

Research Article

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Second-Career EFL Teachers' Experiences of Adaptability and Sustainability in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Since Vietnam's accession to ASEAN in 1995, English has become crucial for regional and international engagement, driving changes in language education policies and increasing the demand for qualified teachers of English. However, little context-related research focuses on second-career EFL teachers (SCETs). This study explores the experiences of three SCETs: a plant pathologist, a salesperson, and a graphic designer, focusing on the process of adapting and sustaining commitment in English Language Teaching (ELT).

Materials/methods. The study adopted narrative inquiry design under the lens of Ecological Systems Theory and Self-Determination Theory with observation, semi-structured interviews and outsider comments.

Results. Findings show that these SCETs leverage their prior career experiences to reflect on factors affecting their autonomous teaching philosophies and job sustainability through community-driven professional development. The plant pathologist evolves himself based on the upgrading from caring for emotionless trees to emotional learners. The saleswoman transfers and acclimates her belief in business ethics into education ethics. The designer inspires learners to be creatively forward-thinking and independent in their learning.

Conclusion. Discussions indicate that SCETs need more support for targeted training in pedagogical competencies and interdisciplinary teaching to maximize the use of their previous expertise assets. This study contributes to the understanding of SCETs' experiences and paves the way for future research to consider expanding the participant base and exploring comparative studies amongst SCETs and other traditional teachers.

1. Introduction

Since Vietnam acceded to ASEAN in 1995, English has become a crucial foreign language medium for regional and international engagement. Recently, there has been a gradual shift from EFL to English as a second language (ESL) in schools, as outlined in Conclusion No. 91-KL/TW by the Politburo and the mission plan for the 2024-2025 school year. These changes are part of a broader effort to integrate English into the national curriculum and expand private language centers to meet the growing demand for English proficiency (Do, Sellars, & Le, 2022; Hoang, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2017). As a result, there is an urgent need for qualified teachers of English. Vietnam's ELT workforce is evolving with many teachers pursuing professional development (PD) programs to meet evolving curriculum standards (Le & Le, 2022; Tran & Tanemura, 2020). However, the experiences of SCETs transitioning from other non-education professions remain underexplored. This study aims to address this gap by using narrative inquiry, including observational and interview data, to capture the adapting and sustaining experiences of three SCETs from different first careers. The findings reveal that SCETs cannot be fully equated to traditional novice teachers, as their previous experiences provide a foundation for adapting their teaching philosophies and professional development approaches. The discussion suggests that teacher training programs should equip them with feasible pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and support them in interdisciplinary teaching. The study implications from SCETs' self-efficacy and agency for interdisciplinary teaching can inform teacher training and career consultation that support their PD and align with national educational goals.

2. Literature Review

SCETs are second-career teachers (SCTs) who enter the field of ELT after working in non-education-related careers (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Powers, 2002). While they share similarities with SCTs in navigating shifts into education and struggling with pedagogy, SCETs are distinguished by the additional focus on subject-specific content knowledge required for English teaching (Grossman & Loeb, 2021). Adapting to teaching requires SCTs to transfer prior knowledge and address challenges. Many SCTs leverage procedural skills such as time management, multitasking, and problem-solving to build a foundation in their new roles (Freidus & Krasnow, 1991; Novak & Knowles, 1992). Successful adaptation depends on identifying similarities between previous work and teaching tasks, known as near transfer, which fosters adaptive expertise (Buchin & Mulligan, 2023; Kimball & Holyoak, 2000). Similarly, SCETs often use metaphors such as guides, gardeners, bridge builders, or nurturers to describe their new roles. They find that teaching allows them to harness empathy, patience, and compassion, which were underutilized in their previous careers (Aslan, 2016; Chen, 2024). Many SCETs confidently approach the profession about their transferable skills but remain cautious about the hurdles they will face (Li & Lai, 2022). This duality of both optimism for resurrecting personas and concerns about adapting to ELT as "novice teachers" works in tandem to drive SCETs forward despite its contradiction. (Leshem, 2019). SCETs can generally be grouped into two categories: those seeking stability after unstable working conditions and those pursuing teaching for community contributions. The weight of these motivations significantly influences their expectations and commitment levels (Alfi-Shabtay & Hemed-Kotake, 2021).

