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‘Finally, it’s all in vain’: A Chinese as an additional language teacher’s agency in navigating the teaching-research nexus in a neoliberal Chinese university

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ABSTRACT

The neoliberal emphasis on performance metrics, such as research outputs and citations, has weakened the symbiotic relationship between teaching and research in language education. However, language teachers’ experiences of navigating the challenge that neoliberalism creates for the teaching-research nexus have been largely absent, with the existing literature predominantly focusing on documenting the impact of neoliberalism on research and teaching. This narrative case study aims to address this gap by tracing a Chinese as an additional language (CAL) teacher’s agency in navigating the teaching-research nexus in a neoliberal Chinese university. Based on data from three rounds of interviews, informal conversations, notes, and policy documents, this study identified a noticeable shift in the participant’s narrated experiences, progressing from *active engagement with research to enhance teaching practices*, to *pragmatic engagement in research for scholarly publication*, and eventually to *disenchanted retreat from the academic battlefield*. This trajectory highlights the escalating challenges faced by the participant in navigating the teaching-research nexus. Practical implications are discussed to strengthen the link between teaching and research in language education in the neoliberal context.

1. Introduction

In language teacher education and professional development, teachers are not only expected to function as ‘intelligent consumers of research’ by applying research findings to their teaching practice (Hökkä et al., 2012, p.124), but they are also encouraged to engage in research on critical teaching issues to enhance their knowledge base about language education (Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021; Gong, Lai, & Gao, 2022). Despite these expectations, however, the teaching-research nexus has not transferred well into language teachers’ practical agendas in neoliberal higher education (Borg, 2010). The rise of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology in universities is characterized by the introduction of various performance metrics (e.g., citation index, impact factor) and the association of faculty promotion and tenure with academic research publications (Sutton, 2017). Against the backdrop of this motivation for academic publishing, language teachers often feel compelled to prioritize research activities over teaching practices, publication-driven research over practice-driven forms of inquiry, in order not to ‘perish’ in increasingly competitive higher education (Cochran-Smith, 2005).

Previous studies have identified the dilemmas and challenges that language teachers encounter to keep teaching and research

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activities integrated and symbiotic (e.g., Anwer & Reiss, 2023; Zhang & Gong, 2024). However, these studies may overlook the micro-level agency exercised by language teachers to act upon the teaching-research nexus (Weenink et al., 2023). To fill this gap, the present study examined the agency of a Chinese as an additional language (CAL) teacher in navigating the teaching-research nexus in a neoliberal Chinese university. This study aims at contributing to a nuanced understanding of the extent to which teaching and research can be integrated in the academic work within neoliberal higher education. The study also has practical implications for language teachers, educational institutions, and policymakers to fortify the connection between teaching and research against the backdrop of neoliberalism.

2. Literature review

2.1. The dual dilemmas faced by language teachers in navigating the teaching-research nexus

The two terms ‘research-teaching nexus’ and ‘teaching-research nexus’ are used interchangeably in the literature (Tight, 2016). The word ‘nexus’ denotes the close, essential, and symbiotic linkage between research and teaching, which are jointly acknowledged as the two fundamental functions of higher education (Huang, 2018). In the context of language education, language teachers are expected to adopt appropriate research methods, explore the complexities of language classrooms, develop research-informed pedagogies, and enhance the knowledge base related to language teaching and learning (Gong & Gao, 2024; Yuan et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

Despite this expectation, existing studies have revealed the dual dilemmas of integrating teaching and research in language teachers’ academic work. On the one hand, the lack of commitment toward academic research and the limited value accorded to research pose a challenge for language teachers in terms of translating research output into practice (Borg, 2010; Buğra and Wyatt, 2021). Research has indicated that language teachers may derive their professional knowledge and apprenticeship primarily from extensive teaching experiences, rather than research activities (e.g., academic publishing) (Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021). They may hold skepticism and mistrust about published research, perceiving it as irrelevant and lacking practical value to their classroom instruction. Consequently, research engagement, which includes both engagement *with* research (i.e., by reading and using it) and engagement *in* research (i.e., by doing it), remains an activity that is not commonly pursued among language teachers (Borg, 2010). At the same time, they also report challenges in conducting research and sustaining engagement for lack of research knowledge and skills or difficulties in allocating sufficient time and resources (Gao & Yuan, 2021). On the other hand, the neoliberal culture has largely shaped the definition and evaluation of academic research, impacting language teachers’ efforts in integrating teaching and research in their professional work (Anwer & Reiss, 2023). The neoliberal research paradigm tends to celebrate publications in top-tier journals with high impact factors, while it may devalue practice-based teacher research for its perceived lack of dissemination power, thereby contradicting with teachers’ expectations of conducting practical research to inform their pedagogy (Barkhuizen, 2021). This might further discourage language teachers from engaging in research.

