

**Understanding Professional Vulnerability in Higher Education: A Multiple Case Study
of EFL Teachers at a University in Mainland China**

by

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Statement of Originality

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Abstract

Teaching is a vulnerable profession. Not only are teachers vulnerable to unfavorable workplace conditions that constrain their professional practice, but they are also vulnerable to an ever-shifting sociocultural context which is beyond their sphere of control. Thus, it can be said that vulnerability constitutes an integral part of being a teacher. The past twenty years have witnessed a steady growth of research interest in teachers' professional vulnerability in the field of teacher education and development. Nevertheless, how teachers perceive and respond to their professional vulnerability has not received due attention from academia. Scant research examines the vulnerable experiences of university teachers in such countries as China, where performativity plays a dominant role in higher education. To fill these gaps, this doctoral thesis reports a multiple case study on the professional vulnerability of five English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers at a university in northwestern China. Informed by an integrated conceptual framework of teacher vulnerability and teacher agency, this study addresses three questions: (1) Do university EFL teachers experience professional vulnerability? (2) How do university EFL teachers agentively respond to their professional vulnerability? (3) What factors lead to university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability?

Drawing on data collected from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews, field observation, reflective journals, documents, and social media (WeChat), this study shows that the participants experience vulnerability in different aspects of their professional lives. They do not resist being labelled as a "vulnerable population" and tend to perceive vulnerability as a dynamic, conflicted, and multidimensional state accompanying their professional

development. The study also shows that, as “agents of change”, the participants adopt cognitive and behavioral strategies to cope with their professional vulnerability. Specifically, their cognitive strategies include reflection-in-action and manipulation of personal belief systems, while behavior strategies include disengagement, compliance, fabrication, ingratiation, adjustment, experimentation, rapport-building, resource-mobilization, investment, and confrontation. These strategies reflect the participants’ diverse orientations towards certain aspects of their professional vulnerability and indicate the dominant role of the “practical-evaluative” dimension of their agency. Furthermore, this study unpacks a constellation of personal (career stage, educational background, academic position, and personality), institutional (managerial technique, power relation, collegiality, and university attribute), and sociocultural (educational reform, “publish-or-perish” mantra, the cultural tradition of teacher-reverence, and face) factors mediating the participants’ experiences of professional vulnerability. The study adds to our knowledge of the complexity of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability in an era of intensified performativity in higher education. It also offers some recommendations for supporting university EFL teachers to withstand professional vulnerability and sustain professional development amidst unrelenting educational changes.

Keywords: professional vulnerability, agency, university EFL teachers, higher education, performativity

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Table of Contents

Statement of Originality.....	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	vi
List of Abbreviations	xii
List of Figures	xii
List of Tables	xiii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Why vulnerability?	2
1.2 Why mainland China?	4
1.3 The gaps in vulnerability research	8
1.4 The objectives of the study	9
1.5 The significance of the study	11
1.6 Organization of the thesis	12
Chapter 2: Literature review	15
2.1 Demystifying vulnerability.....	15
2.1.1 Multiple conceptualizations of vulnerability	16
2.1.2 The “vulnerable population”	18
2.1.3 Different types of vulnerability	21
2.1.4 Summary	25
2.2 Conceptualizing teachers’ professional vulnerability	26
2.2.1 Open vulnerability vs. Protective vulnerability	28
2.2.2 Vulnerability as a structural condition of being a teacher.....	31
2.2.3 Professional vulnerability and the context.....	35
2.2.4 Summary	37
2.3 Professional vulnerability and teacher agency	38
2.3.1 Agency and context	39
2.3.2 Agency and temporality.....	41
2.3.3 Teacher agency	44
2.3.3.1 Teacher agency as action.....	44
2.3.3.2 Teacher agency as cognition.....	45
2.4 A tentative conceptual framework of professional vulnerability	47
2.5 EFL teachers in higher education	49

2.5.1 Understanding performativity	50
2.5.1.1 The rise of performativity in higher education	50
2.5.1.2 The impact of performativity	52
2.5.2 The challenges facing university EFL teachers	55
2.5.2.1 Teaching practice	55
2.5.2.2 Research practice	58
2.5.2.3 Power negotiation	63
2.5.2.4 Contesting cultural stereotypes	65
2.5.3 University EFL teachers' coping strategies	67
2.5.4 Summary	70
Chapter 3: Methodology	72
3.1 Research questions	72
3.2 Rationale of the research methodology	72
3.3 Research site and participants	76
3.3.1 XU, the EFL office, and EFL curriculum	76
3.3.2 Quality management mechanisms in XU	80
3.3.2.1 Personnel agency (ren shi dai li)	81
3.3.2.2 Position appointment (gang wei pin ren)	82
3.3.2.3 Teaching evaluation (ping jiao)	83
3.3.2.4 Course selection (xuan ke)	84
3.3.3 Research participants	85
3.3.3.1 The pilot study	86
3.3.3.2 Participants of this study	88
3.4 Data collection process	93
3.4.1 Interview	94
3.4.2 Field observation	97
3.4.3 Institutional documents	101
3.4.4 Social media	103
3.4.5 Reflective journal	104
3.5 Data analysis	106
3.5.1 Data analysis from top down	106
3.5.2 Data analysis from bottom up	108
3.5.3 The issue of translation	111
3.6 Credibility and ethics of the study	112
3.7 Researcher positionality	115
Chapter 4: Findings	118
4.1 General perceptions of professional vulnerability	118

4.1.1 Motivations to become university EFL teachers	118
4.1.2 An emerging sense of professional vulnerability.....	120
4.2 Vulnerability and teaching practice	127
4.2.1 A general lack of learning motivation among the students.....	128
4.2.2 The pressure to use educational technologies.....	132
4.2.2.1 Overall experiences in using educational technologies	133
4.2.2.2 Online teaching during the pandemic.....	136
4.2.3 Influences of course selection and student evaluation.....	139
4.2.3.1 Contesting the effectiveness of the policies	139
4.2.3.2 Large class sizes	143
4.2.4 Coping with teaching vulnerability	146
4.2.4.1 Negotiating instructional approaches	146
4.2.4.2 Appropriating educational technologies	151
4.2.4.3 Responding to student evaluation and course selection.....	153
4.2.5 Summary	155
4.3 Vulnerability and research practice	156
4.3.1 A lack of research motivation among EFL teachers	157
4.3.1.1 Inadequate research expertise.....	158
4.3.1.2 Ambivalent beliefs about the value of research.....	160
4.3.1.3 Unfavorable academic environment.....	162
4.3.2 Coping with research vulnerability	167
4.3.2.1 Pursuing higher academic degrees	167
4.3.2.2 “All I can do is to cross the river by touching stones”	172
4.3.2.3 “Let’s tang ping”	175
4.3.3 Summary	178
4.4 Vulnerability and administration	179
4.4.1 “Pointless formalities”.....	179
4.4.2 Low work efficiency	182
4.4.3 Excessive interventions	184
4.4.3.1 Joe’s participation in the microlecture teaching contest	184
4.4.3.2 The end-of-semester grading work.....	186
4.4.4 Coping with administrative vulnerability	188
4.4.5 Summary	192
4.5 Vulnerability and social recognition.....	193
4.5.1 The “objectification” of EFL teaching.....	193
4.5.2 A lack of respect from the students and administrators	196
4.5.3 Low salaries.....	199
4.5.4 Reduced workload.....	204
4.5.5 Coping with inadequate social recognition	208

4.5.5.1 Adhering to personal values	209
4.5.5.2 Building rapport with the students	211
4.5.5.3 Offering elective courses to the students	212
4.5.6 Summary	215
4.6 Vulnerability and language proficiency	216
4.6.1 “We can’t speak the language properly”	217
4.6.2 “It’s always like looking at flowers in the fog”	222
4.6.3 Responding to language vulnerability	224
4.6.4 Summary	229
Chapter 5: Discussion	231
5.1 Teacher vulnerability as a dynamic, conflicted, and multidimensional state	231
5.1.1 The shifting experiences of professional vulnerability	232
5.1.2 Conflicts between belief systems and the professional reality	235
5.1.2.1 Self-understanding	235
5.1.2.2 Personal values	237
5.1.3 Unraveling professional vulnerability	238
5.1.3.1 Intrinsic vulnerability	239
5.1.3.2 Practical vulnerability	241
5.1.3.3 Relational vulnerability	242
5.2 Responding to professional vulnerability	244
5.2.1 Cognitive strategies	245
5.2.2 Behavioral strategies	249
5.2.3 Temporal dimensions of the coping strategies	256
5.3 Factors leading to experiences of professional vulnerability	258
5.3.1 Personal factors	259
5.3.1.1 Career stage	259
5.3.1.2 Educational background	260
5.3.1.3 Academic position	261
5.3.1.4 Personality	263
5.3.2 Institutional factors	264
5.3.2.1 Managerial technique	264
5.3.2.2 Power relations	265
5.3.2.3 Collegiality	266
5.3.2.4 University attribute	267
5.3.3 Sociocultural factors	268
5.3.3.1 Educational policies	268
5.3.3.2 “Publish-or-perish” mantra	269
5.3.3.3 Teacher-reverence	270



5.3.3.4 Face.....	270
5.4 Summary	271
Chapter 6 Conclusion and Implications	273
6.1 Towards a refined conceptual framework of professional vulnerability	273
6.2 Contributions of the study	279
6.3 Implications.....	284
6.4 Directions for future research.....	289
References.....	292
Appendices	326
Appendix 1: EFL Teacher interview protocols.....	326
Appendix 2: Snow and Shawn interview protocol	329
Appendix 3: Lucy interview protocol	330
Appendix 4: Student interview protocol.....	331
Appendix 5: Lynn interview protocol	332



List of Abbreviations

CE	College English
CECR	College English Curriculum Requirements
CET	College English Test
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
CMoE	Chinese Ministry of Education
CSC	China Scholarship Council
CSSCI	Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
FH	Faculty of Humanities
NECCS	National English Competition for College Students
NNS	Non-native Speaker
NS	Native Speaker
SSCI	Social Sciences Citation Index
TAO	Teaching Affairs Office
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States



List of Figures

- Figure 1 Tentative conceptual framework of professional vulnerability
- Figure 2 The refined conceptual framework

List of Tables

Table 2.1	Different types of vulnerability
Table 3.1	Composition of the EFL teaching force
Table 3.2	EFL courses at XU
Table 3.3	The decline of CE in the undergraduate curriculum
Table 3.4	Biographical information of the participants
Table 3.5	Timetable of data collection
Table 3.6	Examples of the “bottom-up” approach
Table 5.1	Coping strategies taken by the participants
Table 5.2	Temporal orientations of coping strategies

Chapter 1: Introduction

Today is the first day of the new semester. I felt excited because I was able to conduct face-to-face teaching eventually. I thought the students might look forward to seeing me after eight months since the pandemic outbreak. However, I was shocked that the classroom was empty with the locked multimedia console. I contacted the Teaching Affairs Office to see if they gave me the correct timetable. Then a staff told me, “Sorry, I forgot to tell you in advance. The course has been canceled because the number of students who select it does not meet the minimum requirement, which is thirty.” She made me angry because there was a tone of indifference in her voice. Is her decision fair to the students who registered for my course? Obviously, I’m a vulnerable teacher who is always at the mercy of the university. (Joe, WeChat, 05/09/2020)

The above is a text that Joe, a veteran English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teacher at a university in mainland China, posted on his WeChat (i.e., a social media and multipurpose application) page after finding that the Teaching Affairs Office (TAO) at his university canceled his class without notifying him in advance. In this text, Joe perceives himself as a vulnerable teacher. His perceived vulnerability is reflected in a state of passivity in which he is defenseless against the TAO’s decision to cancel his class following the university rule concerning course selection.