While teaching is often perceived as fulfilling and flexible, sustaining long-term engagement can be challenging if intrinsic motivations are insufficient (Maryam et al., 2021). Sustaining a teaching career relies on both the SCTs themselves and their working context. Internal traits like resilience and curiosity enable SCTs to overcome challenges and refine their methods (Creed, Fallon, & Hood, 2009; Johnston, 2018). Institutional support, such as recognizing prior expertise and fostering collaboration, is essential for building long-term commitment (Coppe, März, & Raemdonck, 2023). Without external help, SCETs risk experiencing burnout and undermining their self-image (Leshem et al., 2023; Ruitenburt & Tigchelaar, 2021). Shin (2016) critiqued traditional teacher preparation programs for

their lack of flexibility, arguing that they often overlook SCETs' diverse professional backgrounds. Although Shin's study focused on the U.S. context, its implications can be valuable globally regarding universal aspects such as increasing demands for English learning, the aging teacher population, and the generational gap between older and younger educators. Recent studies echo Shin's call for systemic regulations that do not marginalize or discriminate against SCETs during their pedagogy training (Leshem et al., 2021, 2023). Recommendations include the establishment of supportive school cultures, mentorship programs, and collaborative practices to help SCETs maximize their contributions. Even though related studies about SCET identity formation employ various frameworks, they generally imply how SCETs' identities are shaped by the teachers' characters, English subject nature, and interactions within institutions. These factors are barely surprising, yet they vary in terms of their intensity and prioritization due to SCETs' unique psychological traits and backgrounds. More qualitative research on personal stories would offer more sophisticated insights to help those with similar circumstances find reference points and relate to one another.

Existing research in the Vietnamese context has examined language teachers who transition to teaching English due to external influences, such as institutional policies or directives from higher authorities, rather than personal choice (Tran, 2018a, 2018b; Tran & Taylor-Leech, 2022). These studies figured out these teachers' dual challenges: adapting to new linguistic frameworks and instructional methodologies. With foundational teaching experience, transitioning to ELT often requires pedagogical adjustments, chiefly regarding the global focus on communicative competence and exam-oriented outcomes. Research also focused on teachers of English as a foreign language (TEFL) from non-teacher-education disciplines. English teachers from business-related majors employ certain strategies, such as imitating model teachers during their initial stages, leveraging neoliberal discourse like branding or metricization, and designing personalized teaching materials to establish legitimacy (Do & Hoang, 2023). Though research in the Vietnamese context has generally centered around the contributions and challenges faced by EFL teachers with different backgrounds, they predominantly focus on those transitioning between foreign languages or business-related groups of participants. The insights from these studies indicate the need for further research to capture SCETs' experiences from other career backgrounds with more diverse profiles.

This study aims to address two questions formulated by the Career Change Framework, including three interrelated phases of initiating factors for switching career – mediating factors of adaptation – commitment (Crow, Levine, & Nager, 1990), in relation to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (Figure 1). An ecological lens from EST (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Chen, 2020) integrates factors across various external levels rather than treating them separately. Multiple contextual factors will arise when SCETs enter a new environment like ELT. Using EST enables classifying and evaluating influential factors across various layers, from direct, interpersonal, institutional, and societal to chronological change. These factors either benefit or impede SCETs' adaptation process. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2024) underpins the experiences of their prolonged motives to commit to ELT. With the internalization principle, the framework can unpack whether teachers adapt external factors to their later intrinsic motivations. Individuals employ various strategies to sustain their motivations. For autonomy, successfully integrating these forces with self-interest brings a sense of sustainability (Chiu, 2022). For the sense of competence or feeling helpful in their roles, achieving competencies can enhance individuals' self-confidence and commitment even in the face of difficulties (Roth, Vansteenkiste, & Ryan, 2019). Relatedness, or the need for meaningful connections and self-belonging with the community, is recognized as vital for sustaining one's passion and well-being in one's career (Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020).