This is a particular case for CAL teachers, who teach Chinese language courses to international students at Chinese universities. Previous studies have reported that CAL teachers often face tensions between enhancing teaching effectiveness and increasing research productivity to meet institutional evaluation targets (e.g., Wang, 2019; Zhang, 2021). Teaching has originally occupied a prominent role among CAL teachers (Zhang, 2021), but they increasingly found it imperative to engage in research and publish their works in top international and/or high-impact journals and develop a productive researcher identity (Zhang et al., 2022). In addition, professional training in their postgraduate studies tends to prioritize the development of teaching skills and the qualification of individuals as proficient CAL instructors, rather than focusing on the cultivation of academic researchers (Wang, 2019). However, there is lack of empirical research on how CAL teachers navigate teaching-research nexus in such contested and complex context (Gong, Gao, & Lyu, 2020; Gong, Lyu, & Gao, 2018).

2.2. Language teachers’ agency in navigating the teaching-research nexus

While previous research suggests the dual dilemmas that language teachers face in navigating the teaching-research nexus, there is evidence showing how language teachers exercise agency to cope with these tensions embedded in teaching and research practices (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2023; Huang & Guo, 2019). In these studies, agency is conceptualized as individuals’ capacity to seek possible changes within constrained environment, demonstrating that “there is always room for manoeuvre” (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 210). For instance, language teachers reflectively examined their pedagogical practices to address real-world problems in classroom teaching (i.e., engage in teacher research), maintaining a balance between their roles as teachers and researchers (Bao & Feng, 2023). Alternatively, they conformed to institutional research demands by strategically selecting appropriate courses, thus safeguarding time for research activities or collaborating with more experienced researchers to increase the efficiency of scholarly publications (Huang & Guo, 2019; Weenink et al., 2023). They also enhanced their research knowledge and improve professional practice through proactively reading and using research (i.e., engagement with research) (Borg, 2010), attending lectures and seminars (Xu, 2014), or pursuing a doctoral degree (Yuan, 2017).

However, it is problematic to position language teachers as positive change agents, who may adopt diverse strategies to transform the structural realities that define their lived social environment (Sun & Wu, 2024). In documenting how English teachers grappling with the pressure of enhancing research productivity, Gao and Yuan (2021) highlighted “unsuccessful” cases who chose to disengage in professional development and conducting research, although they acknowledged that the research is vital to their promotion and contract review. They believed that it is far beyond their competence to manage institutionally demanded research tasks due to limited research skills and inadequate recourses (e.g., doctoral degree). This decision, seemingly at odds with institutional expectations, can

also signify agency where teachers have weighed up the situation and evaluated this to be the best course of action (Priestley et al., 2015). The finding reflects that agency is not something that people possess as an attribute or a capacity to act on one's world (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013), but "an emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transaction" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 625).

In addition, the enactment of agency is not simply negotiation, resistance, or accommodation in a one-time event; it operates throughout teachers' professional trajectories (Tao & Gao, 2021; Wei, 2021). Human actors continuously strive to shape their life paths, employing 'varying degrees of maneuverability, inventiveness, and reflective choice' in different contexts across time (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 964). Studies have highlighted the dynamic, fluid, and varied nature of agency enactment in navigating the tensions between teaching and research amidst continuous affordances and constraints. For example, in Yuan et al.'s (2022) study, a Romanian teacher prioritized research publication and research projects over benefiting Romanian language teaching and learning. Her agency in accommodating neoliberal requirements stemmed from her critical evaluation of current situation, where failing to fulfill the rigorous research criteria posed a perceived risk of jeopardizing her chances for tenure. After achieving tenure, he developed agency in reframing the teaching-research nexus by conducting action research in the language classroom to enhance his students' language learning. In a similar vein, Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrated how a language teacher continuously enacted various forms of agency to negotiate tensions and challenges in developing a teacher-researcher identity. At the early career, his agency was primarily defined by rigorous research requirements, promoting him to pursue doctoral studies and actively engage in the academic community (e.g., presenting research and attending group meetings) to enhance research competence. Upon becoming an associate professor, he redirected his agency towards his aspiration of becoming a distinguished scholar and effective teacher. This shift involved prioritizing his research interests over merely producing research outputs.

The foregoing discussion suggests teacher agency is a dynamic process unfolding throughout a teacher's professional trajectory (Tao & Gao, 2021). Language teachers exercise their agency by making choices about what to engage in and taking different degrees of engagement (e.g., participation or non-participation) to practice the link between teaching and research (Billett, 2006). The present study employs 'agency' as an analytical lens to address the following question:

How did the participant navigate the teaching-research nexus throughout her professional life in a neoliberal Chinese university?

