BEYOND PARSNIP: VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY TEACHER AGENCY IN NAVIGATING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN A CHANGING ESL CONTEXT

VƯỢT RA NGOÀI PARSNIP: NĂNG LỰC CHỦ THỂ CỦA GIẢNG VIÊN TẠI CÁC TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC VIỆT NAM TRONG VIỆC XỬ LÝ CÁC CHỦ ĐỀ NHẠY CẢM TRONG BỐI CẢNH TIẾNG ANH ĐANG CHUYỂN DỊCH THEO ĐỊNH HƯỚNG NGÔN NGỮ THỨ HAI

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Abstract - Vietnam's language policies, including Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg, promote wider use of English. This qualitative study examined how university English teachers conceptualize and navigate sensitive classroom topics from a sociocultural perspective on teacher agency. Data comprised semi-structured interviews with 14 lecturers from five institutions in southern Vietnam and analysis of national policies and professional standards. Reflexive thematic analysis identified four themes: sensitivity beyond controversial topics, involving personal vulnerability and interactional emergence; reading the room and setting boundaries; the conditional educational value of sensitive discussions; and institutional ambiguity concerning professional risk and guidance. Teacher agency was situated and relational, shaped by pedagogical judgment, student responses, and institutional conditions.

Key words - Language teacher agency; sensitive topics; PARSNIP; English language teaching

Tóm tắt – Các chính sách ngôn ngữ của Việt Nam, gồm Quyết định số 2371/QĐ-TTg, thúc đẩy việc sử dụng tiếng Anh rộng rãi hơn. Nghiên cứu định tính này tìm hiểu cách giảng viên tiếng Anh nhận thức và xử lý chủ đề nhạy cảm trong lớp học từ góc nhìn xã hội–văn hóa về năng lực chủ thể. Dữ liệu gồm phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với 14 giảng viên tại năm cơ sở giáo dục đại học ở miền Nam Việt Nam và phân tích chính sách quốc gia, chuẩn nghề nghiệp. Phân tích chủ đề phản tư xác định bốn chủ đề: tính nhạy cảm vượt ngoài chủ đề gây tranh cãi, gắn với sự dễ tổn thương cá nhân và nảy sinh trong tương tác; nắm bắt tình hình lớp học và thiết lập ranh giới; giá trị giáo dục có điều kiện của thảo luận nhạy cảm; sự thiếu rõ ràng của cơ sở giáo dục về rủi ro nghề nghiệp và hướng dẫn. Năng lực chủ thể mang tính bối cảnh và quan hệ, được định hình bởi phán đoán sư phạm, phản ứng của người học và môi trường làm việc.

Từ khóa - Năng lực chủ thể của giáo viên ngôn ngữ; chủ đề nhạy cảm; PARSNIP; giảng dạy tiếng Anh

1. Introduction

The role of English in Vietnam is entering a new policy phase. Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg signals a gradual policy shift toward positioning English as a second language for communication, learning, international engagement, and workforce development [1]. Although the policy does not directly regulate university classrooms, it has implications for higher education, where students are prepared to use English in academic, professional, digital, and intercultural contexts. Greater emphasis on authentic communication may also bring culturally, politically, and emotionally sensitive issues into classroom interaction. In this study, sensitive topics refer broadly to issues that may evoke emotional discomfort or distress, implicate learners' identities or personal experiences, or generate interpersonal or social tension in a particular classroom context [2, 3].

Such issues have traditionally been restricted in internationally marketed English-language materials through the PARSNIP principle: politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms, and pork. These restrictions reduce offence and improve the global usability of materials but may distance classroom content from learners' social realities [4, 5]. The British Council's assessment policy similarly emphasizes candidate well-being, sociocultural inclusion, and the avoidance of potentially distressing or stereotypical content [6]. However, classroom instruction differs from assessment because teachers can clarify, scaffold, redirect, and mediate discussion. Research indicates that controversial topics may support critical thinking and respectful communication, although teachers remain concerned about conflict, emotional harm, bias, and limited institutional support [7, 8]. Their responses are also influenced by personal beliefs, school culture, student reactions, professional roles, and perceived control [9, 10, 11].

Language teacher agency provides a useful lens for examining these situated decisions. Agency is understood as an achievement arising from the interaction of teachers' beliefs, professional histories, goals, relationships, and institutional conditions rather than as a stable individual attribute [12, 13]. [14]'s life-course sociocultural perspective identifies three interconnected forms: identity agency, expressed through professional self-positioning; pedagogical agency, enacted through instructional decisions; and relational agency, developed through

interactions with students, colleagues, leaders, and institutions. However, agency research has largely examined curriculum reform, professional identity, online teaching, and policy implementation, while limited attention has been given to sensitive classroom discussions in Vietnamese higher education.