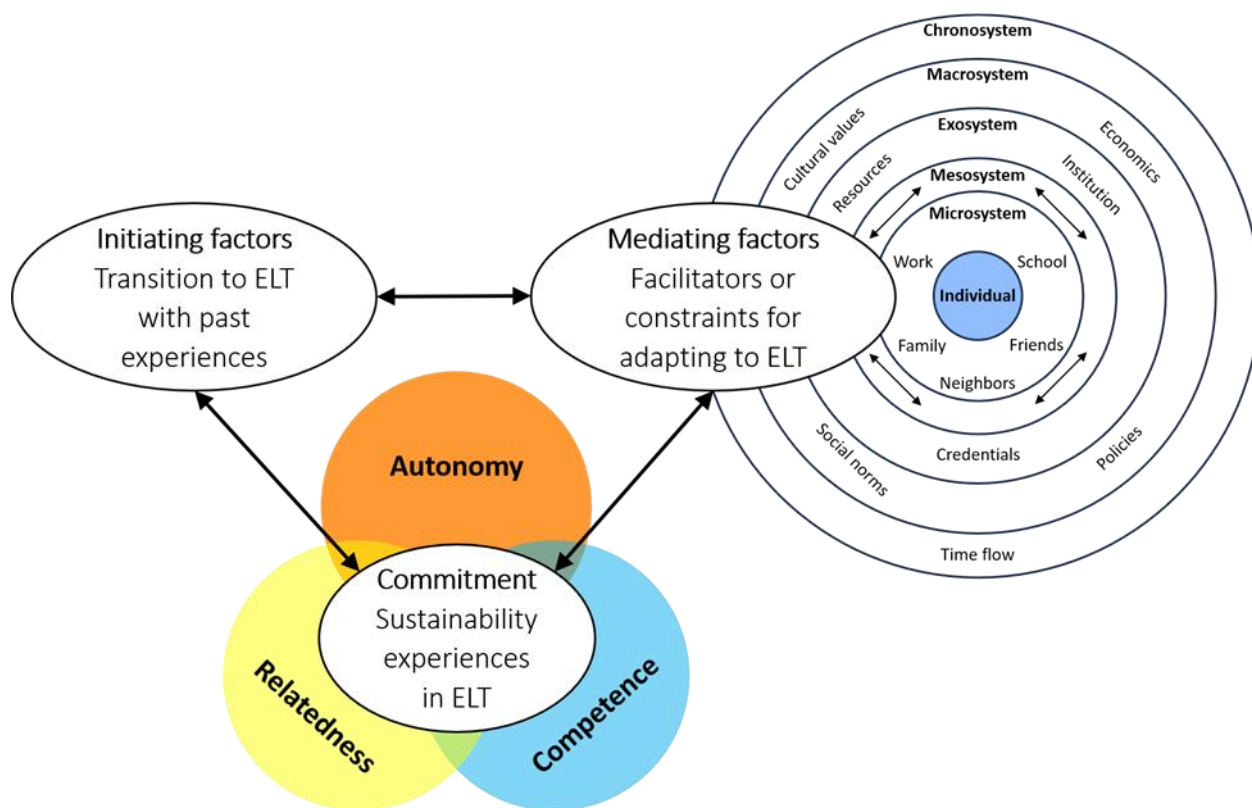


Figure 1. Conceptual and theoretical formulation of research questions

Research question 2 is theoretically formed through an ecological lens that integrates ELT-related factors across various ecological levels that have impacted SCETs' adaptation process.

Research question 3 is grounded in the core of long-term motivation, which occurs when external motivation is internalized through three psychological dimensions.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to explore adaptation processes as it provides rich insights into participants' experiences with contextual, social, and institutional influences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Maxwell, 2022). Situated in the "narrative turn" in TESOL (Barkhuizen, 2011), this approach allows participants to reveal connections between their personal and professional stories (Barkhuizen, 2015; Freeman, 2015). The emphasis, however, remains on professional narratives due to the study's focus on work-related experiences.

The research was set in a city in the Mekong Delta, known for its dynamic and diverse educational landscape with various institutions and operations for ELT. Three participants were purposely selected using "criterion sampling" (Patton, 2014) based on three criteria: (1) having academic backgrounds unrelated to teacher education, (2) becoming qualified EFL teachers via alternative certifications or training programs, and (3) having at least two years of active ELT teaching experience, ensuring exposure to diverse classroom challenges (Borg, 2009; Richards & Farrell, 2005) (as summarized in Table 1). Participants agreed to join the study after being informed of the research objectives and ethical considerations for confidentiality and consent.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information with pseudonyms

Participant	Academic major - First career	Certification	Teaching experiences
Khoa (Male)	Agriculture - Plant pathologist	TEFL Bachelor degree	5 years
Uyen (Female)	Marketing - Salesperson	TEFL Master's degree	6 years
Quan (Male)	Engineering - Graphic designer	TEFL Master's degree	6 years