Joe is just one of the many EFL teachers at his university who experience vulnerability in multiple aspects of their professional practice. As I will discuss in this study, professional vulnerability is a perpetual working condition facing Joe and his colleagues. An investigation of professional vulnerability will allow us to properly understand the complex and conflicted

nature of the EFL teaching profession, which has been increasingly affected by the prevailing discourse of performativity in higher education. Three questions are addressed in this study:

- (1) Do university EFL teachers experience professional vulnerability?
- (2) How do university EFL teachers agentively respond to their professional vulnerability?
- (3) What factors lead to university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability?

1.1 Why vulnerability?

As the research questions show, the focus of this PhD dissertation study is the notion of vulnerability. It grew from my prior EFL teaching experience at a university in mainland China. During my five years of working in that university, I was trapped in a vulnerable position that kept challenging my sense of identity as a university EFL teacher. For one thing, I was subject to multiple teaching challenges, such as a high rate of student absenteeism in class and constant student evaluations that made me feel demoralized, undervalued, and frustrated. For another, I was overwhelmed by various non-teaching tasks that had a direct bearing on my career prospect. Those tasks included, but were not limited to, pursuing a doctoral degree, publishing papers, and applying for research funds. Periodic reviews of my “productivity” (particularly in terms of instructional hours and publication records) by the administrative units also added to my experiences of vulnerability. I kept asking myself, “What is the meaning of being a university EFL teacher?”, “Did I make the right career choice?” and “What does this profession bring to me?”. The idea of forever leaving the EFL teaching profession flashed through my mind.

However, while reading the works of Kelchtermans (1993, 1996, 2005), I stumbled into the concept of “teacher vulnerability” and began to reconsider the role that vulnerability plays in my professional development. Continued reading of relevant literature (e.g., Gilson, 2014; Jackson, 2018; Lasky, 2005, Song, 2016) gives me the impression that vulnerability is an inextricable part of being a teacher, and I cannot simply get rid of it. It seems plausible to me to remain in the EFL teaching profession and explore possible ways to cope with my inherent vulnerability. Therefore I chose teacher vulnerability as the focus of this doctoral research project.

Second, communications with my colleagues and EFL teachers at other universities have made me realize that I am not the only EFL teacher who experiences professional vulnerability. For a long time, our work has been positioned as “a service provision” wherein our “knowledge of the language is perceived as lacking the disciplinary status accorded to the expertise of specialists in conventional subject departments” (Breen, 2007, p. 1072). Our professional expertise tends to be underestimated or even ignored in the mainstream educational discourse (Harper & de Jong, 2009). In higher education, we are often thought of as “instructors” rather than “academics”. Although EFL courses figure prominently in higher education across many national contexts, the EFL education centers at many universities are often viewed as service units rather than academic units (Borg & Liu, 2013). We are often considered less valuable in acquiring external funds, generating income, and boosting the university’s ranking than teachers in other departments (Gao & Zheng, 2018; Leathwood & Read, 2013). Thus, we are vulnerable to contractual termination and economic insecurity

(Breen, 2007; Wen & Zhang, 2017; Zhang, 2013). However, given that EFL education plays a crucial role in promoting social development and that our work may have a profound impact on the students' learning outcomes, it is worth to contemplate the measures that might be taken to strengthen our resilience in the face of professional vulnerability.

Focusing on professional vulnerability does not necessarily mean that we should eliminate vulnerability from our professional practice in order to become “perfect” university EFL teachers. Instead, exploring vulnerability means reconsidering the finitude of our competence by acknowledging that we are not “perfect” (Jackson, 2018). This serves as the precondition for correctly understanding ourselves as well as the profession we are committed to.

1.2 Why mainland China?

There is a strong case for investigating the professional vulnerability of university EFL teachers in mainland China. Since the country reopened to the world in the late 1970s, the significance of English as a *lingua franca* for international communication has been widely recognized (Fang, 2017; Wang & Gao, 2008). Despite the “unchallenged position” (Bolton, 2008, p. 5) of Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) as the national language, the vast population has shown unwavering enthusiasm for English learning, which reached an unprecedented height after Beijing hosted the Olympic Games in 2008. With an estimated number of 400 million English learners and users, China has undoubtedly become the single largest market for English language teaching and training (Wei & Su, 2015).

The national drive for modernization and economic prosperity has precipitated an enormous expansion of English education at all levels, with higher institutions a primary example (Hu & Lei, 2014). Over the past three decades, higher institutions in this country have invested tremendously in EFL education to nurture “critical thinkers with a global outlook” (Teo, 2017, p. 1) and enhance the competitiveness of their graduates in future job market. Against this background, competent and committed university EFL teachers are desired by higher institutions across the country.

The importance of tertiary-level EFL education is reflected by the provision of College English (CE) as a general English proficiency course compulsory for all non-English major undergraduates since the 1980s (Chen et al., 2020). At the same time, the College English Test (CET), a large-scale standardized test designed by the National College English Testing Committee in the late 1980s to provide an objective evaluation of the student’s overall English proficiency, is held in high esteem by EFL teachers, students, as well as the general public. Many employers consider a CET certificate one of the many prerequisites for recruiting university graduates (Jin & Yang, 2006). In addition, a test of English is an essential component of *kaoyan* (i.e., a shortened Chinese term for postgraduate admission examination) for students wishing to advance their studies in the near future. Some universities even require the candidates to pass CET Band-6 for their postgraduate programs.

However, this seemingly favorable context for EFL education does not necessarily mean that university EFL teachers in mainland China are immune to challenges and risks. With the

rapid marketization of higher education over the past few decades, the work of university EFL teachers has become increasingly vulnerable to external changes (Xiong, 2012). One such change pertains to the introduction of performativity into higher education as the dominant managerial technique. In a performative university, priority is given to an academic's "productivity", which can be quantitatively measured against a set of indicators such as the number of instructional hours and research publications. Thus, academics with high "productivity" are assumed to perform better than those with low "productivity" and are more favored by university authorities. While performativity provides teachers with ontological frameworks for improving their performance, it can potentially trigger tensions between teachers and administrators regarding what they perceive as "quality" education (Holloway & Brass, 2018). As a result, university EFL teachers are vulnerable to external intrusions in their professional practice, which negatively affect their sense of autonomy and self-worth.

Another change is related to the growing public discontent with the roles and functions of CE in Chinese higher education in recent years. For instance, despite making enormous efforts to learn English, many university students in mainland China fall behind their counterparts in neighboring countries (e.g., South Korea, Vietnam, and Thailand) in high-stakes tests such as IELTS (IELTS, 2019). The ongoing pedagogical reforms have also turned out to be unsuccessful as many students are still faced with great difficulty in oral and written communications in their work or study situations after graduation (Xu & Fan, 2017). As a result, CE teaching has become the target of public criticism, with such labels as

“time-consuming,” “exam-oriented,” and “dumb English” being used to describe its inefficiency (e.g., Cai, 2013; Cheng & Wei, 2021; Xu & Fan, 2017; Yu & Zhong, 2008). Meanwhile, with the economic growth slowing in recent years, the feverish passion for English education seem to recede (Cheng & Wei, 2021). Apprehensions over the spread of “English mania” across the country have begun to emerge among academia and government officials (Gil, 2016). The seemingly higher position of EFL education vis-à-vis Chinese language education in higher institutions is, in particular, a target of public censure. Against this background, the status of CE as a compulsory general-education course for all non-English major undergraduates has come under question. In many first-tier universities, where the students are assumed to have relatively high English language proficiency and be able to learn the language autonomously, the class hours and credit points allocated to CE are being reduced (Cai, 2013; Chen et al., 2020; Cheng & Wei, 2021). Accordingly, many universities have removed the regulation that passing CET-4 is a prerequisite for graduation to reduce the powerful impact that such high-stakes language tests have on the students (Chen et al., 2020; Yu, 2019). Such reforms contribute to the gradual marginalization of EFL teachers in mainland Chinese universities and create formidable challenges for their professional development.

Therefore, the context of mainland China is one in which university EFL teachers are vulnerable to the uncertainties, dilemmas, and conflicts within and beyond the classroom. It provides a space where we may explore in-depth how university EFL teachers sustain their professional development through interacting with contextual affordances and constraints.

1.3 The gaps in vulnerability research

The research gaps this study intends to fill are reflected in three aspects. First, while there has been growing research interest in teachers' vulnerable experiences (e.g., Bullough, 2005; Jackson, 2018; Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009; Lasky, 2005; Song, 2016), the notion of teacher vulnerability remains undertheorized in the field of teacher education and development. Although it is often touched upon in a considerable body of research on teacher emotions, stress, and burnout (e.g., Chan, 2003; McCarthy et al., 2014; Watts & Robertson, 2011), it is often glossed over without further elaboration. The literature provides meager information on the various factors mediating teacher vulnerability and the potential impact that vulnerability has on teacher practice. Without exploring these issues, we are unlikely to capture the vulnerable nature of the teaching profession and come up with ways to help teachers withstand their professional vulnerability.

Second, although performativity has been prevailing in higher education, its ramifications on academics' professional vulnerability are poorly articulated in educational research. Ball (2003) argues that educational reforms are not "simply vehicles for technical and structural change of organizations, but also mechanisms for reforming teachers and for changing what it means to be a teacher" (p. 217). That said, it remains unknown how elements of the performative discourse (e.g., periodic performance assessment, "publish-or-perish" mantra, and contract renewal) work to ameliorate or exacerbate university EFL teachers' experiences of vulnerability. Nor do we clearly understand how, in a performative work culture, university

EFL teachers respond to their professional vulnerability, prove their effectiveness, and “act counter to societal constraints as well as societal possibilities” (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 197).

Third, although vulnerability has been conceptualized as an integral aspect of the teaching profession (e.g., Uitto et al., 2016; Dale & Frye, 2009; Cutri & Whiting, 2015), empirical studies on how teachers respond to professional vulnerability are scarce. In particular, the concept of teacher agency has rarely been adopted or stated clearly in relevant studies to explore university EFL teachers’ responses (either passive or proactive) towards their professional vulnerability. Correspondingly, existing studies have generated few practical implications for both university EFL teachers and university managers to properly understand the notion of professional vulnerability and to mediate its influences on teacher development.

1.4 The objectives of the study

Based on the research questions and gaps mentioned in earlier sections, this study adopts the “multiple case study” approach to investigate the professional vulnerability of a cohort of EFL teachers at a university in mainland China, where performativity is being implemented to regulate and monitor academic practice. It seeks to achieve the following three objectives:

First, drawing on the theoretical perspectives and approaches from multiple fields (e.g., sociology, nursing, psychology, anthropology, and education), this study intends to clarify some controversies surrounding vulnerability and to develop an integrated conceptualization of vulnerability as a fundamental condition of human beings (Fineman, 2008; Gilson, 2014).

It not only discusses the negative connotations associated with vulnerability but also elaborates on its positive role(s) in promoting human growth and development (Jackson, 2018). Special attention is also paid to various types of vulnerability and how they are embodied in human experiences (Mackenzie et al., 2014). In doing so, this study is expected to shed light upon the complex and multifaceted nature of vulnerability and how it is related to human experiences.