3. Methodology

This study adopted a narrative case study approach, using stories or narratives to investigate how a CAL teacher navigated the teaching-research nexus within a neoliberal university. The case study is heuristic in nature, facilitating the discovery, extension, and confirmation of existing knowledge while also uncovering fresh understandings of the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2009). A case study methodology was selected to explore the experience of a CAL teacher, aiming to provide a nuanced, holistic, and contextualized understanding of how she practiced and navigated the integration of teaching and research with a thick description and situated analysis in disciplinary, institutional, and policy environments. Narrative inquiry was used to explore how the participant constructed her experience in navigating the teaching-research nexus across time and space. "Narration as the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events connected by subject matter and related to time" (Elliott, 2005, p. 45). Narratives demonstrate the goals and intentions of individuals, make connections between events, and show the influence of the passage of time in carrying action forward (Coulter & Smith, 2009).

3.1. Research context and the participant

This study is part of a large project investigating CAL teacher development in higher education. The study was conducted at the International College (hereafter IC) of a public research university located in southwestern China. The IC has traditionally functioned as a service department with an emphasis on delivering Chinese language courses and managing various administrative responsibilities for international students, such as taking responsibility for admissions processes, providing assistance with visa applications, and offering cultural integration support. The department plays a significant role in facilitating the smooth transition and integration of international students during their academic journey in China. However, the evolving landscape of higher education, driven by neoliberalism, triggered a substantial transformation within the IC, entailing a shift its role from a service-driven department to an academically-oriented one.

The reasons why Fang was deliberately selected as the central participant in our case study were two-fold. First, Fang represented an information-rich case, offering insights into various practices and rich experience of linking teaching and research, and thereby offering the potential to shed light on the neoliberal discourse prevalent in Chinese higher education. Fang holds both a bachelor's and a master's degree in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language and had accumulated seven years of experience at the IC at the time of the study. Her commitment to academic work was widely recognized by colleagues and students. Second, the second author, who had previously worked closely with Fang, had established a strong rapport with her. This relationship, built on mutual assistance, facilitates the exchange of information and ensured the reliability of the data (Tillman-Healy, 2003). Such rapport is particularly crucial in qualitative research, which emphasizes the collaborative construction of knowledge between the researcher and the participant (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008).

3.2. Data collection

Data collection for this study took place between June 2021 and May 2022, involving multiple sources of data. These include three rounds of interviews (one unstructured and two semi-structured), informal conversations, notes and memos, and policy documents (see Fig. 1 for an overview of the data collection process). These diverse sources of data were synthesized into a “restored whole” with “a specific analytical agenda” (Consoli, 2021, p. 2). Ethical approval was obtained from the authors’ institution and informed consent was gained from the participant before the study commenced.

The first unstructured interview was conducted in June 2021, shortly after Fang expressed an intention to resign from her current position. It aimed to explore the reasons behind her decision, delving into her seven years of experience as a CAL teacher at IC and unpacking the challenges and emotions associated with her journey. Transcription and initial analysis of this interview provided the foundation for identifying the study’s research focus and formulating research questions. The interview protocol included a list of semi-structured questions (see the Appendix). The second round of interviews occurred in January 2022 at the end of the first semester. Following a period of struggle and reflection during this semester, Fang confirmed her decision to leave her current job. In the second interview, Fang was prompted to engage in deep reflection and discussion on critical episodes that significantly influenced her teaching and research practice. For instance, Fang pointed out that IC’s transition from a service-driven to an academic-oriented department with emphasis on research publication, contributed to her feeling of insecurity, marking it as a critical incident. Throughout these discussions on critical events, the second author probed for additional details using “How” and “Why” questions to encourage Fang to elaborate on her evolving processes and the pivotal events driving these changes. For example, questions such as “How do you engage in research activities?” and “Why do you approach it in that way?” were employed to delve into her research practices. The third interview took place following the initial analysis of the second interview transcript for member checking and clarification. During this session, the participant was prompted to reflect upon and revisit the narratives she had shared in the previous interviews.

In addition to the interviews, the second author also engaged in multiple conversations with Fang via the Chinese social messaging app, WeChat, to discuss Fang’s encounters at the IC. These conversations provided nuanced insights into Fang’s real-time reflections and thoughts, which complemented the data from the formal interviews. Notes and memos were taken by the second author during these informal conversations to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the research data (Thomas, 2021). At the same time, official documents related to the requirements for publishing and teaching at the IC were collected as supplementary data.