The study used (1) classroom observations, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) comments from their colleagues and students to enhance trustworthiness through triangulation, reducing bias, and cross-validating findings (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Instruments for data collection

Instrument	Aim
Classroom observations	To capture the participants' classroom practices
Semi-structured interviews with three participants	To find out ELT-related factors affecting SCETs' adaptability and sustainability
Comments from stakeholders (participants' colleagues and students)	To explore the perceptions towards the effect of SCETs' professional practices

Classroom observations following Merriam's (1998) observation guideline captured teaching strategies, interactions, and classroom dynamics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to provide a benchmark for constructing interview questions. Semi-structured interviews initially collected participants' self-reported data. Further questions were established based on observational data to understand the rationale behind classroom practices. Pilot interviews were conducted to refine interview questions for more effective insight collection. Comments from stakeholders offered the perceptions of the effect of SCETs' professional practices.

Interview data was collected in Vietnamese, transcribed verbatim, and kept for confirmability. However, there was unequal data collection across participants. Due to limited consent, the researcher completed two classroom observations of Khoa and Quan but only one of Uyen. This discrepancy in classroom observations was acknowledged but did not significantly compromise the study's validity. Data analysis followed an iterative process from transcription, open coding, and thematic analysis to member checking for credibility. Triangulation and peer debriefing enriched the findings, and transferability was ensured by providing contextual details and applying EST.

4. Results

RQ1: ELT-related factors affecting SCETs' adaptability in professional practices

Three SCETs drew comparisons between their past and new careers to make it easier to recall the multifaceted factors that either benefitted or challenged them in adapting to ELT (Figure 2).

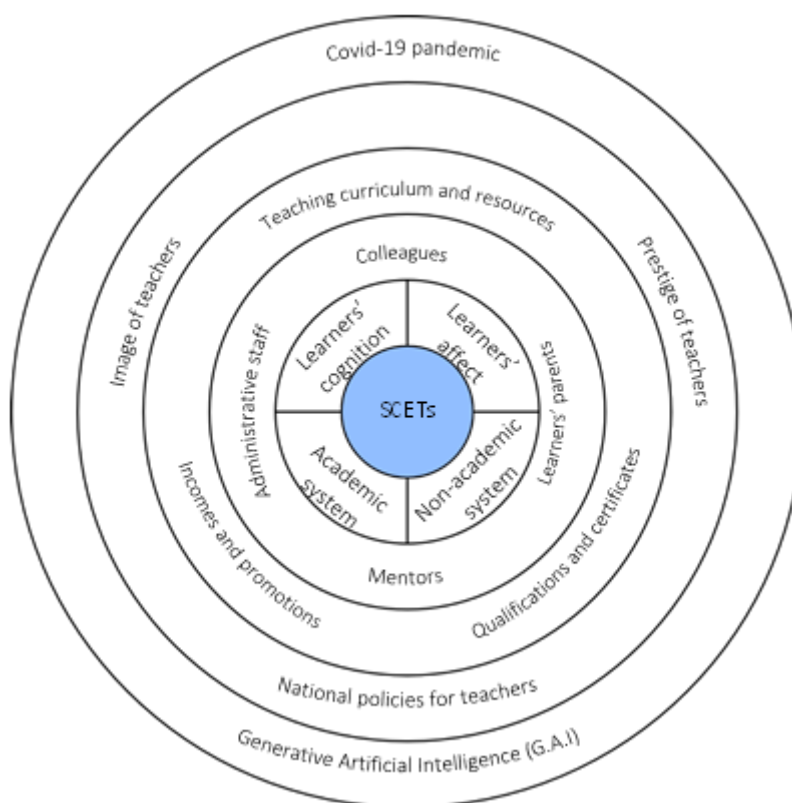


Figure 2. Factors related to ELT affecting SCETs' adaptability in professional practices

All three teachers emphasized that learners' cognitive, affective, academic, and non-academic systems directly influence their teaching practices. They reflected on previous careers to see how they could transfer or adapt their interactions with learners.

Khoa contrasted the passive and trial-error nature of plants with the dynamic learners' effect.

"When substituting for my friend, I thought just copying what he did was fine because I had observed his class before. But when I organized activities, and the students asked why we did this, I found myself questioning too. In my past job, I imitated others to loosen soil or trim leaves easily. If I messed up or killed plants, I could quickly replant for compensation, but teaching is not like that. Unlike plants, learners have feelings and reactions that cannot be experimented like in the laboratory." (Khoa, Interview 1.1)

Uyen adapted her flattering communication for clients into more critical feedback for learners.