Accordingly, this study asks: (1) How do Vietnamese university English teachers conceptualize sensitive topics in a changing ESL context, and (2) How do they exercise identity, pedagogical, and relational agency when navigating such topics in classroom interaction? The study extends language teacher agency research to an underexplored classroom challenge and examines how teachers' professional positioning, pedagogical decision-making, relationships with students, and institutional conditions shape their responses to sensitive classroom situations. It also draws on document analysis to consider how existing policies and professional standards frame teacher responsibilities and support in such contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Life-Course Sociocultural Perspective Framework

[14]'s life-course sociocultural perspective conceptualizes teacher agency as an evolving process shaped by past experiences, present circumstances, future aspirations, and the sociocultural conditions of teachers' work. The framework identifies three interconnected manifestations: identity agency, through which teachers shape and reposition their professional selves; pedagogical agency, expressed through decisions about materials, instruction, classroom management, and participation; and relational agency, enacted through interactions with students, colleagues, leaders, and professional communities. Sensitive classroom incidents make these dimensions visible because teachers must interpret the issue, decide how to position themselves, select an instructional response, and respond to the expectations and reactions of others. In this study, Nguyen's framework is used as an interpretive lens for understanding the themes emerging from the interview data rather than as a predetermined coding scheme.

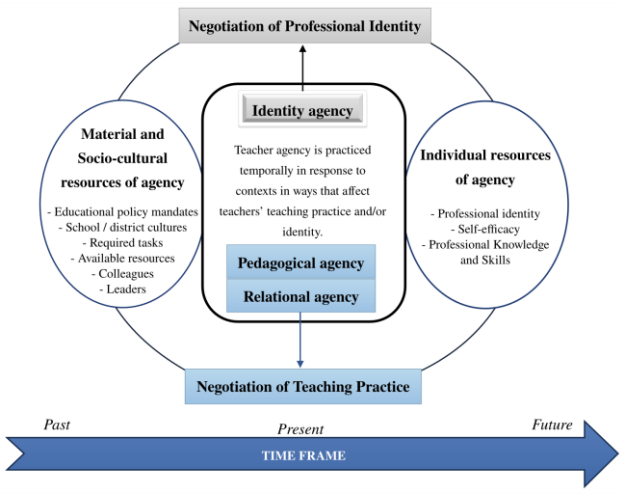


Figure 1. *A life-course sociocultural perspective of language teacher agency [14]*

2.2. PARSNIP, Sensitive Topics, and Authentic Language Use

The concept of a sensitive topic is broader than that of a conventionally controversial or taboo topic. Hulme and Kitching define sensitive topics as issues that may elicit emotional or distressing responses from learners, particularly when classroom content intersects with their personal circumstances or experiences [15]. Winstone and Kinchin similarly note that sensitive content may generate distress or discomfort in higher-education settings [3]. By comparison, the Council of Europe defines controversial issues as those that "arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society" [15]. Recent research consequently treats sensitive and controversial issues as context-dependent: what becomes sensitive may vary across learners, cultures, classrooms, and social settings rather than belonging to a universal list of prohibited topics [7], [15]. In this study, sensitive topics are therefore understood as classroom issues that may evoke emotional discomfort or distress, implicate learners' identities or personal experiences, or create interpersonal or social tension within a particular context. This definition distinguishes sensitivity from controversy while allowing the two to overlap.

PARSNIP, which stands for politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms, and pork, is primarily a publishing convention used to reduce offence and improve the global marketability of English-language materials [4, 5]. The British Council's equality, diversity, and inclusion policy broadens this approach by emphasizing group representation, privilege balance, sociocultural inclusion, and age-specific vulnerabilities through TURNIPS [6]. However, assessment restrictions should not be treated as general prohibitions on classroom discussion. Research suggests that carefully mediated sensitive topics can support authentic interaction, critical literacy, and intercultural learning, although their value depends on task design, learner readiness, classroom safety, and teacher mediation [8, 16]. Teachers may nevertheless avoid such issues because of school values, anticipated student reactions, limited preparation, and concerns about control or professional risk [7, 9, 10, 17, 18]. Similarly, recent Vietnamese evidence indicates that EFL teachers generally recognize the value of sociocultural content but devote limited classroom time and effort to its integration [19].