Second, by focusing on the professional practice of university EFL teachers, this study aims to develop a holistic picture of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability.

Specifically, it will expound on the multiple sources of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability and how they respond to their professional vulnerability. It also aims to shed light upon the various personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors mediating university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability. It should be pointed out that it is not the aim of this study to describe university EFL teachers as a vulnerable community with gloomy career prospects. Indeed, by bringing to the fore the vulnerable nature of tertiary-level EFL teaching, this study seeks to raise the awareness of supporting EFL teachers to withstand their professional vulnerability among university managers and policymakers.

Third, this study seeks to develop a contextualized understanding of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability. Specifically, it tends to explore how the system of performativity mediates university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability. Performativity, in this study, is manifested in a set of rules and techniques used by university managers to quantitatively

measure teachers' performance and competence (Ball, 2003). Despite the controversial role that performativity plays in regulating teacher behavior, little is known about how university teachers perceive performativity and how performative elements such as student evaluation and institutional review of research outputs influence their experiences of professional vulnerability. Given the growing marketization of higher education (Olssen & Peters, 2005), it is necessary to locate vulnerability research within the system of performativity.

1.5 The significance of the study

This study, which examines the professional vulnerability of a cohort of university EFL teachers, has conceptual, methodological, and practical significance. Conceptually, it contributes to a scholarly understanding of teacher vulnerability, which remains a nebulous and less explored concept in the field of teacher education and teacher development (Brown, 2011). Drawing on theoretical perspectives and approaches from a myriad of disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, nursing, and education), this study can open up relevant discussions and point to ways of reconceptualizing vulnerability that differentiates the teaching profession from other professions. Seeing vulnerability as a circumstantial construct (Mackenzie et al., 2014), this study can also facilitate an adequate understanding of the intricate relationship between university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability and elements of performativity that are (re)shaping the current landscape of higher education. What is more, by examining how individual teachers perceive, feel about and deal with their professional vulnerability, this study can shed light on how teacher vulnerability is dynamically linked to teacher agency.

Methodologically, while previous research uses interview as the primary instrument for data collection (e.g., Gao, 2008, 2011; Uitto et al., 2016; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016), this study garners data from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews (both formal and informal), field observation, documents, reflective journals, and social media. This “triangulation” approach, coupled with my own teaching experience in the field, may contribute to the credibility of the research findings. Meanwhile, extending over fifteen months, this study allows for a holistic portrayal of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability by examining how the participants fulfill their professional tasks and interact with the system of performativity.

Practically, this study may add to our limited knowledge about the professional vulnerability of EFL teachers in various higher education contexts dominated by performativity. It may not only help raise university EFL teachers’ awareness of vulnerability as an integral part of their profession but also allow them to critically reflect on the impact that vulnerability has on their professional development. In addition, the findings of this study may serve as a helpful lens for university administrators to understand the vulnerable nature of EFL teachers’ professional work, examine the appropriateness of their performative decisions, and play a more constructive role in helping EFL teachers respond to their professional vulnerability.

1.6 Organization of the thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter introduces the research background (i.e., my previous EFL teaching experience and the EFL education context in mainland China) as

well as the objectives and significance of the study. The second chapter begins with a general review of the literature in various fields, such as sociology, to bring to the fore the ambiguity of vulnerability. Then, it introduces three perspectives (i.e., open vulnerability vs. protective vulnerability, vulnerability as a structural condition of being a teacher, and teacher vulnerability and the context) that may shed light upon the complexity of teachers' professional vulnerability. Following that, the notion of teacher agency is introduced to explain how teachers may use their cognition and action to cope with professional vulnerability and how context and temporality influence their coping strategies. Lastly, this chapter presents an overview of the various professional challenges facing university EFL teachers to reveal the vulnerability inherent in their professional practice.

Chapter three describes the research methodology (i.e., multiple case study) employed in this study. Following the introduction of the three research questions, it explains the theoretical underpinnings of "case study" in exploring university EFL teachers' experiences of professional vulnerability. Then the selection of the research site and participants (with a detailed portrayal of their biographical information) is elaborated. After that, the process of data collection (i.e., semi-structured interviews, field observation, documents, reflective journals, and social media) and analysis (i.e., the dual approach of "top-down" and "bottom-up") are elaborated, with the issue of translation involved in transcribing the data being discussed. This chapter ends with a discussion of the research credibility and ethics and my researcher positionality.

Chapter four reports on the research findings. It presents six sections, including the participants' general perceptions of professional vulnerability, vulnerability and teaching practice, vulnerability and research practice, vulnerability and administration, vulnerability and social recognition, and vulnerability and language proficiency. Its aim is to reveal how vulnerability is manifested in the participants' professional practice.

In chapter five, the major findings are discussed in detail in reference to the research questions. Specifically, it discusses the dynamic, conflicted, and multidimensional nature of the participants' professional vulnerability, elaborates on the cognitive and behavioral strategies adopted by the participants to cope with their professional vulnerability, and unpacks a constellation of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors mediating the participants' experiences of professional vulnerability.

The last chapter draws together what is discussed in chapter five and presents a refined framework of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability. Following a summary of the research findings, this chapter presents the major contributions that this thesis makes to vulnerability research in the field of teacher education and development. It also provides some practical implications for policymakers, university managers, and university EFL teachers and highlights directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter aims to present a critical review of the multidisciplinary concept of vulnerability, elaborate on the relationship between teachers' professional vulnerability and their agency, and provide a general picture of university EFL teachers' professional work. It comprises five parts: demystifying vulnerability, conceptualizing teacher professional vulnerability, professional vulnerability and teacher agency, a tentative framework of teacher professional vulnerability, and EFL teachers in higher education. The five parts are presented due to their centrality to a nuanced understanding of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability within the system of performativity.

2.1 Demystifying vulnerability

Davis (2008) argues that “educational research and practice have been net importers of methods, theories, and discourses...from other disciplines” (p. 50), suggesting that findings from different fields of inquiry might be used to broaden the horizon of educational research. Therefore, in this part, I review the literature in fields other than education, such as sociology, nursing, anthropology, and environmental science that are assumed to inspire vulnerability research in teacher education and teacher development.

Despite the proliferation of relevant studies over the past few decades (e.g., Glass & Davis, 2004; Gordon-Bouvier, 2019; Kelchtermans, 1993, 1996, 2005; Mackenzie et al., 2014; McLeod, 2012; Prinsloo & Slade, 2016; Sellman, 2005), vulnerability remains a largely ambiguous concept without an explicit agreement on its definition, sources, characteristics,

and impact on human development and organizational operation. The reason might be that this concept is so complex that it allows for potentially different interpretations for different individuals across different fields. The ambiguity of vulnerability is reflected in three aspects: the lack of a unified conceptualization of vulnerability, the controversy raised by the notion of “vulnerable population,” and the multiple types of vulnerability.

2.1.1 Multiple conceptualizations of vulnerability

Vulnerability originates from the Latin word *vulnerabilis*, which means to wound (Snyman, 2015). Over the past few decades, the notion of vulnerability has been innovatively adopted in various fields ranging from poverty and school bullying to economic crisis and environmental hazards. In common parlance, vulnerability is used negatively, meaning a state of being susceptible to adverse conditions (Spiers, 2000). For instance, Asbjornslett and Rausand (1999) provide a straightforward definition, highlighting that vulnerability serves as “the properties of a production system...that may weaken or limit its ability to endure threats and survive accidental events that originate both within and outside the system boundaries” (p. 220). This definition suggests that vulnerability is related to a system’s lack of resilience to internal and external risks. In sustainability science, Turner et al. (2003) define vulnerability as “the degree to which a system, subsystem, or system component is likely to experience harm due to exposure to a hazard, either a perturbation or stress/stressor” (p. 8074). In environmental science, Cutter et al. (2012) state that vulnerability to environmental hazards “means the potential for loss” (p. 242). Exploring nursing practice, Sellman (2005) notes that vulnerability is “part of the human condition” in which “we are never free from the

possibility of being harmed” (p. 3). In addition, Cops and Pleysier (2011) refer to vulnerability as “the perception of exposure to danger, a loss of control over the situation and a perceived inadequate capacity to resist the direct and indirect consequences of victimization” (p. 59). All these framings of vulnerability emphasize negative connotations of vulnerability, suggesting that it is an unpleasant and undesirable state in which specific actions need to be taken to reduce or diminish its negative influences on various economic, social, and cultural systems.

However, vulnerability has also been frequently cited as a construct which is conducive to human growth and development. For instance, through a secondary analysis of the data drawn from an ethnographic study on female nurse academics, Glass and Davis (2004) recast vulnerability as “an enabling state” through which uplifting changes (e.g., a greater level of resilience) can be made. They argue that vulnerability serves as “a mobilizing force that provides the momentum to reach a level of empowerment” (p. 90). Drawing on a dimensional analysis of nurses’ vulnerability, Davenport and Hall (2011) conclude that vulnerability has an empowering effect on nurses. Reflecting on her experience as an early career feminist researcher, Matsuoka (2017) argues for “embracing vulnerability” as a way to foster personal growth and professional development. Bartz et al. (2017) contend that managers’ vulnerability is an essential attribute. By openly disclosing their vulnerability (e.g., acknowledging that they do not have the solutions to all the problems and welcoming criticism from the staff), managers can foster innovation and loyalty among the staff

members and establish healthy and sustainable manager-staff relationship based on equality and trust.

The literature reviewed above suggests that the notion of vulnerability needs to be approached with great care. While there are compelling cases in which vulnerability should be decreased or even avoided, there is also strong evidence that vulnerability can promote human growth and development. Focusing on the negative or the positive side of vulnerability might obscure the differences among various types of vulnerability (Cole, 2016). In this study, vulnerability is framed as having both negative and positive forms or, in Jackson's (2018) words, "having both benign and malignant aspects" (p. 234). While experiencing more vulnerability to social injustice than others is clearly negative, being vulnerable to an unknown field of inquiry creates a space for innovation and growth.

2.1.2 The "vulnerable population"

The ambiguity of vulnerability is also attributable to the controversy raised by the notion of "vulnerable population". Despite our quest to be autonomous and independent, it is apparent that all individuals are limited in their abilities to reduce vulnerability (e.g., Gordon-Bouvier, 2019; Mackenzie et al., 2014; McLeod, 2012; Prinsloo & Slade, 2016; Sellman, 2005). We are particularly vulnerable during infancy when we are dependent on our parents' care. We are vulnerable to diseases, injuries, and even deaths throughout our lives. As social beings, we are vulnerable to marginalization, alienation, and stigmatization due to the multifarious conflicts between different cultural groups. In times of economic crisis, we are vulnerable to

poverty, bankruptcy, and crimes due to the lack of resources available to get through our plight. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that we are never free from the possibility of being harmed, as vulnerability constitutes “a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition” (Fineman, 2008, p. 8). However, humans do not uniformly perceive their vulnerability, and the degrees to which they could withstand vulnerability vary significantly. Some may perceive themselves as vulnerable, while others may not. Hence, the notion of “vulnerable population”, which has been widely used in discussions about politics and social planning, raises controversy (Fineman, 2008; Vasas, 2005).