"In sales, communication also involved profiling people to know how to compliment them. In education, however, flattery was not always good. As teachers, especially with young learners, excessive or insincere praise can negatively affect them. Educational communication ethics could not be "deceptive moonlight" but about finding a balance, with feedback that is honest and constructive, providing direction to neither make the teacher nor students feel uneasy." (Uyen, Interview 2.1)

Quan transferred his creativity to inspire his learners yet struggled with the generation gap.

"I have worked in design for quite a while; when clients asked for changes, I had to jump in and fix them immediately. So, when I started teaching, I was mentally prepared to individualize everything because I knew everyone was different. I was flexible and open-minded when students wanted to go out of the box, as my background was in the creative field. However, a challenge I

faced was the age gap. I felt like I was falling behind because of being much older than my Gen Z learners." (Quan, Interview 3.1)

To meet these needs, three of them learned more about learners' psychology. With different philosophies, three of them acknowledged the vital roles of group work and learners' feedback on refining teaching practices. Their teaching activities were observed in the classrooms and confirmed by outsiders for boosting learners' motivation in responsive learning environments. Khoa and Quan both applied self-study instructions and project-based learning to help learners develop independence beyond classrooms in their private sectors.

"For students like me who are weak in English, he usually pairs us with someone stronger. The weaker student brainstorms ideas in Vietnamese first, and then the stronger partner helps translate. I think it helps both improve because the best way for the weaker students to learn more English is through translation, while the stronger ones can excel themselves through teaching others. He also advises us to combine learning skills together as learning separately is ineffective." (Khoa's student, Interview 1.3)

However, while Quan reported that his students often showed signs of arrogance and complaints, his student feedback revealed some more positive insights.

"He made us work on projects for weeks. We often tease him, calling him a "grumpy man," but that is because we felt comfortable around him. Honestly, at first, everything was really tough, but he's one of the people who helped us become independent. He really showed us that university-level teaching is so different from high school." (Quan's student, Interview 3.3)

Uyen, as a public high-school teacher, tried her best to lead learners to prepare for the national entrance examination, higher education and offered career orientation consultation.

"She often has us do presentations where we have to state a point, provide evidence and examples to support it, and cite sources. I move from an innocent learner to a more empathetic one as she puts me in groups where we have to divide responsibilities and patiently collaborate. She said if you did not learn how to be responsible for working in groups now, your university years and even future career would become your greatest nightmare." (Uyen's student, Interview 2.3)

Collaboration with stakeholders also shaped the three's experiences as teachers. Uyen highlighted the importance of engaging with learners' parents. She managed rigorous parental expectations through transparent and rational communication to dictate her teaching priorities. Quan, who taught at a private university, mentioned his collaborations with stakeholders across faculties. He frequently engaged with mentors and teachers from other departments to create interdisciplinary learning experiences. Besides the boss and colleagues, Khoa further emphasized building his rapport with administrative staff who monitored and kept track of the language center.

"But the good thing is, I'm quite close with the administrative staff. I often interact with them when preparing exam papers and tracking students' progress. Those staff might even be spies for the boss. They observe everything: how I teach, how the students react, how I respond to feedback, and my attitude. They know everything." (Khoa, Interview 1.1)

At a broader level, financial incentives such as income and promotions motivated all three teachers. However, institutional encouragement for extra qualifications was responded to differently. Khoa, as a test trainer, enthusiastically embraced these certifications, viewing them as opportunities for professional growth and credibility. Meanwhile, although Quan had qualified credentials, he preferred focusing on practical competencies instead of extra certificates.

"In my past job, I was phased out because younger employees were more tech-savvy and aesthetically skilled. My dear uncle told me if I did not want to be forgotten, I should do something to share my knowledge with others. Therefore, I became a teacher as a way to make a meaningful impact. I never thought of using certificates or rewards to brag or allure anyone. I self-study only

for my learners' outcomes and improvement. It does not mean underestimating any certificates; I just do not perceive them as a representation of my ability." (Quan, Interview 3.1)

All three teachers faced challenges related to teaching resources to various extents. Khoa had to create supplementary materials independently due to the increase in testing scopes. Similarly, Uyen, working within rigid curricula, had to adapt and modify materials to meet learners' unequal proficiency. Quan felt more at ease due to the modern equipment and financial resources available at his university, which eased logistical pressures but still required his proactive involvement in customization to align with his teaching creativity. On the whole, the three teachers mentioned that they were learning more to enhance material and test design competencies.