3.3. Data analysis

The interview data underwent a comprehensive analysis employing a hybrid process of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Initially, the second researcher immersed herself in the collected data to identify critical events, defined in this study as significant occurrences or career shocks that influenced the participant’s practices in teaching and research. For instance, one critical event was identified when the institution began prioritizing publications, evaluating them through both quantitative and qualitative metrics. Following this, several meaningful categories emerged, guided by previous research, such as engagement with research for innovative pedagogies, pursuing a doctoral degree, conducting practice-based research, and so on. These categories were subsequently organized under three overarching themes: *active engagement with research to enhance teaching practices*, *pragmatic engagement in research for scholarly publication*, and *disenchanted retreat from the academic battlefield*.

In addition to interviews, supplementary data in the form of reflective writing, policy documents, and informal conversations were utilized to enrich and contextualized the primary data source. These supplementary materials served to complement and triangulate the information obtained from the interviews, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the study (Yin, 2009). For instance, Fang’s discussions regarding the research-oriented institutional culture were corroborated and enriched through an examination of relevant policy documents and evaluation policies. Her self-reported efforts to translate research findings into her teaching practice were supported by tangible evidence such as notes documenting her classroom teaching. By integrating these additional data sources, a comprehensive understanding of Fang’s practices in integrating teaching and research was achieved. These information sources

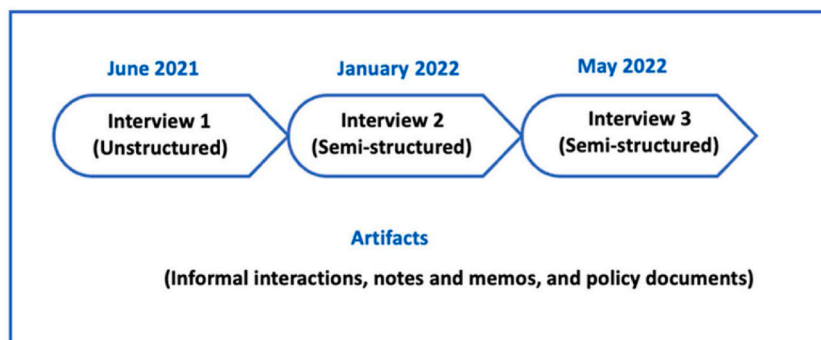


Fig. 1. The data collection process.

enabled our interpretations to be grounded in rich, multifaceted data, thereby enhancing the robustness and validity of the findings (Thomas, 2021). During the data analysis phase, primary analysis was conducted by the second author. Additionally, both the first and third authors independently conducted their analysis, followed by comparison and discussion of inconsistencies until consensus was reached. All identified codes were meticulously scrutinized, modified, and validated through the use of memos, informal interactions, and official documents. This rigorous process aimed to enhance our interpretation and ensure the validity of the data (Shenton, 2004).

In constructing the narrative, Clandinin and Connelly's (2004) three-dimensional inquiry model guided the process, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of Fang's lived experiences across the temporal, social, and spatial dimensions. Specifically, attention was directed towards Fang's agency in practicing the relationship between teaching and research across time (*temporality*). This examination highlighted how Fang's agency emerged and evolved, influenced by both her internal values, beliefs, and perceptions (*inward factors*) and external social conditions (*outward factors*) within specific contextual settings (*place*). This holistic approach provided insights into the intricate interplay between Fang's personal experiences and environmental contexts, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of her agency in integrating teaching and research.

3.4. Researcher positionality

This qualitative study engaged the three researchers in critical self-reflection on their respective positionalities and collaborative efforts to mitigate potential bias and subjectivity in the presenting Fang's narratives. The second author, drawing on her prior experience as a CAL instructor at the IC, led the data collection process, which involved conducting interviews, engaging in informal conversations, and gathering relevant policy documents to develop a preliminary understanding of Fang's professional experiences. Her personal connection with Fang as a colleague and confidant enabled her to develop pertinent and insightful interview questions, empathetically apprehend Fang's inner thoughts, and provide emotional support during the in-depth dialogues (Holmes, 2020). This facilitated the production of an initial draft of the findings, which was subsequently transformed into a more cohesive narrative of Fang's experiences through collaborative efforts with the first and third authors. To further minimize the risk of bias, all three researchers independently coded the data and engaged in reflective writing during the data analysis phase (De Costa, 2014). The iterative process of comparison and discussion among the researchers culminated in the development of a consistent and trustworthy narrative of Fang's lived experiences.

4. Findings

The findings pertaining to Fang's agency in navigating the teaching-research nexus were presented in chronological order, starting with her commencement of employment at the IC in 2016 and concluding in 2022. The participant's narratives offered detailed insights into the evolving challenges she encountered throughout her professional journey, and the agentic decisions and actions she undertook to navigate teaching-research nexus within neoliberal context.