Traditionally, the notion of “vulnerable population” has been used by policymakers and social workers to label those physically or socioeconomically disadvantaged people (e.g., asylum seekers, sex workers, homeless people, disabled people, children without access to education, and the underemployed) who are incapable of defending themselves in highly harsh situations (Brown, 2011; Brunila et al., 2016). As a normal and ethical practice, multiple forms of social intervention and professional assistance (e.g., a special mentoring class for at-risk young people) are provided to these marginalized groups to enhance their adaptability and resilience in the face of adverse conditions (Brown, 2011; Furedi, 2013).

However, the notion of “vulnerable population” has several discernible pitfalls. In particular, it presupposes the existence of specific social groups that are “invulnerable”, which seems to undermine the claim that vulnerability is a universal condition of being a human (Fineman, 2008). Meanwhile, while policymakers and social workers tend to place

interventions for “vulnerable populations” at the center of their moral obligations, members of a “vulnerable population” may not like being labeled as “the vulnerable”. Some of them even consider external interventions as an insult to their self-esteem and hence, resist relief mechanisms of any kind (Brown, 2014; Brunila et al., 2016; Furedi, 2004). In some circumstances, labeling certain social groups as “vulnerable populations” may end up exacerbating their experiences of vulnerability, resulting in persistent “self-stigmatization” that threatens their self-esteem and confidence (Angel & Vatne, 2017; Vasas, 2005).

In the field of nursing, Spiers (2000) advocates incorporating etic and emic perspectives into analyses of vulnerability. The etic perspective sees vulnerability as conditioned by many risk factors that are observable and measurable. In other words, whether one should be labeled as “the vulnerable” must be decided by socially appointed experts and professionals through evaluating their capacity to function well amidst adverse conditions. For those judged as “the vulnerable”, social interventions and assistance are deemed desirable. On the contrary, the emic perspective sees vulnerability as determined by the person who experiences it. From this perspective, whether one is vulnerable depends on how they perceive the risk and evaluate their capacity to cope with it. One may not experience vulnerability if they feel confident enough in coping with the risk. In this regard, vulnerability should be understood as “an experiential quality of life” influenced by personal values, knowledge, and beliefs (Spiers, 2000, p. 716).

In this study, I tried to avoid labeling university EFL teachers directly as a “vulnerable population” given the potential controversies raised by this notion. However, since vulnerability is an “embodied and embedded human condition” (Gordon-Bouvier, 2019, p. 165), I do not want to deny the vulnerable nature of the university EFL teaching profession. Indeed, I argue that vulnerability is universal across different professions. However, the sources and characteristics of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability may differ from those of other professions. Understanding the specificity of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability can help us capture the complex nature of their professional practice. Meanwhile, as informed by Spiers (2000), I believe that views from outside the university EFL teaching profession (e.g., mass media) should not form the sole basis upon which knowledge about EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability is constructed. The views held by frontline EFL academics about their professional vulnerability should also be given equal prominence. Based on these reasons, I propose the first research question (i.e., How do university EFL teachers understand the notion of professional vulnerability?) in order to understand EFL teachers’ genuine feelings about their professional vulnerability and to examine if external interventions or assistance should be provided to them without threatening their self-esteem.

2.1.3 Different types of vulnerability

The ambiguity of vulnerability is also highlighted by a cohort of scholars committed to distinguishing various types of vulnerability based on their different sources and characteristics (see Table 2.1). As stated above, while vulnerability is an inherent human

condition, it has a variety of forms and sources (Gordon-Bouvier, 2019). For instance, Asbjornslett and Rausand (1999) distinguish internal vulnerability from external vulnerability. Internal vulnerability is related to “threats within the physical boundaries of the system”, such as outdated managerial techniques and the breakdown of equipment, while the external vulnerability is related to “external threats” (p. 220) such as economic crisis and backward transportation. They further argue that analyzing internal and external vulnerability can improve a system’s resilience and robustness to external threats.

Angel (2010) distinguishes objective vulnerability from subjective vulnerability. Objective vulnerability emerges when the external demands surpass a person’s available resources as visible to everyone, while subjective vulnerability emerges when the persons in question feel that their resources are scarce or cannot be harnessed effectively. Objective vulnerability does not necessarily lead to subjective vulnerability if the person feels strong and competent enough to survive the plight (Angel & Vatne, 2017). Therefore, vulnerability can be understood as a self-experienced construct: people with solid self-efficacy are less likely to experience a sense of vulnerability than those with weak self-efficacy, even when the vulnerable situation is objective.

In her study of secondary school teachers’ experience with a government-mandated reform, Lasky (2004) identifies two overarching categories of vulnerability that teachers foreground in the way they talk about vulnerability: structural vulnerability and relational vulnerability. The structural vulnerability has to do with the implementation of reforms and schooling

conditions such as course scheduling and ethnic composition of the student body, while relational vulnerability, which has to do with the relation dynamics between people, particularly how teachers develop and maintain trustful relationships with the students. This distinction, however, seems to ignore internal factors that could lead to teacher vulnerability, such as misconceptions about the reform and inadequate professional knowledge.

Mackenzie et al. (2014) provide a nuanced and systematic taxonomy of vulnerability (i.e., inherent, situational, and pathogenic) based on its sources. Inherent vulnerability is intrinsic to human beings. It is embedded in our corporeality and social connections. Thus, we are all inherently vulnerable to precarious circumstances such as illness. Situational vulnerability is context-specific. It is contingent upon the social, cultural, political, and economic situations of the individuals or particular social groups. For instance, people from affluent countries where the infrastructures and social welfare systems are in good conditions maybe more adaptable to natural disasters than those from poor countries. Pathogenic vulnerability is engendered by dysfunctional or abusive interpersonal and social relationships that are embedded in our social lives. It can also arise when the endeavor to ameliorate one's vulnerability ends up exacerbating their vulnerability.

The three types of vulnerability are not entirely distinct from each other. Indeed, they can be mutually influenced. For instance, one's health conditions (inherent) might be affected by their socio-economic status (situational), and good physical conditions (inherent) may, in turn, facilitate one's achievement of higher socioeconomic status (situational).

In addition, Mackenzie et al. (2014) propose “dispositional vulnerability” and “occurrent vulnerability” as two different states of vulnerability. For instance, all human beings are dispositionally vulnerable to natural disasters. However, whether one is occurrently vulnerable to natural disasters or not is influenced by various inherent and situational factors, such as their physical conditions, economic status, geographical locations, and rescuing mechanisms. In other words, vulnerability can be framed either as a propensity or as a result of such propensity. This distinction serves to determine whether immediate actions should be taken to ameliorate the detrimental impact that vulnerability has on a person at the moment.

Table 2.1 Different types of vulnerability

Asbjornslett & Rausand (1999)	Internal vulnerability	
	External vulnerability	
Angel (2010)	Objective vulnerability	
	Subjective vulnerability	
Lasky (2004)	Structural vulnerability	
	Relational vulnerability	
Mackenzie et al. (2014)	Sources	Inherent vulnerability
		Situational vulnerability
		Pathogenic vulnerability
	States	Dispositional vulnerability
		Occurrent vulnerability

The various vulnerabilities discussed above indicate that vulnerability is such a complex and ambiguous concept that there is a lack of universally agreed-upon criteria to identify its sources, states, scope, and influences on human experiences. It also indicates the absence of a ready-made model that can be used to distinguish various vulnerabilities experienced by university EFL teachers. A reasonable solution to this problem seems to be locating the study in a specific cultural context and constructing a new model that can well capture the characteristics of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability in that context. This is why I choose to adopt the qualitative multiple case study approach in this study.

2.1.4 Summary

The literature reviewed thus far suggests that vulnerability remains an under-theorized concept. There is a lack of a unified conceptualization of the role that vulnerability plays in human lives, what constitutes a “vulnerable population”, and how to distinguish various vulnerabilities. Therefore, this concept needs to be further explored.

First, as one of the most fundamental parts of human experiences, vulnerability can be understood as an ontological state of being susceptible to adverse conditions. It is embedded in the interaction between individual attributes and the settings (cultural, environmental, historical, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic) (Lasky, 2004).

Second, the notion of vulnerability needs to be approached with care. Despite its explicit connection with negativity, vulnerability has a positive side. In many circumstances, it

encompasses chances for empowerment, growth, and development. Therefore, we need to develop an objective view of vulnerability.

Third, the notion of “vulnerable population” is contentious since labeling certain social groups as “vulnerable populations” risks the danger of stigmatizing them and reinforcing their experiences of vulnerability. Nevertheless, this does not mean that social interventions with those who are in vulnerable positions unnecessary. Social interventions do play an instrumental role in enhancing certain groups’ resilience in the face of vulnerability. A desirable approach to vulnerability thus is to combine emic perspectives (the perspectives of individuals experiencing vulnerability) with etic perspectives (the perspectives of external organizations assessing the vulnerability of individuals who are in plight) to make informed decisions about how to cope with vulnerability.

Finally, vulnerability has diverse sources, states, and characteristics due to its complexity and ambiguity. It is conditioned by various internal and external factors. This makes it challenging to construct a universal model of vulnerability that can be applied to different contexts. Hence, it seems more reasonable that a specific model is constructed to describe the specificity of vulnerability experienced by individuals in a specific context.

2.2 Conceptualizing teachers’ professional vulnerability

Teaching involves a range of technical matters as it is “a certain and linear process within which knowledge is transmitted more or less directly from teacher to student by following a

fixed and scientifically predetermined sequence of instructions” (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 97).

With the growing emphasis on quality education and professionalization of the teaching force, it has become commonplace to presume that those technical matters of teaching, such as instructional skills and subject matter knowledge, figure largely in the ultimate improvement of education. Over the past few decades, this presumption has been reinforced by a plethora of research work aimed at exploring the knowledge and skills required for teachers to carry out effective teaching and promote student learning. However, teaching is about more than technical matters. It is a complex and uncertain process that should be examined from teachers’ biographical experiences in the local context (Kelchtermans, 1993). When asked about their professional practice, teachers often refer to situations where they are vulnerable to multiple challenges and risks inherent in the pedagogical process and their relationships with different stakeholders.

Geert Kelchtermans is one of the earliest pioneers in exploring the vulnerability of teachers. His initial interest in teacher vulnerability began from his analysis of the professional experiences of ten Belgium primary school teachers (Kelchtermans, 1993). Adopting a biographical perspective, he found that vulnerability was a recurring theme in teachers’ narrative construction of their career stories. Several sources of professional vulnerability were identified, such as the judgment of the outside world, extra community services, and low self-efficacy. Following Kelchtermans (1993), there has been a growing interest in professional vulnerability as a significant part of teacher practice, as clearly evidenced by the ever-increasing number of publications on this subject (e.g., Cutri & Whiting, 2015; Dale &

Frye, 2009; Gao, 2008, 2011; Gao & Yuan, 2021; Jackson, 2018; Kelchtermans, 1996, 1999, 2005, 2009; Knowles, 2014; Lasky, 2005; Ponte & Twomey, 2014; Song, 2016; White, 2011; Yuan et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2018). The following sections elaborate on three theoretical perspectives on teacher vulnerability that might shed light upon its complexity and close relationship with the context.