"Khoa has to design new materials every two weeks as the VSTEP test adds nearly 30 new sets each month. He also collaborates with our administrative team to sequence the activities in the materials. If the top section is reading, the bottom section will be writing or speaking for students to draw ideas and vocabulary from the text and then produce." (Khoa's colleague, Interview 1.2)

Three teachers mentioned the influence of national and societal norms for teacher image and prestige. In their previous careers, especially Khoa and Quan, they were not particularly concerned about looks, but now they care for their appearance and manner to minimize students' judgement. Uyen perceived personal image as her favorite investment, but she got influenced by policies due to her position as a government employee.

"In agriculture, is it required to dress as formally as when teaching? I have started paying more attention to things like hair, clothes, and appearance. When teaching, how should I dress? Should I tuck in my shirt, how should I do my hair, and what about my shoes? Everyone has their own view, but for me, I want to maintain a neat and serious image. I also want to be a role model for my students. If I conduct myself properly, they will follow suit." (Khoa, Interview 1.1)

"Uyen looks petite and thin, but she's really energetic. I've never seen her show up tired or clumsy in class. We have tons of duties like training sessions, frequent evaluations, and introspections. She still manages to appear in her tactful manner and neat image." (Uyen's colleague, Interview 2.2)

Finally, the flow of time and historical evolution cannot be absent in shaping the three SCETs' adaptation journeys. They mentioned COVID-19 and the emergence of G.A.I as boosting factors for them to develop technological skills. They have been experienced teaching offline and online modes with application of digital tools in lesson-planning, testing and assessments. Although Quan was relatively ahead of Khoa and Uyen in terms of tech savvy inherited by his previous career, they were all concerned about learners' e-cheating and unauthorized assistance.

RQ2: Sustaining commitment in ELT

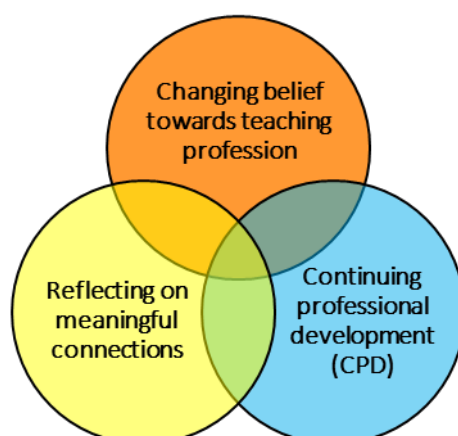


Figure 3. SCETs' process of sustaining commitment through motivation

Although three of them like English, they did not choose EFL teachers as their first career due to initial bad impressions towards the reality of teaching in their hometowns. Their beliefs about teaching have evolved after realizing the impact of this job to the community. While Uyen and Quan changed their views on teaching from a boring job into an innovative and powerful one, Khoa is re-inspired by the same memory about teaching that used to hold him back before.

"The general awareness about education in my hometown was very low. Some teachers taught without much dedication, and young people were unwilling to learn. I can't blame anyone when there's nothing encouraging them to be committed. I had an old English teacher. At first, his prep class for university entrance exams had around ten students; then, it dwindled until I was the only one left. Yet, he still taught with enthusiasm. I felt sorry for him and couldn't help but wonder, would I end up like that? That image of disinterest made me avoid being an English teacher despite my love for English. But now I think differently. Why wouldn't I try to be like my teacher instead of leaving people to remain stuck in the same cycle? If he gave up on me, no one would guide me to pass the most important exam. That's why I wanted to be an English teacher to change the situation back home." (Khoa, Interview 1.1)

Three of them acknowledged that good relations in the workplace can fuel their passion for ELT. Khoa and Quan got on well with their colleagues and students through their achievements and failures. Besides that, Uyen overcame the insecurity about her sense of belonging and self-esteem at her first workplace and now cherishes all meaningful connections she has got.