2.3. Language teacher agency

Language teacher agency refers to teachers' capacity to interpret and respond to professional demands within particular social and institutional conditions. Rather than a fixed personal trait, agency is understood as an ecological achievement shaped by beliefs, prior experiences, aspirations, relationships, resources, and institutional constraints [12, 13]. This perspective is relevant in Vietnam, where centralized policies and competency frameworks are interpreted through local professional beliefs and institutional cultures rather than implemented uniformly [20, 21]. Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg strengthens the policy emphasis on communicative English use but provides limited guidance for handling culturally, politically, or emotionally sensitive classroom content.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a multi-site qualitative exploratory design to examine how English lecturers in Vietnamese higher education understand and navigate sensitive topics in their classrooms. The study was informed by Nguyen's [14] life-course sociocultural perspective on teacher agency, particularly its identity, pedagogical, and relational dimensions. However, these dimensions were used as an interpretive lens rather than predetermined coding categories.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data source. Document analysis was additionally conducted to examine the broader policy and professional environment surrounding participants' reported practices and to provide contextual triangulation.

3.2. Participants

Table 1. *Participants' background information*

Teacher (pseudonymized)	University	Years of teaching English
P1	A	4
P2	A	3
P3	B	4
P4	B	4
P5	B	5
P6	C	3
P7	C	9
P8	C	3
P9	D	5
P10	D	3
P11	D	11
P12	E	13
P13	E	1
P14	E	5

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Fourteen English lecturers from five higher-education institutions in the south of Vietnam participated in the study. They taught a range of courses, including General English, language skills, academic English, translation and interpreting, linguistics, intercultural communication, and teacher education. Participants varied in teaching experience, allowing comparison across different career stages and institutional contexts. Participants were assigned the codes P1–P14, and their characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

3.3. Data collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 14 participants. Interviews lasted approximately 15–20 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and were subsequently transcribed.

A common interview protocol covered seven areas: (1) teaching background; (2) understandings of sensitive topics; (3) perceived educational value; (4) a specific classroom incident; (5) responses and reasons for those responses; (6) student and institutional influences; and (7) reflection and professional support.

Core questions included: *What makes a topic sensitive in a university English classroom?; Do sensitive topics have educational value?; Can you describe a specific classroom situation in which a sensitive topic emerged?; How did you respond and why?; How did students influence your response?; What institutional policies or expectations influenced your decision?;* and *What support would help teachers handle such situations more confidently?*

All participants were asked about the same core areas, while follow-up probes varied according to their responses and experiences. These probes explored issues such as student discomfort, reasons for continuing or stopping a discussion, teacher neutrality, professional boundaries, and formal or informal institutional expectations.

3.4. Document analysis

Document analysis was conducted to contextualize and triangulate interview findings [22]. The documentary corpus included national English-language education policies, regulations concerning teachers and university lecturers, and professional competency frameworks relevant to foreign-language teaching. Key documents included Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg [1], the 2025 Law on Educators [23], relevant Ministry of Education and Training regulations on professional conduct and university lecturer standards [24, 25], and the Foreign Language Teacher Competency Framework [26].

The documents were examined for expectations concerning teacher autonomy and responsibility, respect and fairness toward learners, learner protection, professional conduct, classroom communication, institutional accountability, and professional development. Documentary evidence was compared with interview findings to identify convergence, divergence, complementarity, and areas in which formal guidance remained limited.

3.5. Data analysis

Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis [27]. Analysis began inductively with repeated reading and initial coding of participants' experiences, perceptions, actions, and contextual influences. Initial codes included personal vulnerability, discomfort, student silence, disagreement, neutrality, non-disclosure, redirection, discussion scaffolding, student readiness, professional boundaries, institutional ambiguity, collegial learning, and reputational risk.

A cross-case matrix was then used to compare patterns across the 14 participants and identify contrasting cases. Through iterative comparison, four themes were developed: (1) sensitivity beyond the topic; (2) reading the room and negotiating boundaries; (3) conditional educational value; and (4) institutional ambiguity and professional risk.

Nguyen's [14] framework was subsequently used to interpret how these patterns reflected teachers' professional positioning, pedagogical decision-making, and relationships with students and institutional contexts. Thus, the empirical themes were developed from the

data before being interpreted through the teacher-agency framework.