2.2.1 Open vulnerability vs. Protective vulnerability

Lasky (2005) contends that vulnerability is “a fluid state of being that can be influenced by the way people perceive their situation as it interacts with their identity, beliefs, values, and sense of competence” (p. 901). What she implies is that vulnerability is a dynamic state mediated by human cognition. Based on her study of Canadian secondary school teachers’ experience with an educational reform, Lasky (2005) unpacks the multifaceted nature of teacher vulnerability. In particular, teachers may experience “protective/inefficacious vulnerability” when contextual factors such as educational reforms put their professionalism at stake. With “protective vulnerability,” teachers develop strong feelings of insecurity and inferiority. They feel that they are incapable of safeguarding the favorable workplace conditions (e.g., respect from the students). To maintain their authority and self-esteem, they are inclined to close themselves to others by concealing their genuine emotions. They may also feel reluctant to share their own vulnerable experiences with others. This closed stance towards vulnerability may spawn relationships that are “distant and/or conflict-laden” (Shapiro, 2010, p. 619). On the contrary, teachers experience “open/willing vulnerability” when they feel safe enough to endure embarrassment and take risks. In this situation, teachers

willingly open themselves up to the feedback from colleagues, administrators, parents, and students (Knowles, 2014). They are emotionally available to others and engage with others' emotional work (Cutri & Whiting, 2015). They may also attend to others' vulnerable experiences and willingly share their own. This open stance towards vulnerability is conducive to establishing trustful interpersonal relationships that are crucial for improved teacher performance and self-efficacy.

Lasky's framework is also adopted by Song (2016). In her study on the vulnerable professional experiences of Korean EFL teachers in teaching study-abroad returnee students, Song (2016) discovers that some teachers experience "open vulnerability" by contesting the publicly held image of teachers as all-knowing persons and demystifying the returnee students' language proficiency. Through analyzing the students' learning needs, these teachers manage to establish an empathetic relationship with their students. In contrast, other teachers evince "protective vulnerability" in the form of anxiety about their language proficiency and discomfort about speaking English to returnee students who demonstrate higher language proficiency than them.

Here, the notion of "open vulnerability" implies an unintended benefit that vulnerability brings to individual teachers and their practice. Opening themselves up to vulnerability involves showing their weaknesses and limitations, sharing their failures with others, and expressing their genuine emotions to the public. It means letting others see that they are not perfect, are not in full control of the situation, and make mistakes occasionally (Shapiro,

2010). By displaying their vulnerability, teachers are telling others that they are trustworthy persons who willingly share what might otherwise embarrass them (Bloom, 2020). Therefore, “open vulnerability” can enhance teachers’ connections and rapport with their significant others (Romney & Holland, 2020).

In the field of teacher education, the principles underlying “open vulnerability” are valued by many scholars for their great potential in promoting teacher learning (e.g., Gilson, 2014; Jackson, 2018; Ponte & Twomey, 2014). For instance, Ponte and Twomey (2014) suggest that acknowledging their vulnerability related to supervising student teachers allows some mentor teachers to reflect on the appropriateness of their supervisory strategies. Similar views are held by Gilson (2014), who advocates embracing “epistemic vulnerability” as a “precondition for learning”:

Epistemic vulnerability begins with being open to not knowing...It is an openness to being wrong and venturing one’s ideas, beliefs, and feelings nonetheless...Epistemic vulnerability entails the ability to put oneself in and learn from situations in which one is the unknowing, foreign and perhaps uncomfortable party (p. 94).

Gilson (2014) notes that epistemic vulnerability “is more appropriately demanded of those who are relatively privileged precisely because they have likely not already found themselves in situations in which they are the unknowing, uncomfortable, and the nondominant party” (p. 311). For instance, when the perspectives and experiences of the administration are normalized in a university, the perspectives held by front-line teachers tend to be ignored or

misrecognized by the administration. Nevertheless, when the administration embraces “epistemic vulnerability,” they may discover the limitations and weaknesses of their own perspectives and experiences, realize that they are not perfect in managing the university, and take the perspectives and experiences of front-line teachers into account when making managerial decisions. In this case, developing “epistemic vulnerability” contributes to the improvement of university management.

The open stance towards vulnerability taken by Lasky (2005) and Gilson (2014) has important implications for teachers: the scope of teacher knowledge is never broad and inclusive enough to cover all the possible perspectives. Therefore, instead of taking an authoritarian position and directly passing information to the students, teachers should acknowledge their limitations, learn to reflect on their limitations, seek honest feedback from others, and consistently refine their knowledge structure (Jackson, 2018; Oyler & Becker, 1997; Simmons & Thompson, 2008; Teng, 2020). As Fels (2004) puts it, teachers should permit and welcome “the cracks that are in themselves generative emergent action/sites of learning, illumination, recognition” (p. 75). For this reason, many scholars accentuate the value of incorporating the teaching of vulnerability into teacher education programs (Cutri & Whiting, 2015; Dale & Frye, 2009; Zhu et al., 2018).

2.2.2 Vulnerability as a structural condition of being a teacher

As mentioned in earlier sections, there is an explicit lack of academic definitions of teacher vulnerability. Many scholars (e.g., Cutri & Whiting, 2015; Emerald & Carpenter, 2015; Gray

et al., 2017; Lasky, 2005; Oyler & Becker, 1997; Shapiro, 2010; Song, 2016; Zembylas, 2003) tend to conceptualize teacher vulnerability simply as an emotional state that is subject to the dynamic interplay of teacher identities, beliefs, and work context. For instance, Lasky (2005) argues that teacher vulnerability is “a multidimensional, multifaceted emotional experience that individuals can feel in an array of contexts” (p. 901). In particular, “open vulnerability” is associated with positive emotions (e.g., happiness, satisfaction, and confidence), while “protective vulnerability” is imbued with negative emotions (e.g., disempowerment, frustration, and defenselessness).¹

In his early studies, Kelchtermans (1993, 1996) also conceptualize teacher vulnerability as a series of emotions that individual teachers develop in their daily professional practices. However, he dismissed this perspective in his later work, arguing that conceptualizing teacher vulnerability as an emotional experience is “a claim without much arguments, nor any positioning in relation to other theoretical attempts to conceptualize emotions or emotional experiences” (Kelchtermans, 2005, p. 998). In other words, while vulnerability triggers intense emotions among teachers, it is not a type of emotion or an emotional state. He reframes vulnerability as “a structural condition teachers find themselves in”:

There is more to teaching and being a teacher than technically linking the means...Since the relationship with students is an ethical one, the teacher never has

¹ Lasky (2005) uses the term of vulnerability literally in her interview questions for data collection (e.g., when you hear professional vulnerability, what does it mean to you?). Kelchtermans (2005) notes that this approach incorporates the common-sense understandings of “vulnerability” (e.g., vulnerability is about negative emotions) into her conceptual framework, thus “blurring the status of vulnerability as either a first or second-order concept and resulting in conceptual vagueness” (p. 998).

full control over the situation, nor over the outcomes of his/her action...The “pedagogical” relationship can never be fully controlled, nor can one be sure that one’s actions will convey the meaning they were intended to have for the students (p. 998)

This claim suggests that the teaching profession has a moral or ethical dimension: teachers should have a moral responsibility for the students entrusted in their care. Although teachers need to influence students (e.g., helping them to learn, facilitating their personal development), this can never be a purely instrumental relationship because those students are human beings and, by definition individually different and unpredictable. To safeguard this inter-human relationship, teachers need to treat each student fairly by taking their personal characters into account. However, this pedagogical belief about doing justice to individual students is often contested by performance managers who promulgate standardized effective teaching methods. This can evoke feelings of vulnerability among the teachers, which is how they “live in their job situation” (Kelchtermans, 1996, p. 307).

Conceptualizing professional vulnerability as “a structural condition” of the teaching profession allows us to understand vulnerability as a destabilizing factor defining what it means to be a teacher in an uncertain, unpredictable, and intractable work environment. It is consistently featured in teachers’ confrontation with the evolving social and educational ecology (Glass & Davis, 2004). And it dovetails with Bullough (2005), who contends that “to teach is to be vulnerable...to be vulnerable is to be capable of being hurt” (p. 23).

Kelchtermans (2009) further argues that professional vulnerability is made up of three elements: First, vulnerability lies in the fact that teachers are not in full control of their workplace conditions, most of which (e.g., educational reforms) are centrally imposed on them. These conditions are influenced by performativity, which establishes the paradigms of what is thought to be “good” teachers and how “good teaching” should be carried out (Ball, 2003, 2012a, 2012b). Second, vulnerability is reflected in the limited degree to which teachers can prove their effectiveness by claiming that the students’ learning achievements are the direct result of their pedagogical efforts. This explains why many teachers consider the quality control system, focusing mainly on test scores, as an unfair evaluation of their work. The third element of teacher vulnerability is that teachers often do not have a firm basis to justify the decisions they make for the students and their learning. While the capacity to justify and evaluate their actions is a crucial dimension of teacher professionalism, it is often contested by significant others, even if teachers could relate their actions to specific arguments of “good” education.

Conceiving vulnerability as a structural condition of the teaching profession moves the discussion of teacher vulnerability beyond the experiential level of teachers’ daily practice and allows us to examine the role of vulnerability within the broader socio-cultural context. It highlights that vulnerability is a problematic situation that individual members of the teaching profession necessarily encounter and endure throughout their careers. Vulnerability, in this sense, is not an emotion. It is emotionally charged as it can provoke intense emotions among teachers, making teaching “an inherently emotionally fraught endeavor” (Song, 2022, p. 2).

2.2.3 Professional vulnerability and the context

Teachers do not naturally feel vulnerable, as vulnerability results from a meaningful interaction between individual teachers and the context (Angel & Vatne, 2017). Vulnerability reflects the relational and social aspects of a particular context. By context, I mean “the physical, institutional environment of the school” (Kelchtermans, 1993, p. 444) as well as the broader social, cultural, and historical world.

Jackson’s (2018) work is informative here. She adopts a relational view on vulnerability, contending that the extent to which a teacher feels vulnerable is not pre-determined. Rather it is influenced by a complex network of interpersonal and institutional relations. Specifically, she argues that not all academics are equally vulnerable since how one experiences vulnerability depends on their subject positions in the community and how they are related to other community members. Thus, it is conceivable that those at the lower levels of the power hierarchy might experience greater vulnerability than those at the upper levels. For instance, the vulnerability of non-tenured academics does not grow out of a natural order. It derives from their low status in higher education, wherein they feel insecure, marginalized, and underrepresented in the decision-making process.

Institutional cultures and social expectations can also influence teacher vulnerability. Failing to meet external demands can add to teachers’ experiences of professional vulnerability. For instance, White (2011) reports the stories of three teacher-researchers who are vulnerable to the backlash and recrimination from their colleagues due to their engagement with research

and publications. He suggests that this phenomenon might be attributed to a faculty culture that assumes teachers who are “conspicuously successful” as a threat to the status quo of other community members (White, 2011, p. 331). There are also a few studies examining how teachers in Eastern contexts (e.g., mainland China and Hong Kong) experience vulnerability as they struggle with conflicting social and cultural expectations of the teaching profession. For instance, drawing on the messages posted in an online teachers’ community, Gao (2008) discovers that the “teacher-reverence” tradition aggravates Chinese teachers’ vulnerability. On the one hand, this cultural tradition emphasizes showing reverence to teachers for their authority in knowledge impartation and moral integrity. On the other hand, it puts teachers under consistent pressure to project culturally expected images (e.g., an all-knowing and self-disciplined person), rendering them vulnerable to public scrutiny and recrimination. In another study, Gao (2011) examines the social criticism about the “falling” language standards in Hong Kong. He notes that language teachers in Hong Kong are vulnerable to high social expectations of the language teaching profession, particularly regarding their language proficiency. In addition, Zhu et al. (2018) demonstrate that Chinese student teachers are expected by their mentor teachers to engage in “teaching supportive activities” during the practicum. This situation deprives student teachers of the power to enrich their practical knowledge and adds to their sense of professional vulnerability.