"The director at my center was accustomed to Japanese cultural practices. In a professional setting, they often adhere to a system called senpai-kōhai, or vertical society. The person at the top never talks directly to the lowest-ranking member, which, in this case, was me. The director complained about my task performance to my mentor instead of me even though the three of us were in the same room. I initially thought she looked down on me. But after hard-working years, I got promotions for my contributions. As I moved beyond my status as a newbie, I became a mentor to new staff and could work directly with the director. She was incredibly polite and professional. My immature assumptions faded, and I believed that by consistently upgrading myself, I could eliminate feelings of self-doubt and confidently appreciate the respect I deserve." (Uyen, Interview 2.1)

To survive in the ongoing educational landscape, three of them shared their plan for CPD. Khoa has a bachelor's degree in English teacher education and is pursuing a master's degree. Uyen integrated her sales and marketing expertise into her lessons, using case studies and real-world scenarios to enhance learners' critical skills. She prepared to take on the responsibilities of teaching interdisciplinary subjects at school. She further aims to open a private center in her hometown with her edu-business competency. Quan leveraged his computer science background to apply technology in teaching and participated in cross-faculty collaborations for CPD, confirmed by his colleagues.

"I am currently taking the TEFL master's course. Second language acquisition and foreign language learning principles help me navigate learners to prioritize feasible tasks and envision their target band. I believe that my strong foundational knowledge of pedagogy and knowledge in natural science can be my competitive advantage compared to current test trainers." (Khoa, Interview 1.1)

"In this age of technology, having Quan around really helps us with machines and software. Quan is very good but often feels insecure about not sounding 'posh' when speaking English. Still, he teaches English for specific purposes quite well. Those students in IT fields praise him, saying he knows an incredible amount and shares lots of educative stories." (Quan's colleague, Interview 3.2)

5. Discussion

Learner-related variables, which fall in the immediate ecological layer, emerge as the most influential factors. SCETs in this study felt uneasy as "not novice workers but novice teachers" for

their insignificant PCK, aligning with findings from Evens, Elen, and Depaepe (2015) and Kim and Ko (2020). After nurturing their knowledge of learners, three SCETs' use of metacognitive and exam-focused strategies could be observed and confirmed by learners. However, the only female SCET received more positive feedback for fostering affective and non-academic growth. This can be explained by her previous experience in sales, where she attained customer negotiation and persuasion skills, enabling her to engage students and gain their parents' trust. All three reported minimal difficulties with content knowledge, as most possess a strong passion for English, which serves as an intrinsic motivator for entering the profession. Although one SCET expressed concerns about his accent molded by his mother tongue and late exposure to English, feedback from colleagues and students indicated that the phonological aspect is less critical than other English competencies. As part of the meso-system, three SCETs emphasize the importance of relatedness in building positive relationships not only with mentors and colleagues but also with administrative personnel or security guards in the workplace. It is suggested that training should focus on enhancing SCETs' understanding of psychology, language acquisition-learning theory, classroom instructions, and communication. These areas are particularly relevant if SCETs transition from careers with limited human interaction to roles requiring direct engagement and long-term responsibility for learners.

Within the exosystem, three SCETs highlight institutional facilitations for CPD as key motivators for their sense of autonomy and competence, concurred by Coppe (2024) and (Kaplan, 2021). In line with Li & Lai (2022) and Peña-Pincheira and De Costa (2021), SCETs frequently adapt materials, create lessons to suit their teaching context, and express a desire to integrate their past experiences into their teaching practices. Three SCETs perceive themselves as having quite interesting performances in interdisciplinary teaching with the implementation of case-study and group projects into ELT, a view supported by external colleagues that acknowledges their uniqueness compared to traditional teachers. However, learners sometimes found their methods challenging to follow. It is recommended that they receive training in practical yet integrative teaching approaches, curriculum, and course design, possibly for content-language integrated learning (CLIL) or English as a medium of instruction (EMI). Such interventions can help them balance their prior experiences with real-life classroom needs, enabling them to conduct more feasible learning objectives. Incomes and job stability were reported to extend their commitment to ELT, with two SCETs from rural areas adding that improvements in infrastructure and academic resources in their hometowns have further encouraged their sustainability. These developments land on the intersection between macro and exosystem, where top-down policies are spread upon institutions to attract teachers through increased incentives and welfare. From the SDT perspective, these pragmatic benefits act as extrinsic rewards to foster lifelong intrinsic motivation.