4.1. Active engagement with research to enhance teaching practice

From Fang's perspective, the two professional tasks of teaching and research were mutually reinforced in the Chinese language classroom. This perception was largely because her disciplinary background was aligned with her teaching practice, and she recognized the relevance of her MA research area to her teaching practice. With respect to disciplinary considerations, Fang emphasized the essential role of research, which is to 'address real-world problems in language education' (McKinley, 2022, p. 8), instead of viewing research as a 'tradable' finished product such as a research publication or research grant (Brew, 2001).

CAL is a practical discipline. The research should address real classroom problems, rather than merely focus on abstract theories that are hard for teachers to understand and implement in their teaching. (Interview 1)

Given limited institutional support (e.g., insufficient training in teaching practices) and teaching resources (e.g., textbooks), Fang designed her own teaching content and practice mainly based on research findings from the CAL field (Anwer & Reiss, 2023). This choice to incorporate research findings into her pedagogical decisions was driven by her belief that research could play a positive role in informing teachers' instructional practices (Borg, 2010). In practice, she not only used empirical findings to address practical issues in classroom teaching, but she also actively sought inspiration from research on language education to innovate her pedagogy. Through a continuous implementation of innovative pedagogies (e.g., a task-based approach) and solicitation of feedback from her students, she refined and transformed these pedagogies to ensure their maximum effectiveness and relevance in the Chinese language learning context. In addition, she took the initiative to note down and systematize her pedagogical insights, sharing them with other teachers (Bao & Feng, 2023). Her insights and efforts related to pedagogical innovation in her Chinese classes were highly appreciated by her students and peers.

I really love exploring new ideas and teaching methods in my classes. The literature has been a significant source of inspiration for me, providing endless ideas to enrich the learning experience for my students. (Interview 2)

Moreover, Fang kept abreast of up-to-date knowledge about research in language learning and teaching, consistently updating her educational ideologies (Cao et al., 2023). Informed by research insights, she shifted her teaching focus from solely developing linguistic skills to exposing learners to 'diverse cultures and perspectives, thus promoting a broader understanding and appreciation of the world' (Interview 2). She became more aware of her students' needs and adopted a more student-centered pedagogy in her courses. For

example, she introduced her students to basic everyday dialects spoken by local community members, encouraging them to interact with residents and gain insight into the local culture. Additionally, she facilitated discussions and debates on various topics related to Chinese culture and society, providing her students with opportunities to explore different perspectives and deepen their cultural understanding.

I used to prioritize ensuring students enjoyed classes and practiced Chinese as much as possible. However, I came to recognize the importance of helping students to develop broader cognitive skills that would be valuable in their lives beyond the classroom. (Interview 2)

Although Fang intellectually valued the mutual connection between teaching and research, this nexus was unbalanced in her practice (Geschwind & Broström, 2015). Compared to her endeavors in reading the literature and using research findings to inform her pedagogical beliefs and practices, Fang's involvement in conducting research was comparatively minimal. Her narratives indicated that this imbalance between research and teaching resulted partly from the institutional culture and priorities at the IC.

I have had a lot of reflection, and I really wanted to conduct research to investigate it. But as you know, preparing for teaching took me so much time. Also, my colleagues weren't very interested in research, and the institution did not emphasize research much either, so I just did not feel strongly motivated. Maybe if someone could guide me and offer some support, I'd be more engaged in it. (Interview 1)

Early in her career, Fang's comment to teaching and valued attached to research shaped her practices concerning the link between teaching and research. Her agency was evident in the active transmission of research knowledge into the curriculum (Griffiths, 2004). However, the weak research culture in teaching-oriented environments and a lack of research competence hindered the integration of teaching and research, resulting in limited engagement in research activities (Huang, 2018).

4.2. Pragmatic engagement in research for scholarly publication

The evolving landscape of higher education, influenced by neoliberalism, has prompted significant transformations within institutions such as the IC. This shift has entailed a transition from a service-driven department to one that is more academically oriented (*policy documents*). Despite being in a teaching-oriented position, teachers like Fang could not 'escape' from the increasing demand for research output, which had become a decisive factor in faculty promotion. Despite verbal acknowledgment of the equal importance of research and teaching, the institution's criteria for evaluation remained unbalanced; the quality of research was mostly assessed both quantitatively and qualitatively, whereas the quality of teaching was narrowly measured by teaching workloads (*informal conversations*). This made Fang skeptical about the roles of research and teaching in higher education:

This completely subverted my perception. I have always felt that teaching is the priority for a university teacher, and research is for the purpose of better understanding and improving teaching practices. (Interview 1)

Without an established research record and sufficient research knowledge, Fang felt increasingly pressured and vulnerable. She was compelled to exercise her agency in academic research and increase her research productivity in order to survive in the neoliberal system. During her extensive reading of the research literature she had discovered the paradigm of action research, which aligned with her belief that research could truly contribute to CAL teaching and learning. Therefore, she focused on her experiences as a CAL teacher to form the context and content of her research (Cochran-Smith, 2005). However, engaging in action research proved to be a complex and challenging journey, especially in relation to how to collect classroom data to evaluate students' performance as well as collect meaningful information to further improve her teaching practice (Buğra & Wyatt, 2021). She had particularly struggled initially with categorizing the data she had collected and distilling the key ideas from it. Additionally, she grappled with significant self-doubt, particularly in visualizing the interventions she could implement to address the issues she had identified in her classroom teaching.