All these studies suggest that, as an inherent characteristic of the teaching profession, vulnerability is grounded in multiple professional discourses that prescribe who teachers are, how they are expected to perform, and what qualities they need to possess. In other words,

social images and expectations of the teaching profession influence how individual teachers experience professional vulnerability. This is a valuable perspective for examining teacher vulnerability against the backdrop of increased performativity in higher education, where teachers' performances come under the scrutiny of university authorities and are gauged in terms of their productivity and efficiency (Ball, 2012b).

2.2.4 Summary

Based on the literature reviewed above, a working definition of professional vulnerability is provided here to serve as a hermeneutic tool for understanding the complex and conflicted nature of teacher practice: professional vulnerability is a professional state in which teachers are subject to multiple challenges and risks in their situated context.

First, informed by Kelchtermans (2005), I take the position that vulnerability is a professional state consistently shaping teachers' professional practice. It is an inherent aspect of being a teacher. All teachers, regardless of their demographic attributes, are necessarily influenced by professional vulnerability. They must endure this passivity inherent in their professional practice, and there is no escape from it. Hence, "to teach is to be vulnerable ... to be vulnerable to be capable of being hurt" (Bullough, 2005, p. 23).

Second, while professional vulnerability is not an emotion, it evokes intense emotions among teachers. For some teachers, vulnerability brings them a strong sense of insecurity, posing a threat to their status quo and self-esteem. As a result, they may conceal their genuine

emotions, refrain from risk-taking, and disengage from empathetic dialogues. While for other teachers, experiencing vulnerability means acknowledging their limitations, displaying their genuine emotions, and sharing unpleasant experiences with others. In this regard, vulnerability contributes to personal and professional development.

Third, informed by Jackson (2018), I hold that teachers do not naturally experience vulnerability. Their professional vulnerability depends on their relationship with contextual affordances and constraints. The context keeps changing, and it can be assumed that professional vulnerability is changing too. Therefore, vulnerability is a dynamic state. Adequate knowledge about teachers' situated contexts is vital for properly understanding their professional vulnerability.

However, conceiving vulnerability as a professional state that teachers find themselves in is not sufficient for us to capture how teachers in a specific context perceive and cope with their professional vulnerability. Nor can it adequately explain why some teachers tend to persist in the face of vulnerability and are more competent than others in coping with their vulnerability. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss teacher agency, an essential quality enabling teachers to cope with their professional vulnerability (Lasky, 2005; Goller & Harteis, 2017).

2.3 Professional vulnerability and teacher agency

Teachers are inclined to enact their agency to cope with their professional vulnerability (Lasky, 2005). For instance, they may reflect on their strengths and weaknesses before taking

actions. They may resort to wider professional networks for work-related feedback and suggestions. They may also draw on their beliefs and past work experiences to fulfill the tasks they feel responsible for as teachers (Wiggins, 2011). Agency serves as the basis upon which teachers perceive and cope with their professional vulnerability.

2.3.1 Agency and context

While agency can be simply conceptualized as self-initiated human actions or the capacity to take actions based on personal beliefs and judgments (Goller & Harteis, 2017; Turnbull, 2005), the concept *per se* remains contentious. In the past few decades, there have been hot debates in sociology over the relationship between human agency and structure. In line with the individualistic tradition in the Western culture, agency has been described as the capacity of human beings for autonomous actions independent of social structures (Calhoun, 2002).

Advocates of this view claim that agency resides in people who are “self-motivated, self-directing, rational subject(s), capable of exercising individual agency” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 2). Therefore, agency is a sign of freedom from social constraints. An alternative view considers agency as mechanistic response to external forces that are beyond human sphere of control. Thus, agency is understood as a construct determined by external forces, while the *self* as merely “a repository and conduit for them” (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175).

Both views have come under attack by academia for being overly individualistic (e.g., Usher & Edwards, 1994) or socially determined (e.g., Archer, 2000). Indeed, many scholars have sought to develop a dialectical approach towards agency (e.g., Ahearn, 2001; Biesta et al.,

2015; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Layder, 1997). These scholars argue that dichotomizing agency and structure is an inherently flawed approach which ignores the reciprocity between the two constructs. Ahearn (2001) defines agency as the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112), and in this regard, individuals are “neither free agents nor completely socially determined products” (p. 120). A more recent definition of agency is provided by Biesta and Tedder (2007), who, informed by pragmatist philosophers John Dewey and Georgy Herbert, posit that agency is achieved through human interaction with a particular context-for-action:

This concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment...that the achievement of agency depends on the availability of economic, cultural, and social resources within a particular ecology...that the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural “factors” as they come together in a particular and, in a sense, always unique situations. (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137).

This view brings to the fore the close relationship between agency and context. In particular, agency is not a “capacity” or “power” that humans are born with and use to cope with vulnerability. It is a construct that humans achieve through engaging with the ecological conditions in a given context-for-action. Thus, priority is given to the context wherein various human activities occur. Lasky (2005) contends that “what individuals believe, and how individuals think and act is always shaped by cultural, historical, and social structures that are reflected in mediational tools such as literature, art, media, language, technology, and

numeracy systems” (p. 900), indicating that agency is subject to multiple sociocultural and sociopolitical forces. This view is supported by a plethora of studies investigating how teachers’ abilities to make free and independent judgements in relation to their professional practice are constrained by contemporary education ideologies such as performativity, accountability, and quality (Sanger, 2012; Sullivan et al., 2021; Wilkins et al., 2012). Conceptualizing agency as achieved through human interaction with the context thus contributes to exploring how university EFL teachers cope with their professional vulnerability in the shifting higher educational context.

2.3.2 Agency and temporality

Agency is influenced by temporality. Many scholars (e.g., Biesta et al., 2015; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Flaherty, 2003; Hitlin & Elder, 2007) contend that social interactions have temporal orientations and that the “self” is a temporal phenomenon. In an attempt to address the “one-sidedness” of existing theories of agency that focus on either the past (e.g., Bourdieu, 1997) or the future (e.g., Giddens, 1984), Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define agency as:

The temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (p. 970).

This definition brings to the fore three constitutive elements of agency, namely iteration (routine), projectivity (purpose), and practical evaluation (judgement). Iteration refers to “the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). It gives primacy to one’s ability to select among habitual, tacit, and often taken-for-granted schemas of actions embedded in their past experiences and to implement them in the present context for action. It is also manifested in attributes such as personality and dispositions developed over one’s early life experiences (Layder, 1997).

The second element, projectivity, denotes “the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). It involves one’s ability to reformulate their patterns of thought and action in light of foreseeable challenges and risks in the future. It is targeted at and motivated by one’s short-term or long-term goals (Giddens, 1984). Goals are one’s perception of “what kind of person one wants to be or how one’s environment (e.g., the workplace) should look in the future” (Goller & Harteis, 2017, p. 8). One example of projectivity is teachers’ expectation of their future career, which mediates how they respond to present situations (Kelchtermans, 2009).

The third element, practical-evaluation, refers to “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). It is located in the joint position between iteration and projectivity and can only be acted out here and now through individuals’ judgement of and engagement with present situations. It involves problematizing their current experiences in response to possible contingencies. To a certain degree, practical-evaluation overlaps with the notion of “pragmatic agency” (Hitlin & Elder, 2007), requiring individuals to focus on immediate surroundings and thereby make choices in emergent situations.

While the three elements operate simultaneously in a given action, they do not influence the action equally. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) metaphorically describe this phenomenon as “a chordal triad of agency” in which iteration, projectivity, and practical-evaluation “resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones” (p. 972). This means that, depending on how one responds to situational exigencies, one temporal orientation might be given the primary tone while the other two secondary tones in a single action.

Combining the ecological view of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) with the notion of temporality (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), we may conceptualize the achievement of agency as a temporal process in which individuals’ interaction with the context is mediated by their past experiences, oriented towards their future goals, and aimed at addressing their present needs. Conceptualizing agency in this way might be helpful for this study. For one thing, it

facilitates a contextualized understanding of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability, particularly how they perceive and cope with professional vulnerability through interacting with the context. For another, it allows us to capture the influences that past (personal and professional) experiences, future development goals, and present situations have on university EFL teachers' experiences of professional vulnerability.

2.3.3 Teacher agency

Agency is an essential dimension of teacher professionalism (Biesta et al., 2015). As “agents of change” (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 192), teachers are not only reflexive and creative but also capable of navigating their work through various structural enablements and constraints. A review of the literature reveals two major aspects of teacher agency relevant to our understanding of teachers' experience of professional vulnerability: teacher agency as action and teacher agency as cognition.

2.3.3.1 Teacher agency as action

Teacher agency manifests in various actions teachers take to maintain routines, solve immediate problems, and achieve future goals (Robinson, 2012). Although agency is often associated with positive actions, it can also be manifested in negative actions. Osborn et al. (1997) suggest that “negative” agency can take multiple forms, such as resistance, conspiratorial mediation, and creative mediation. Pyhältö et al. (2012) contend that, in the context of school reform, teacher agency not only entails proactive actions that comply with the reform requirements but also entails criticism and resistance. In vulnerability literature,

teacher agency is often achieved through “micropolitical actions,” a set of strategies teachers employ to exercise power and safeguard professional interests. According to Hoyle (1982), the school always operates as a political entity where teachers “seek to use their resources of power and influence to further their interests” (Hoyle, 1982, p. 88). Professional interests are those working conditions (e.g., collegiality) that a teacher or a group of teachers consider as necessary and essential for them to do a good job. They matter for teachers and indicate teachers’ values, beliefs, ideologies, and career motivations. Therefore, the decisions made by individual teachers in relation to their pedagogical practice and professional development are value-laden and interest-driven (Blasé, 1988). Teachers experience vulnerability when their professional interests are being threatened or lost. To cope with vulnerability, they resort to “micropolitical actions” to negotiate, safeguard and further their professional interest.

However, teacher agency is not merely achieved through concrete actions within a specific ecological setting. It is also achieved through a cognitive process through which teachers reflect on and make sense of their professional practice in order to decide how to cope with their professional vulnerability. The following section elaborates on the pivotal role that cognition plays in teachers’ achievement of agency.

2.3.3.2 Teacher agency as cognition

Borg (2003) argues that “teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs” (p. 81). This view brings to

the fore the vital role that cognition plays in guiding teachers' decision-making and practice.

In an era of unrelenting educational reforms, cognition (the ability to think) constitutes a central aspect of teachers' achieved agency that enables them to properly respond to the exigencies of their situated context.

Two areas of teacher cognition may provide useful perspectives on how teachers cope with professional vulnerability: beliefs and reflection. First, beliefs are various assumptions, convictions, and insights that individual teachers hold about themselves and their workplace conditions (Farrell & Guz, 2019). The beliefs underlying teacher behavior are idiosyncratic reflections of their past learning, professional, and life experiences (Kelchtermans, 2009). Hence, they operate as a part of the "iterational" dimension of teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2015). Teachers not only hold beliefs about themselves (e.g., their professional goals, professional interests, and strengths and weaknesses) but also about the pedagogical process (e.g., an understanding of language teaching and their relationship with significant others). To some extent, teacher beliefs are value-laden as they reflect teachers' stance towards specific issues related to their professional practice. Teachers may adopt or modify their own beliefs in their daily professional practice to cope with professional vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 2009).