3.6. Ethics and trustworthiness

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before each interview. Identifying information was removed, and participant and institutional codes were used throughout the paper. Trustworthiness was strengthened through systematic coding, cross-case comparison, attention to contrasting cases, and triangulation between interview and documentary evidence. The findings are presented as contextualized interpretations rather than representative claims about all Vietnamese university English lecturers.

4. Results and discussion

Four themes were identified from the interview data. Rather than organizing the findings directly according to predetermined dimensions of agency, the themes were developed inductively and subsequently interpreted through Nguyen's [14] life-course sociocultural perspective.

4.1. Sensitivity beyond the topic: controversy, vulnerability, and interaction

Participants commonly identified politics, religion, gender, sexuality, and related social issues as sensitive. However, their classroom experiences showed that sensitivity extended beyond conventional controversial or PARSNIP topics. Family circumstances, bereavement, domestic violence, romantic relationships, appearance, and other personal experiences could also become sensitive when they exposed students to emotional discomfort or unwanted disclosure.

For example, one participant described a family-speaking task in which a student disclosed being physically abused at home. Rather than requiring the student to discuss the experience, the lecturer allowed him to modify the content because the objective was to assess English rather than personal disclosure. Another participant recalled a routine family assignment that unexpectedly caused distress because a student's father had recently died.

Sensitivity could also emerge through interaction. An ordinary activity could become sensitive when a joke, question, stereotype, or disagreement triggered embarrassment, anger, silence, or withdrawal. A classroom game became sensitive when one student repeatedly questioned another student's sexual orientation, leading to anger, withdrawal, and silence.

The findings therefore suggest three overlapping forms of sensitivity: socially contested issues, personal vulnerability, and interactionally emerging sensitivity. This supports the view that sensitivity is context-dependent rather than an inherent characteristic of a fixed list of topics [7], [17]. From an agency perspective, teachers therefore had to interpret not only the topic itself but also its relationship to students and classroom conditions.

4.2. Reading the room: Mediating expression and setting boundaries

Teachers repeatedly described monitoring students' silence, facial expressions, embarrassment, anger, willingness to participate, language proficiency, and changes in classroom atmosphere. These cues influenced whether a discussion was continued, modified, or stopped. P12 emphasized watching students' "eyes", "facial expressions", laughter, and tone of voice to identify discomfort. P4 stopped an LGBTQ-related discussion after noticing that some LGBTQ students appeared visibly embarrassed; the participant described the teacher's role as both a "controller" and a "defender".

Participants used several strategies. Some remained neutral and facilitated competing viewpoints without expressing their own position. Others depersonalized sensitive discussions, allowed students to avoid personal disclosure, provided language for respectful disagreement, established ground rules, imposed time limits, or redirected attention to the learning objective.

Neutrality was nevertheless conditional. While some lecturers avoided taking sides on contested political or social issues, others intervened more explicitly when they perceived discrimination, personal attack, or potential harm. Thus, teachers' responses were not fixed strategies but forms of situated pedagogical decision-making.

Through Nguyen's [14] framework, these findings illustrate the close relationship between pedagogical and relational agency. Teachers' actions were shaped continuously by their interpretation of students' reactions and by their own understanding of professional responsibility.

4.3. Conditional educational value: When discussion is worth the risk

Most participants recognized potential educational benefits in discussing sensitive issues, particularly for meaningful language use, critical thinking, intercultural awareness, respectful disagreement, and preparation for communication outside the classroom. P11 argued that sensitive topics "can't [be] ignore [d]… in real life" and therefore students should learn how to deal with them in class. P7 similarly described a change from initially viewing sensitive topics as a "hazard" to seeing them as opportunities for communication and critical thinking. This orientation is consistent with the broader policy emphasis on expanding meaningful English use and international engagement under Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg [1].

However, participants did not view such educational value as unconditional. They considered lesson objectives, available time, student proficiency, maturity, emotional readiness, classroom atmosphere, and the likelihood of conflict. Some therefore encouraged discussion when it clearly supported learning, while others redirected it when the risks appeared to outweigh its educational value.

A contrasting position was expressed by lecturers who preferred to remain close to the syllabus and avoid social or political issues to prevent bias or unnecessary

disruption. Avoidance therefore represented not simply the absence of agency but, in some cases, a particular interpretation of the teacher's professional role.

These findings highlight the identity dimension of agency [14]. Teachers differed in whether they understood themselves primarily as language instructors, neutral facilitators, protectors of students, or educators preparing learners for wider social communication.