I followed every step of the action research process, but honestly, I couldn't picture how it would all turn out in the end. Will this work or not? Am I heading in the right direction, or do I need to make some adjustments? (Interview 2)

With limited institutional support and guidance from experienced researchers, Fang actively sought feedback from her classmates who were pursuing doctoral degrees, enabling her to sustain her engagement in research and reduce the stress and ambiguity she experienced during the research process (Buğra & Wyatt, 2021). Discussion with her classmates inspired Fang to focus her research on facilitating interactions in online classes, where she implemented a series of interventions aimed at promoting student-student and student-teacher interactions. For instance, she switched from the Tencent conference app to Zoom because of its more convenient grouping function and designed more group discussion activities with assigned roles (e.g., questioner, organizer, concluser). She then instructed students to collectively present their group discussion results and gave other groups the opportunity to ask questions. During this task Fang observed the student-student interaction in each group and took notes. She also interviewed some students to understand their perceptions and reflections on their experience of the online classroom. Although some students reported difficulties communicating effectively in the online classroom, they showed more engagement during their interactions with peers.

I've learned a great deal through this action research process, and I believe this is what I want to continue doing. It has the potential to greatly benefit myself and help us to systematically reflect and refine our teaching practice. (Interview 2)

Despite the potential research implications for her teaching, academic journals seemed to close the door on Fang publishing her practitioner research, due to its lack of scientific rigor and a 'big name' associated with it (Bao & Feng, 2023). In practice, '*e*'ducational

journals consider there is a lack of mainstream theoretical frameworks or theories in the field of education, while applied linguistic Chinese journals consider that such research does not align with their linguistic focus' (Interview 2). As Fang shared in informal conversations, most journals preferred manuscripts submitted by established scholars or supported by major national research grants. She experienced internal confusion and contradiction when trying to figure out what should or could be counted as research (Cochran-Smith, 2005).

Does research necessarily have to entail a fancy theoretical framework or complex theories to be considered as such? Is research conducted within the confines of a classroom not worthy of being recognized as legitimate research? (Interview 2)

In summary, the performative incentives served as the driving force for Fang's transition from being an 'intelligent of consumer of research' to becoming a 'teacher-researcher' (Hökkä et al., 2012, p.124). Despite her efforts to navigate this transition (e.g., learning to conduct action research), multi-layered factors (e.g., the narrow definition of research in Chinese academic circles) significantly impeded her ability to excise her agency fully in achieving this transition in neoliberal context.

4.3. Disenchanted retreat from the academic battlefield

The explicit institutional implementation of a research-oriented appraisal system further intensified Fang's feelings of vulnerability and lack of recognition. Despite her devoted efforts and outstanding achievements in CAL teaching and education, her contributions were often ignored due to their non-scholarly nature, and she did not receive any 'material recognition' such as bonus payments, honorary titles, or promotion (Strauss, 2020). Unlike research scholarships, teaching awards and workload were not systematically quantified. In addition to publications in prestigious journals (e.g., CSSCI and SSCI journals), academic staff seeking promotion from Lecturer to Associate Professor were also required to have led national-level research projects as principal investigators (*policy documents*). However, it seems that teaching-focused CAL lecturers were not eligible to apply for these research projects, because the eligibility for national-level research projects stipulates that applicants must either hold associate or full professorships (Bao & Feng, 2023). Fang felt frustrated and disheartened because of this constraint, perceiving that the institution's evaluation system lacked empathy and humanity.

Only your efforts publishing your research are recognized and valued. If there is no publication, you are considered as making no contribution to the university, and your efforts go unnoticed and unvalued. It is inhumane! (Interview 2)

Fang's sense of despair was accentuated by continued rejections of her applications to join a PhD program. From her experience, she had learned that obtaining a doctoral degree was a prerequisite for entering the academic community. However, the paucity of doctoral programs in CAL education, along with her limited research publication record, placed her at a disadvantage in the fiercely competitive application process (*informal interactions*). In addition, doctoral programs in CAL education tend to value the pursuit of scientific inquiry in linguistic research, while undervaluing language practitioner research that aligned with Fang's interests and aspirations. Despite receiving verbal encouragement from their institution to enhance their academic qualifications, Fang and her colleagues did not receive any substantial financial or resource support to facilitate their pursuit of PhD programs.