Their strategies and approaches for CPD are consistent with recent Vietnamese studies (Tran, 2018a, b; Do & Hoang, 2023), which lead to building communities of practice among teachers with diverse backgrounds to facilitate mutual learning. Two SCETs already have TEFL master's degrees, and one is currently taking a master's course. Two of them further attempt extra proficiency certificates related to English for higher status and reputation, while the remaining teachers value self-study over formal certificates. According to SDT, individuals with different psychological and living backgrounds have different sources of motivation. The first two are externally motivated by hierarchical recognition, while the third is driven by intrinsic needs for autonomy and self-actualization. At the macrosystem level, their actions are in response to Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training circulars for domestic teachers, including Thông tư 20/2018/TT-BGDĐT (regulating professional standards for teachers) and Thông tư 02/2020/TT-BGDĐT (establishing criteria for teacher training programs) that address the credentials, competency, and ethics for becoming qualified educators. Moreover, their self-development aspiration reflects the shared societal perceptions in Vietnam, where the teaching profession is highly prestigious, influenced by

Confucian tenets of “Tôn sư trọng đạo” (Reverence for teachers). The SCET from agriculture career also mentioned Hồ Chí Minh’s philosophy, “Vì lợi ích 10 năm trồng cây, trăm năm trồng người” (For the benefit of 10 years planting trees; for the benefit of 100 years cultivating people) to connect his transition to teaching with these long-standing cultural norms. Lastly, SCETs express excitement about their agency and require extra support for technological knowledge to maintain blended-mode teaching and assist learners to regulate their overdependence on G.A.I. These findings resonate with both national and international studies (Duan, Chu, & Liu, 2023; Le, Do, & Tran, 2024; Skantz-Åberg et al., 2022) as the chronosystem globally covers EFL teachers and SCETs in particular.

6. Conclusion and Suggestion

By examining the external factors through the lens of ecological systems, the study illustrates how SCETs progressively transform extrinsic influences into intrinsic motivations, driven by their investments in autonomy – teaching belief involvement, relatedness – meaningful network and relationships, and competence – personal and professional growth, thereby exemplifying the internalization principles of SDT. The participants' adaptability and sustainability through reflecting on prior experiences imply that pedagogical training should support SCETs in unraveling their learners' psychological systems, emulating the continuum of educational evolution from cognitivism to humanism. Ongoing CPD programs could offer these SCETs fruitful chances to attempt interdisciplinary teaching with CLIL and EMI approaches thanks to their professional empirical knowledge inherited from previous careers.

Nevertheless, although findings and discussions bring noticeable implications to systemic training, the modest inclusion of three SCETs in this study requires a larger sample size for a more comprehensive collection of their challenges and expectations. The time constraints and unequal distribution of data collection, as noted in the methodology section, also prevented a meticulous exploration into the fluctuation and nuances of participants' experiences. For an investigation into human sustainability, the cross-sectional design was also a limitation that needed to be acknowledged in the study.

To enhance the richness of outcomes, future research could broaden its participant base by recruiting SCETs transitioning from a wider variety of professions, as outlined in the Danh mục nghề nghiệp Việt Nam (Vietnam’s occupational classification) under the Decision 34/2020/QĐ-TTg guideline. Furthermore, the changing role of English in the Vietnamese context from EFL to ESL signifies that mathematics, natural, and social sciences will gradually be taught in English, demanding teachers to possess strong interdisciplinary skills. This presents a critical prediction of whether there is a growing need for teachers from diverse backgrounds or whether traditional EFL teachers will exhibit their agency in delivering English content-based lessons. A comparative analysis between SCETs and first-career teachers would provide more insights into the differences and similarities in their responses and adaptation strategies. Another suggestion is to conduct longitudinal or ethnographic studies that track SCETs' observably objective experience over time without much reliance on memory-based retrospectives. This would offer a more precise archive of how these teachers' motivations shift and how they maintain their enthusiasm over the years, therefore refreshing systemic implications for career consultation and training programs.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Trinh Quoc Lap: overseeing the study, conceptualizing the study, ensuring the quality, editing the report; Phan Ngoc Tuong Vy: reviewing literature, collecting and interpreting data, writing the dissertation draft, Ngo Huynh Hong Nga: consulting on the data collection and interpretation procedure, reviewing the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Approval. Research objectives and your data collection using the classroom observations and interviews for the project were assessed to meet the ethical standards. Follows are information related to this ethical approval; Ethical approval number: 20230601.

Data Availability Statement. Data is available by the corresponding author upon official request.

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