The other important aspect of teacher cognition pertains to reflection. As a cognitive skill, reflection allows teachers to critically examine their abilities to produce target outcomes in relation to context specificity (Goller & Harteis, 2017). It enables teachers to identify sources

of their professional vulnerability, examine the ramifications that vulnerability has on their professional practice, and choose between alternatives in light of their professional “know-how”. Schön (1983) distinguishes “reflection-in-action” from “reflection-on-action”. The former is indicative of the evaluative-practical orientation of teacher agency which involves teachers constantly making sense of an event when it is occurring, while the latter is indicative of the iterational orientation of teacher agency which involves teachers examining an event after its occurrence. Both forms of reflection are important cognitive strategies teachers may employ when coping with their professional vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 2009).

2.4 A tentative conceptual framework of professional vulnerability

Based on the literature reviewed above, I propose a tentative conceptual framework of professional vulnerability (see Figure 1) that may guide this study. Data analyses, however, reveal that this tentative conceptual framework needs refinement, and the refined framework is presented in Chapter 6 as a major contribution of this study.

In this model, professional vulnerability is conceptualized as a professional state in which teachers are subject to multiple challenges and risks. The big circle represents the context wherein teachers experience professional vulnerability. Teachers do not naturally experience vulnerability. Instead, their sense of vulnerability hinges upon their relations with the context (Jackson, 2018). Therefore, it is of vital importance to examine the significant impact that workplace conditions have on teachers’ professional practice.

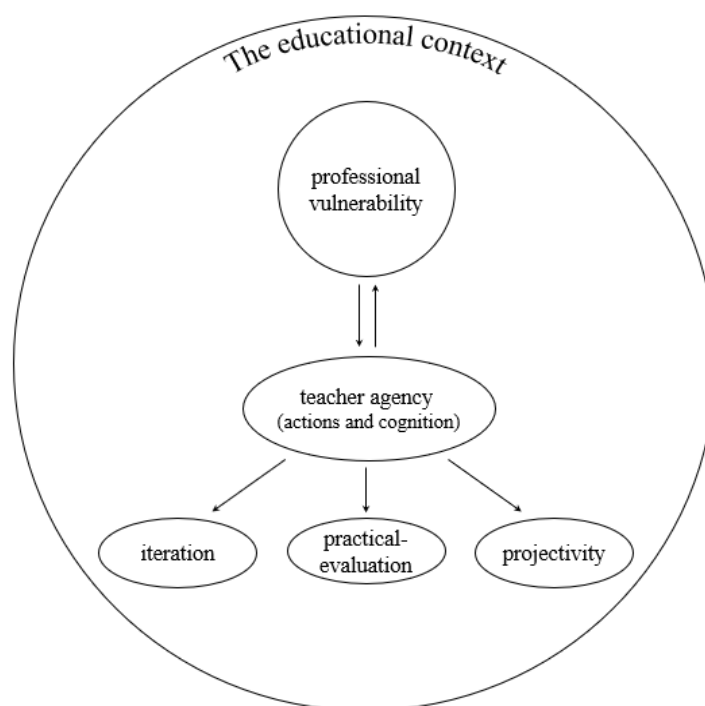


Figure 1. A tentative conceptual framework

Professional vulnerability does not influence teachers' practice in a deterministic way. The bi-directional arrows between professional vulnerability and teacher agency indicate teachers' state of professional vulnerability: a significant sense of professional vulnerability may lead teachers to enact their agency; through enacting their agency, teachers can mediate the impact that vulnerability has on their professional practice.

Teacher agency is not a quality or attribute (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Rather, it is achieved through teachers' dynamic interplay with the context (Biesta et al., 2015). Informed by this view, teacher agency in this study is conceptualized as an ongoing process of coping with professional vulnerability. It is subject to multiple enablements and constraints in the educational context which is represented by the big circle. The process of coping with

professional vulnerability involves taking actions, drawing on personal belief systems, and reflecting on personal practice. It is influenced by one's past experience, aimed at addressing immediate problems, and oriented towards future goals (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

2.5 EFL teachers in higher education

This section reviews the literature on the professional experience of university EFL teachers globally. It comprises three parts: The first part presents a brief account of performativity, a managerial technique shaping the professional practice of university EFL teachers in many countries (e.g., mainland China) in recent years. The aim is to draw a clear picture of university EFL teachers' work environment. The second part outlines four aspects of university EFL teachers' professional work (teaching practice, research practice, power negotiation, and contesting cultural stereotypes) that are subject to enormous challenges. The third part gives an overview of the multiple strategies employed by university EFL teachers to cope with the challenges mentioned in the second part.

Whereas most of the studies cited here are not explicitly located within the framework of vulnerability, they provide valuable insights into the vulnerable nature of the tertiary EFL teaching profession. I also want to make it clear that I do not intend to portray university EFL teachers as a completely vulnerable population with a gloomy career prospect. Indeed, there are worthwhile rationales to acknowledge the constructive role that university EFL teachers play in imparting knowledge, cultivating talents, promoting quality education, and serving national development. Anecdotal evidence (e.g., Ai et al., 2019; Kumazawa, 2011; Stanley,

2013; Syamananda, 2017; Yuan et al., 2020; Zhang, 2013) even suggests that they value such work conditions as flexible work schedules, dialogues with international academics, and opportunities to visit and study in foreign cultures. However, the immense challenges facing higher education mean that many university EFL teachers do not have full control over their workplace conditions. Unpacking these challenges may enable us to capture the complexity of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability.

2.5.1 Understanding performativity

The professional vulnerability of university EFL teachers needs to be understood by reference to the system of performativity, which constitutes one of the most fundamental changes in global higher education over the past few decades. This change has reshaped the nature of higher institutions and reoriented the professional work of university academics towards a demand for maximum productivity.

2.5.1.1 The rise of performativity in higher education

The rise of performativity in higher education is linked in many ways to the ascendancy of neoliberalism that profoundly restructured global economic relations during the 1980s and 1990s (Olssen & Peters, 2005). As a supporting ideology of globalization, neoliberalism entails multiple practices that are “organized around a certain imagination of the ‘market’ as the basis for universalization of market-based social relations” (Shamir, 2008, p. 3). It emphasizes “rationality, scientific objectivity, essentialism and the linear directions of time, thought and development” (Heron, 2008, p. 89). Influenced by neoliberalism, market has

become an important technique that governments adopt to exert control over public sectors such as education (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Knowledge becomes an essential “commodity” for global competition. Education serves as the vehicle for transmitting expertise needed for economic growth (Kenny, 2017). The preparation of talents as an intellectual capital then becomes an increasingly important agenda for countries worldwide (R. Anderson, 2008).

Against this backdrop, higher institutions in many countries (e.g., the UK and Australia) began to stage a number of reforms aimed at optimizing their performance and producing a qualified labor force for the market (Avis, 2005; Jeffrey, 2002; Perryman, 2006; Roberts, 2007). A vital component of the reform package is performativity, which refers to “a technology, a culture, and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition, and change—based on rewards and sanctions” (Ball, 2003, p. 216). As a powerful technology, performativity is now at work at all levels and in all kinds of education (Ball, 2012b). It works in at least three ways. First, “it works as a disciplinary system of judgements, classifications, and targets towards which schools and teachers must strive and against and through which they are evaluated” (Ball, 1998, p. 190). This means that the ethos of performativity is secured by a wide range of measurement and judgement mechanisms, such as target-setting, output comparisons, and surveillance, reflecting a strong orientation towards rationality and objectivity. Within the disciplines of performativity, academics are required to spend increasing amounts of time making themselves accountable and providing performance data (usually related to teaching and research) which institutions leverage to assess their competence.

Second, performativity “provides sign systems which ‘represent’ education in a self-referential and reified form for consumption” (Ball, 1998, p. 190). So its underlying ideology is a quasi-market mechanism, with educational activities “valorized” within a market form. Higher education institutes act as “providers” who must meet the specific needs and preferences of potential “consumers” such as students. Priority is accordingly given to the “productivity” of academics who are quantitatively measured against such performance indicators as instructional hours and research grants. Academics with high “productivity” are considered more valuable than those with low “productivity” (Wilkins et al., 2012).

Third, performativity “resides in the pragmatics of language” (Ball, 1998, p. 190), suggesting that it is realized through performative utterances that influence how academics act and think. Many of the performative utterances are related to institutional management. Such utterances include assessment statements, written rules and regulations, and various discourses that depict one as “excellent” or “unsatisfactory”. It can be argued that performative utterances largely reflect the values and interests of the authority, establish the rules for academic relations, and define what it means to be “qualified” academics.

2.5.1.2 The impact of performativity

Ball (2003) holds that the implementation of performativity leads to a “devolved environment” where greater freedom is given to local authorities (p. 217). Schools and universities are responsible for making themselves different and gaining a competitive edge in pursuing higher international rankings. Simultaneously, through rewards and sanctions,

university managers install a culture of calculation that encourages academics to invest personally in their work, boost their productivity, add value to themselves, and strive for excellence. This contributes to the competitiveness of the “goods” and services that universities produce. Thus, from the vantage point of universities, it is perhaps not difficult to understand why performativity should have become an entrenched form of management.

For some academics, performativity provides “the onto-epistemic framework” through which they understand their worth, compare their outputs, and discipline themselves (Holloway & Brass, 2018, p. 378). The externally imposed standards and targets become part of their professional knowledge (Mulcahy, 2011). In a performative university, academics are expected to respond professionally to the feedback from significant others and make improvements to their work (Arthur, 2009). More importantly, by fulfilling competitive imperatives, academics may develop a sense of accomplishment, leading to improved self-efficacy and professional performance (Leathwood & Read, 2013).

However, the ideology of performativity has become a target of criticism in recent years, with a great attention paid to its adverse impact on academics’ professional commitment, sense of self-worth, and identity construction. Specifically, in a performative work culture, professional judgements might be subverted and replaced by an incessant demand for impression and performance (Ball, 2003). This renders some academics vulnerable to “values schizophrenia”, a potential “splitting” between their own “judgements about ‘good practice’ and the students ‘needs’ and the rigors of performance” (Ball, 2003, p. 221). When this

happens, the academics may experience low self-efficacy and feel less motivated to grow professionally (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Meanwhile, since performativity emphasizes efficiency (i.e., minimizing input/output ratios), academics in some disciplinary areas (e.g., humanities) are more vulnerable to financial cuts and inadequate support due to a perceived lack of practical values in their work (Gao & Zheng, 2018; Oleksiyenko, 2017).

Performativity is also criticized for being “misleadingly objective and hyper-rational” (Ball, 2003, p. 217), as it accords primacy to target-setting and cold calculation while ignoring the complex, hybrid, and humanistic nature of academic work. In a performative work culture, productivity is everything. It is closely related to academics’ appointments, promotions, and contract renewal. Whereas academic work incorporates multiple aspects, many academics have to orient themselves towards those aspects that are most rewarded, such as research publications, in order to survive. They become “self-entrepreneurs” committed to adding values to themselves (Ball, 2012b). Accordingly, the moral aspect of education, such as “making a difference for all students, based on principles of equity” (Kelchtermans et al., 2011, p. 99), and various non-audited yet valuable activities such as mentoring novice teachers tend to be less rewarded or even ignored.