It feels impossible for me. I've been dedicatedly working in this field for seven years, yet I feel like I haven't achieved anything, income, position ... It's all in vain! (Interview 3)

The data indicates that Fang was experiencing a sense of hopelessness and frustration, feeling as though her efforts over the past seven years have been futile. Lacking the necessary resources (e.g., a doctoral degree and a research publication record) to meet the institution's requirements, she felt incapable of advancing her career within this system. Meanwhile, staying in her current position would result in her '*passion for CAL teaching*' going unacknowledged, unevaluated, and unrewarded in the context that prioritized research over teaching. Rather than '*fruitlessly battling against the system*' (Interview 1), Fang decided to resign from her current position in pursuit of a new job that would not only recognize her teaching efforts but also provide opportunities for career growth.

It's not my ideal career. A career should start with a genuine passion that fuels continuous self-improvement. Furthermore, it should be a career where both students and institutions recognize and appreciate your contributions. (Interview 1)

Fang's competent teaching did not contribute to her professional status or career prospects, and her deficits in research made her feel marginalized in the higher education community (Bao & Feng, 2023). She increasingly found herself diverging from its requirements, and eventually she reached a point where she felt unable to meet these demands and recognized that her efforts were consistently marginalized. Consequently, Fang made the decision to withdraw from her current position.

5. Discussion and implications

Drawing on multiple data sources, this study explored a CAL teacher's seven-year journey and examined how she exercised agency to navigate the nexus between teaching and research within a neoliberal Chinese university. The findings indicate that the trajectory of agency in integrating teaching and research in practice is a dynamic, complex, and evolving process characterized by tensions, leaps, stumbles, and a myriad of multilayered factors shaping the ways in which these relationships are practiced (Huang, 2018; Weenink et al., 2023). Initially, Fang directed her agency towards applying research findings inform her teaching practice with limited engagement in research, influenced by the weak research culture in a teaching-oriented institution. Subsequently, she shifted agency to engage in teacher research and attempted to publish results, driven by the institution's shifting policies focusing on publication. Ultimately, however, Fang disengaged entirely from academia, withdrawing from both research and teaching activities due to her

perceived inability to meet the demanding research requirements and her recognition of the consistent marginalization of her efforts in that neoliberal university.

The findings shed light on how Fang's agency in navigating teaching-research nexus is configured, enabled, and shaped in multilayered sociocultural contexts. Constrained by limited training in teaching practices and teaching resources (e.g., textbooks), Fang's agency was enabled by her commitment to teaching and the value she attached on research. The agency manifested in her engaging with research (i.e., reading and using it) to facilitate teaching practices. Further, job insecurity, exacerbated by the escalated research expectations and emphasis on research publication, directed her agency in taking her own teaching practice as site of research inquiry and seeking professional improvement through continuous reflection and actions such as collaborating with peers and pursuing a doctoral degree (Yuan, 2017). These findings suggest that the emerging challenges brought by performativity and accountability, to some degree, may serve as a 'developmental driving force' for young academics without permanent position to exercise agency to improve their research skills (Engeström, 2015, p. 193). However, the finding also highlights that agency does not always take the form of 'participation' or leads to positive outcomes. In the study, Fang faced challenges in gaining recognition for her action research within the academic community and experienced the undervaluation of her teaching efforts, along with difficulties in pursuing academic qualifications (e.g., doctoral degree). Consequently, rather than continuing to '*fruitlessly battling against the system*' (Interview 1), she concluded that resigning from her current position was a more practical choice. Thus, the '*disenchanted retreat from the academic battlefield*' was not an option Fang originally preferred, but emerged after Fang meticulously evaluated her own competencies and the prevailing conditions she faced. This finding suggest that agency should not be reduced to individual choices and actions; instead, it emerges from the complex interaction between the individual (Fang) and her situated context (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015).

