" (T2, interview), relieving them of the heavy burden of research pressure. However, the institution's new promotion policy demonstrates that its interpretation of China's national research policy is to value both research and teaching, particularly educational research in the teaching aspect. As a result, the participants felt that they were burdened with "more things to do" (T6, narrative frame), and they were imposed with the identity of "versatile" researchers rather than their preferred identity as focused researchers with expertise in one specialization. This led to their sense of being "lost with the changes in promotion" (T5, narrative frame). While previous research noticed the influence of institutional research policies on EFL teachers' professional identity construction (Huang et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2017; Yuan, 2017), the misalignments between non-elite universities' implementation of national research policy and EFL academics' expectations appear not to have been sufficiently reported. Perhaps this is due to a lack of attention paid to the needs and perspectives of EFL academics from non-elite universities, who actually represent the majority of EFL teachers in China (Wang, 2018). In China's quest to become a key player in global higher education (Ai, 2019), the potential contribution of academics from non-elite universities to the competitiveness of Chinese universities cannot be overlooked in light of their large proportion.

Meanwhile, as part of the implementation measures, the investigated university adopted a three-year key performance appraisal system. This system required faculty to produce quick and stable research results, creating tension between the institutionally imposed identity of "paper generators" and the participants' preferred identity of "growing researchers." While the participants were aware that they needed time to advance as growing researchers, the pressing need to produce enough research output for the key performance appraisal drove them in the opposite direction. Driven by the outcome-oriented accountability system (Gao & Yuan, 2021; Gao & Zheng, 2020; Huang & Guo, 2019), academics adopted a compromising practice by following mainstream topics (Kim et al., 2018; Tian & Lu, 2017). The institution's demand for quick research results actually hampered academics' long-term growth and restricted academic freedom and autonomy (Henkel, 2005). This was achieved by diverting EFL teachers' attention away from pursuing genuine research interests and toward blindly following mainstream topics to ensure quick, short, and easy results to meet the appraisal requirements. This is evident in T4's claim that they were all chasing research topics with "the hottest issues" (T4, interview). On the one hand, the utilitarian pursuit of such topics helped the participants meet the institutional demand and shaped their identities as paper generators; on the other hand, it made the participants doubt their legitimacy as qualified researchers because this practice distracted them from persistently pursuing their own research area.

Another notable misalignment that hampered the participants' researcher identity development was the misalignment between the institutional stance and academics' expectations of collaborative research. Despite the participants' strong desire to become collaborative

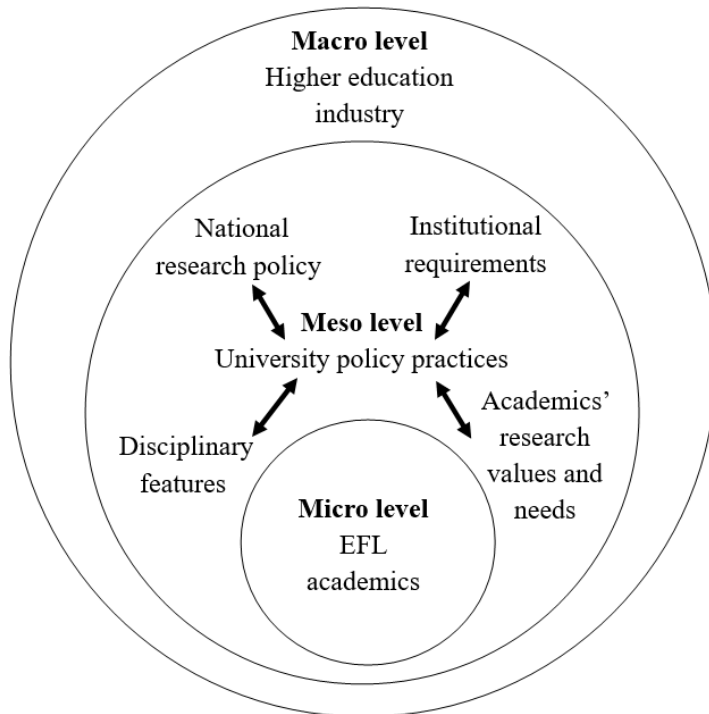
researchers, the institution only recognizes the principal investigators of research grants and the first or corresponding authors of paper publications. This performance-based management practice not only puts heavy pressure on university academics (Shams, 2019) but also discourages collaborative work by devaluing team membership in research grants and co-authorship in publications. This thus hampers the participants' development as collaborative researchers. Given that research productivity and recognition are inextricably linked to faculty promotion, performance appraisal, contract renewal, and awards in Chinese higher education (Dai et al., 2021; Gao & Yuan, 2021), institutional authorities' refusal to recognize collaborative research work has resulted in a lack of a collaborative research culture at universities (Ai, 2019; Xu, 2014), as experienced by the participants in this study. This misalignment, on the other hand, demonstrates the distinctions between meso-level management and micro-level academic thinking modes. While the institution seeks to improve its national ranking with more research outputs by pushing all teachers to apply for research grants and yield research publications, EFL academics seek to enhance their research competence and further their professional development through collaboration. Given that the meso-level and the micro-level are both in the same ecological system in higher education with mutual interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; van Lier, 2010), their coordination seems to be a critical issue in the sustainable development of the overall system. Otherwise, the continued misalignments might break rather than shape the researcher identity of EFL academics in the system, which might eventually constrain the sustainable development of ecological systems in higher education.