4.4. Teaching without a script: Institutional ambiguity and professional risk

Across the five institutional contexts, participants reported limited specific guidance on how to respond when sensitive topics emerged. They frequently referred instead to professional experience, common sense, general institutional expectations, or informal conversations with colleagues.

Document analysis showed a similar pattern. National regulations and professional standards emphasize broad principles such as professionalism, teacher responsibility, respect, fairness, learner protection, and appropriate professional conduct [23 - 26]. However, these documents provide limited operational guidance for situations involving unexpected discussions of politics, religion, sexuality, discrimination, personal trauma, or other sensitive issues.

Participants also described professional risks associated with complaints, classroom recording, social media circulation, and institutional reputation. Such concerns suggest that teachers' perceptions of institutional boundaries may be shaped not only by written policy but also by informal norms and anticipated consequences.

No clear pattern distinguished one institution as consistently more open or restrictive than another. Variation within institutions was considerable. The stronger cross-institutional pattern was the reliance on individual professional judgment in the absence of specific operational guidance.

This finding extends Nguyen's [14] relational dimension of agency by showing that institutional influence may operate through both formal and informal mechanisms. Teachers exercised considerable situated judgment, but their capacity to act was also shaped by the availability-or absence-of policy guidance, collegial support, and professional protection.

Overall, the findings suggest that navigating sensitive topics is a situated form of teacher agency involving continuous negotiation among students' needs, pedagogical purposes, professional identities, and institutional boundaries. Professional support may therefore be most useful when it moves beyond broad ethical principles and provides case-based opportunities for teachers to discuss realistic classroom situations and develop a wider repertoire of context-sensitive responses.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how 14 English lecturers from five Vietnamese higher-education institutions understood and navigated sensitive classroom topics. The findings show that sensitivity extended beyond conventional controversial issues such as politics, religion, gender, and sexuality. Sensitive situations also arose from personal vulnerability, including family circumstances, bereavement, relationships, and identity, and could emerge unexpectedly through classroom interaction. Teachers therefore did not respond to sensitive topics according to fixed categories. Instead, they continuously interpreted students' reactions, classroom atmosphere, lesson objectives, and perceived risks before deciding whether to facilitate, modify, redirect, or stop a discussion. Viewed through Nguyen's [14] life-course sociocultural perspective, these practices reflected the interconnected operation of identity, pedagogical, and relational agency, although the themes themselves were developed inductively from the interview data.

The study makes three main contributions. First, it broadens the understanding of sensitive topics in language education by showing that sensitivity may originate from social controversy, personal vulnerability, or interaction itself. Second, it demonstrates that teacher agency in such situations is highly situated. Participants monitored students' silence, discomfort, engagement, and willingness to participate; adopted strategies such as neutral facilitation, depersonalization, protection of non-disclosure, and boundary-setting; and sometimes departed from neutrality when they perceived discrimination or potential harm. Third, the comparison between interview and documentary evidence revealed a gap between broad professional expectations and practical guidance. National policies and professional standards emphasize professionalism, learner respect, fairness, protection, and responsible teaching [1, 23 - 26], yet provide limited operational guidance for responding to unpredictable sensitive classroom incidents. This helps explain participants' frequent reliance on experience, professional judgment, informal collegial advice, and real-time interpretation of classroom conditions.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved only 14 lecturers from five institutions, so the findings should not be interpreted as representative of Vietnamese higher education as a whole. The findings were based primarily on teachers' self-reported experiences and were not triangulated through classroom observation or student perspectives. Although document analysis provided a second source of evidence, the documents examined were mainly national policies and professional standards and cannot demonstrate how individual institutions implement these expectations in practice. Future research could therefore combine interviews with classroom observations, student accounts, and institution-specific policies, and could examine how teachers' responses develop over time and across different regions and institutional settings.

As Vietnam expands opportunities for meaningful English use, university classrooms may increasingly encounter socially, culturally, and emotionally complex discussions. The findings suggest that effective practice cannot be reduced either to avoiding sensitive issues or to

encouraging unrestricted discussion. Teachers need a wider professional repertoire for recognizing vulnerability, reading classroom reactions, facilitating respectful disagreement, protecting students from unwanted disclosure, and setting appropriate boundaries. Teacher education and professional development should therefore include realistic critical incidents, discussion protocols, de-escalation strategies, and case-based professional dialogue. Institutions should complement broad ethical principles with clear but flexible guidance that supports teachers' professional judgment while protecting both student well-being and responsible classroom communication.

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