The findings further suggest that within a neoliberal context, despite teachers' endeavors, systemic constraints (e.g., 'tradable' research culture and the prioritization of research over teaching in evaluation process) which separate teaching and research are evident, impeding how the ideal of "teaching-research nexus" can be achieved (McKinley et al., 2021). This finding aligns with previous research indicating that the nexus between teaching and research is "normatively strong but empirically light" (Huang, 2018, p.766). Normatively, the teaching-research nexus is prominently featured in policy documents, institutional rhetoric as well as acknowledged discourses (Tight, 2016). Practically, achieving the teaching-research nexus has proven challenging due to economic imperatives, demands for accountability, and a performative culture (Geschwind & Broström, 2015). Specifically, the emphasis on 'tradable' research products (e.g., research publications and research grants) inhibits teachers' sustainable agency in integrating teaching and research (Huang, 2018). Research activities, which traditionally encompassed diverse forms of knowledge production, have increasingly narrowed to research publication and research projects within a performative research culture (Brew, 2001). The practice-oriented applied disciplines emphasize testing and applying fundamental concepts and methods in real-world contexts, which may not always align with publication in recognized academic journals (Griffiths, 2004). For example, Fang, who strongly believed in the mutual benefits of the research-teaching nexus, actively incorporated research findings to innovate pedagogy and conducted classroom-based research to improve language teaching and learning. Despite her efforts, these endeavors were undervalued both in Chinese academic journals and institutional evaluations, discouraging her attempts to bridge teaching and research. Moreover, within neoliberal higher education defined by neoliberalism, there exists a disparity in the valuation of research and teaching, with research often receiving greater emphasis, thus exacerbating the dichotomy between the two (Brew, 2010). Institutional rhetoric, promotion policies, and financial incentives strongly signal the importance of research visibility, while teaching responsibilities are increasingly marginalized (Sutton, 2017). Despite Fang's dedication to innovative and high-quality teaching practices, her contributions were less recognized and appreciated (McKinley et al., 2021), which diminished her motivation to continue investing in teaching.

In contrast to previous studies revealing the mutual relationship between teaching and research constructed by language teachers (e.g., Buğra & Wyatt, 2021; Yuan et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022), Fang's narrative seemed to unfold as an 'unsuccessful' story. However, instead of portraying the participant as a disempowered victim, this study attempted to illustrate the complex ways in which the institutional context of a neoliberal university can undermine teachers' professional wellbeing. Despite being a high-achieving and hardworking teacher actively engaged in both teaching and research, Fang still suffered from self-doubt, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness, and ultimately ended up leaving academia. This finding offers practical implications for educational stakeholders, institutions, and policymakers. In contexts where the paradigm of research is largely defined by neoliberal norms, there is a pressing need for gatekeepers of research (editors and reviewers) to "play a more supportive role in ensuring classroom-based research is valued" (Rose, 2019, p. 899). Rather than adhering to the conventional understanding of research as 'objective', 'quantifiable', and 'generalizable', it is essential to embrace alternative perspectives, recognizing and promoting scholarship that accommodates the unique needs of language teachers or academics from the practice-oriented applied disciplines (Barkhuizen, 2021). In addition, PhD study usually serves as a crucial platform for CAL teachers or language teachers to receive systematic research training. It is imperative that PhD programs should value and provide guidance on practice-based research, fostering a positive and supportive culture that connects research with authentic pedagogical needs. Furthermore, universities should be more sensitive and tolerant to academics from the practice-oriented applied disciplines (e.g., language education), in order to provide tailored support and evaluation (Wang, 2019). Specifically, university administrators need to develop teacher evaluation and promotion standards according to more objective, rational, and balanced approaches. Diverse forms of knowledge production such as textbook development, curriculum design, and innovative pedagogies should be recognized as scholarship, sustaining teachers' ongoing investment in integrating teaching and research (Barkhuizen, 2021).

6. Conclusion

Through a narrative case study, we have unraveled the experience of a CAL university teacher in a Chinese university in relation to how she engaged with integrating research evidence into her teaching practice as well as how she engaged in practice-based research for publication, in order to maintain a coherent and legitimate professional self in a neoliberal context. Despite active research engagement, she experienced a growing sense of being overlooked and unappreciated due to a lack of ‘tradable’ research outputs. Ultimately, feeling vulnerable and under pressure, she made the decision to leave academia. In this regard, the current research culture and evaluation system in neoliberal universities may further undermine the work settings of language teachers and even compel them to abandon their original aspirations to enter academia (McKinley, 2019).

This study contributes to our understanding of the challenges and complexities involved in navigating the teaching-research nexus in neoliberal context. However, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. First, although it used a longitudinal approach, the research drew on a single case to explore the complex experience of navigating the teaching-research nexus within a neoliberal context. Future research could benefit from involving multiple participants in a cross-case analysis, in order to generate multiple trajectories for CAL teachers’ experiences in navigating the teaching-research nexus within multi-layered and differentiated contextual dynamics. For example, future researchers could explore institutional environments that differ from Fang’s experiences. Investigating environments where there is sufficient institutional support and resources devoted to language teachers’ professional development will provide valuable insights (Bao & Feng, 2023). Second, several studies have acknowledged the significance of emotions embedded in integrating teaching and research in a neoliberal context (e.g., Wei, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Therefore, future studies could delve deeper into language teachers’ emotional dynamics, in order to gain a better understanding of how academics’ emotions intersect with their agency in linking teaching and research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Yang (Frank) Gong: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Formal analysis. **Luyao (Elva) Zhang:** Resources, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Wendong (Marco) Li:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103420>.

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Further reading

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