Consistent with previous research findings on academics' varied responses to institutional policies (Huang et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2022), this study also found that EFL academics responded differently to the misalignments between meso-level management and their research practices in developing their researcher identities. While senior academics with more years of research experience strived to advance their research achievements, novice researchers with more research pressure adopted a survival strategy in this managerial context. Senior academics in this study, unlike their counterparts with a defensive stance toward managerial reforms in Huang et al.'s (2018) study, focused on their own academic goals and exercised self-agency to navigate through the contextual constraints. T1 and T3 were solely motivated by a desire to be influential scholars in their academic identity reconstruction, whereas T2 wished to reclaim his identity as an active researcher after a period of inactivity. This study accords with the argument made by various scholars (e.g., Lu & Yoon, 2022; Nguyen & Ngo, 2023; Teng, 2020; Yuan, 2017) that EFL academics' exercising of teacher agency could play a critical role in their researcher identity construction despite contextual constraints. Senior academics' intrinsic research motivations aided them in becoming agentive and active researchers with fruitful research achievements, inadvertently meeting the external institutional research requirements. As for novice researcher participants, they took actions directed at survival in the managerial context, resulting in a complying researcher identity. This conformity partially reflects Chinese culture, in which Chinese teachers are more subservient to bureaucratic authority and adopt socially expected identities (Huang & Guo, 2019). However, another more important reason is probably their pragmatic mindset in the performativity-valued institutional culture. Following the institutional policy could ensure their survival in such a context, as evidenced by their claim that "the external reason is actually greater than the internal reason" (T5, interview); they were conducting research to "pass the research assessment" (T4, interview) or "for promotion and meeting school requirements" (T6,



narrative frame). Hence, “pragmatism” and “conformity” appeared to be the surviving strategies for novice EFL researchers in response to meso-level management in their research practice.

Following the three-tier framework adapted from the ecological systems model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), along with findings regarding the (mis)alignments between university policy practices and EFL academics’ research engagement, we present in Figure 2 “The key factors in aligning meso-level policy practices with EFL academics’ researcher identity (re)construction.”



**Figure 2. The Key Factors in Aligning Meso-Level Policy Practices with EFL Academics’ Researcher Identity (Re) Construction**

Based on the findings of this study, we propose that various interconnected and interacting factors within ecological systems be thoroughly considered to achieve alignment among the different subsystems, contributing to the overall sustainable development of the ecological system. Specifically, as illustrated in Figure 2, concerning the (re)construction of EFL academics’ researcher identity, it is crucial to recognize that not only do individual factors at the micro level matter, but university policy practices at the meso level should also consider factors such as EFL academics’ disciplinary features, research values, and needs. This consideration is essential when formulating institutional research requirements guided by national policies at the macro level. University policy practices at the meso level are deeply rooted in the contexts where novice EFL researchers aspire to survive in the culture of performativity, and senior EFL academics endeavor to thrive and advance their careers within the system. As such, EFL academics’ researcher identity (re)construction should not only be viewed from a micro perspective, such as EFL teachers’ research engagement alone but also include the impact of university policy practices on their research engagement. In the long run,

achieving alignment between university policy practices at the meso level and the professional development of individual academics at the micro level helps sustain the ecological systems in higher education.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This study investigated the (mis)alignments between meso-level practices of macro-level policy and micro-level EFL academics, as well as how the EFL academics navigated the complexities of such (mis)alignments in their researcher identity (re)construction. Given the prevalence of managerialism in global higher education, the findings may shed more insights into the professional development of EFL academics in similar contexts. Furthermore, by displaying the critical influencing factors in the three-tier framework based on the ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this study adds to our understanding of the interrelation and interaction between university management at the meso level and individual academics' researcher identities at the micro level, whose alignment contributes to the sustainability of the ecological systems in higher education.

The findings point to two implications for EFL academics and university management on academics' professional development and the sustainability of ecological systems in higher education. First, EFL academics, with their professionalism redefined by the performativity culture (Ai, 2019; Huang & Guo, 2019), need to improve their research competence and exercise self-agency in facing challenges within the managerial educational environment. They should devise coping strategies to support their sustainable professional development. For instance, even if meso-level management does not actively support their research capacity building through collaboration, EFL academics can form research teams based on their own interests. Engaging in periodic activities within research teams can promote peer interaction and foster research collaboration.

Second, there is a need for university management to reconsider some of the performative requirements in policy implementation as they may disturb the researcher identity (re)construction of EFL academics. For example, university management needs to adopt more reasonable and balanced approaches to measuring faculty research productivity. Given that the majority of EFL teachers at non-elite universities have heavy teaching workloads (Wang, 2018), limited research experience (Bao & Feng, 2022), and insufficient research knowledge and skills (Yang et al., 2022), a moderate reduction in publication and research grant requirements may suit their reality and relieve the research pressure caused by their disadvantaged status in research practice. More co-authorship recognition and incentives for collaborative research work can be implemented to foster a collaborative and shared institutional culture and to facilitate EFL teachers' research engagement and researcher identity development. Furthermore, the institutional administration could hold open dialogues with EFL academics to hear their perspectives on research support and suggestions for improving administrative management.

This study has two limitations. One, there is a lack of observational data on the participants' researcher identity (re)construction through their research activities in situated institutional contexts. Future research may continue to explore how EFL academics conduct research and develop their researcher identities individually or collaboratively in research teams through field observations. Two, this study only takes a cross-sectional look at the participants' researcher identity (re)construction in a managerial context. Longitudinal research may be

needed to explore the long-term identity development of EFL academics through (re)construction and negotiation at various stages.

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## Appendix A. An Overview of Data Collection

Source of data	Time period	Example of data collection method
Narrative frame	March-May 2021	<p>I _____ (frequency) conduct research because _____;</p> <p>I usually conduct research on _____;</p> <p>I mainly conduct research for _____;</p> <p>The requirements of my university for my research output are _____;</p> <p>Generally, my attitude toward research and the university research requirements can be summarized as _____.</p>
Interview	June-October 2021	<p><b>Micro-level:</b></p> <p>How long did it take for you to become a researcher? How do you feel about that?</p> <p>What motivates you to become a researcher?</p> <p>What efforts have you paid to become a researcher?</p> <p>With regard to research, do you have any particular experiences to share with us?</p> <p><b>Meso-level:</b></p> <p>What do you think of your university’s policy practices of China’s national research policy?</p> <p>What is the impact of your university’s research requirements on your research work?</p> <p>Could you tell me three things that you like and dislike of doing research at your university?</p> <p><b>Macro-level:</b></p> <p>What is your opinion on China’s national research policy, breaking the “Five-Only”?</p> <p>What is the impact of this national research policy on your research work?</p>
Document analysis	March, October 2021	The university’s promotion documents, three-year key performance appraisal system documents, annual evaluation system documents

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