In addition, performativity is characterized by tight control over academics’ professional practices. For instance, through mechanisms of accountability and surveillance, performativity makes all scholarly activities transparent and auditable. It creates a “blame culture” in which academics are vulnerable to blame and sanctions should they fail to meet

the set targets (Avis, 2005). With academics positioned as transmitters of pre-determined content, risk-taking and innovative problem-solving are unlikely to occur. As a result, the space for “creative pedagogy” is shrinking and vanishing (Burnard & White, 2008; Craft & Jeffrey, 2008; Simmons & Thompson, 2008).

To sum up, the entrenchment of performativity in higher education reflects the profound impact neoliberal discourses have on academics’ professional lives. This is a professional reality facing university EFL teachers across different sociocultural contexts. A deep understanding of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability would not be possible without closely examining the performative work culture shaping their professional practice.

2.5.2 The challenges facing university EFL teachers

Given the dominance of performativity in higher education, it can be assumed that EFL teachers are vulnerable to enormous challenges to their professional practice. A cursory review of the literature reveals four significant aspects of university EFL teachers’ professional practice that are fraught with challenges: teaching practice, research practice, power negotiation, and contesting cultural stereotypes.

2.5.2.1 Teaching practice

Effective teaching is the cornerstone of quality higher education (Shin, 2011). The onus is on the teachers to continuously make pedagogical innovations and improve their teaching competences. Pennington and Hoekje (2014) argue that teaching is “naturally the focus of

ELT, and any kind of ELT unit is first and foremost a site of instruction” (p. 165). EFL teaching is different from the teaching of other subjects not only because its content is less hierarchically organized than other subjects but also because it has a greater demand for student-teacher interactions, which is essential for improved student learning (Borg, 2006). Interactions are based on effective teaching methodologies. However, university EFL teachers are normally faced with incongruence between their desirable teaching methodologies and the classroom reality (Nunan, 2003). This seems to hold for those from expanding-circle contexts such as mainland China, where the adoption of new teaching methodologies is often faced with potential resistance from local cultures (e.g., Al Asmari, 2015; Hiep, 2007; Yu, 2001; Zhu, 2003). For instance, Zhang et al. (2020) report that while EFL academics in mainland China generally agree that the teaching of critical thinking should be incorporated into the EFL curriculum, teaching critical thinking in classroom settings may be hampered by the students’ unwillingness to challenge authority. Rao (2002) notes that university students in mainland China may feel unmotivated to participate in communicative activities designed by EFL teachers. He attributes this phenomenon to a raft of intrinsic (e.g., preference for memorization and rote learning as principal acquisition techniques) and extrinsic (e.g., exam backwash and limited access to authentic English beyond classroom settings) factors. Barkhuizen (2009) also lists several other factors behind the students’ unwillingness to communicate, such as “their (the students) lack of English proficiency, not knowing enough about the particular topic, being too shy, lacking confidence” (p. 118).

Meanwhile, university EFL teachers encounter considerable challenges in using educational technologies. Habibi et al. (2019) conducted a sequential exploratory study on 138 EFL teacher educators from three Indonesian universities. Their study shows that, while the majority of EFL teacher educators agree that they need to become the role models for the students to integrate information and communication technologies with instructional activities, their practicing efforts are hindered by limited knowledge of technology-facilitated course design, inadequate peer collaboration, and the troublesome internet connection. Similar findings are reported by Hu and McGrath (2011). In addition, the discrepancy between teaching materials and the classroom reality, insufficient administrative support, and a lack of relevant pedagogical content knowledge also impede university EFL teachers from effectively using educational technologies (Celik 2013; Chen, 2008; Timucin, 2006).

A myriad of other intrapersonal and institutional factors also seem to undermine university EFL teachers' teaching performances. Chen and Goh (2011) point to the lack of confidence in their language proficiency, inadequate pedagogical knowledge, large class size, and insufficient teaching resources as stumbling blocks to effective oral English teaching in some universities in Taiwan. Liu and Xu (2011) indicate that, in mainland China, conflicts between some EFL teachers and the university in terms of how to practice new teaching methodologies can have a detrimental impact on the quality of EFL teaching. In their study, Hui (the teacher participant) espoused the "traditional, authoritarian, knowledge-diffusion model of English language teaching" while the department advocated "a more liberal, egalitarian, and knowledge co-construction model" (p. 592). As Hui was skeptical about the

rationale behind the department's promotion of the new pedagogy, she was marginalized from the learning community organized by the department. Syamananda (2017) suggests that the teaching practice of university EFL teachers in Thailand is hampered by extrinsic factors such as low salary, heavy workload, and the lack of job security. Talbot and Mercer (2018) argue that, apart from several job-related stressors (e.g., administrative tasks), the "pace at which language changes" (p. 419) makes it challenging for university EFL teachers to teach effectively. Morris and King (2018) suggest that student apathy and classroom silence may lead to frustration among foreign EFL teachers in Japanese universities.

All these studies reviewed above indicate multiple challenges facing the enterprise of university EFL teaching. While some challenges are related to personal factors such as motivations, beliefs, and ideologies about what constitute effective EFL teaching, others are related to extrinsic factors that are context-specific and culture-bound.

2.5.2.2 Research practice

Connelly and Ben-Peretz (1980) argue that "professionalism in teaching depends on an inquiry attitude oriented to the canons and procedures of scholarly inquiry" (p. 97). This view highlights the centrality of research activities in establishing the credibility of a discipline and underpinning the practice of those working in that discipline (Pennington & Hoekje, 2014). As Pennington (1992) puts it:

Like doctors, lawyers, engineers, and other professionals, we [ELT teachers] in tertiary education have to accept the need not only to continually upgrade our skills

and to learn new techniques, but also to advance the knowledge base of language learning and teaching. Otherwise, we cannot lay claim to being a profession, not even an emergent or developing one...Tertiary level ELT practitioners ought to be involved in research and publication (p. 19).

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing interest in teacher engagement in research (by doing) and with research (through reading) as a means to enhance their intellectual capabilities and professional performances (Borg, 2010; Oleksiyenko, 2017). For university teachers, research serves as an empowering and transformative force enabling them to become “expert-knowers about their own students and classrooms” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16). By drawing on sound research outcomes, teachers get deeper insights into their professional contexts and make informed decisions about professional practice (Burns, 2013; Xu & Lei, 2020).

However, research is also a high-stakes and challenging enterprise that profoundly influences academics’ career lives. In many contexts where universities are zealously scrambling for higher international rankings, all academics (EFL teachers are no exception) are obliged to publish papers in prestigious journals, apply for research funds, and boost their research profiles (Hammersley, 2004). With the prevalence of performativity in higher education, the academics’ contract renewal, salary increment, and career promotion become reliant upon their research performance and outcomes (Kwan, 2010; Peng & Gao, 2019). While research activities are central to the competitiveness of higher institutions, an over-emphasis on

research productivity can deflect the academics' attention from other personally meaningful activities such as teaching and social services (e.g., Wang, 2018; Xu, 2014; Zhang, 2013).

Over the past decade, studies on university EFL teachers' research practice have been increasing with much attention paid to various factors that constrain their research engagement (e.g., Bai, 2018; Bai & Hudson, 2011; Bai & Millwater, 2011; Bai et al., 2012, 2014; Borg & Liu, 2013; Burns & Westmacott, 2018; Lee, 2014; Xu, 2014; Yuan, 2021). A review of the literature suggests that university EFL teachers experience a higher level of research vulnerability than teachers in other departments. Unlike hard sciences research with vertical knowledge structures and driven by rigorous empirical enquiries, foreign language research is characterized by diverse methodological and theoretical parameters (Borg, 2006; Gao & Zheng, 2018). Its practical and theoretical values are subject to diverse interpretations and judgements. Accordingly, university EFL teachers are faced with greater difficulties in career promotion if their research work is evaluated by a uniform performance evaluation system. Meanwhile, in an increasingly commercialized educational climate, non-applied subjects such as language education are more vulnerable to funding cuts than applied subjects due to their less prominent role in generating incomes (Leathwood & Read, 2013).

Another important issue concerns institutional and cultural factors influencing university EFL teachers' publication experience. For instance, drawing on her own publishing experience and that of other academics, Lee (2014) concludes that the research endeavor of EFL academics in some Asian contexts (e.g., Hong Kong) is impaired by the "publish-or-perish" system,

wherein research output is used as a yardstick to evaluate their competence and performance. As she argues, due to the absence of transparency in gauging the quality of publications, many EFL academics are confused about what kinds of publications are counted as good. This situation is further complicated by an institutional preference for SSCI (Social Sciences Citation Index) journals and high impact expectation, which could impoverish the EFL discipline by reducing the diversity of relevant journals. Yuan (2017) suggests that the potential bias from international journals in favor of standard British/American English and research conducted in western contexts is a major stumbling block to the research practice of many non-native English speaker (NNES) teachers in “peripheral regions” (p. 477).

Notably, many studies on university EFL teachers’ research engagement are conducted in the context of mainland China. This is probably because this country has the largest population of tertiary-level EFL learners, and reform initiatives (e.g., the implementation of performativity) in higher education have made it urgent for EFL teachers to boost their research profiles (Bai et al., 2014). For instance, Yuan et al. (2020) identify several factors that block two Chinese EFL teacher educators’ research engagement: a potential bias against qualitative research in their academic fields, the nepotism and favoritism caused by the editor-centered practice, the unpredictable ranking changes of prestigious journals, and unfamiliarity with the style requirements and discourse features of academic English writing. Tao and Gao (2017) indicate that the research practice of ESP teachers at a university in mainland China might be circumscribed by the marginalized position of ESP in relation to other mainstream research areas, such as linguistics or translation. Long and Huang (2017) note that the conditions in an

unfavorable academic culture, such as the publishing market and the competitive opportunities for developing research competence (e.g., in terms of applying for PhD programs) are the major impediments to EFL teachers' construction of robust researcher identities. Xu (2014) demonstrates that, while the research policies in some Chinese universities are more rewarding than punishing, EFL teachers' research practice is hindered by "teaching overload, a shortage of resources, and a lack of support from mentors, as well as self-efficacy belief" (p. 248). Resonating with other scholars (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Bai, 2018; Du, 2002), her study shows that EFL teachers are bothered by the "disproportionate number of key language education journals compared to the number of university EFL teachers in China and the importance of social networking in publishing" (p. 248).

In addition to commonplace challenges (e.g., the arduous process of reviewing, unavailability of participants, and insufficient time to conduct research) facing academics of all disciplines, the literature reveals several challenges that might be unique to EFL academics' research practice. These challenges are related to their personal beliefs and attributes, such as the belief that language and language education research is irrelevant to teaching (e.g., Bai, 2018; Borg & Liu, 2013; Hiep, 2006; Long & Huang, 2017), different conceptions about what counts as authentic research (e.g., Bai, 2018), inadequate research expertise (e.g., Bai, 2018; Yang et al., 2001), and the inability to develop clear and stable research areas (e.g., Bai, 2018; Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Long & Huang, 2017; Xu, 2014). These challenges might be due to the fact that tertiary-level EFL education in mainland China has long been teaching-oriented, with many non-English major teachers engaged in providing foundation courses such as CE.

Therefore, the EFL discipline in mainland China has a relatively short and weak research tradition (Bai et al., 2014).

2.5.2.3 Power negotiation

All social organizations are sites of power and influence, and higher institutions are no exception (Hoyle, 1982). Gore (1995) contends that “the apparent continuity in pedagogical practice, across sites and over time, has to do with subtle but pervasive exercises of power relations” (p. 166). Therefore, the issue of power is central to our understanding of the complex educational process. Hoyle (1982) argues that it is essential to distinguish authority and influence as two facets of power. Authority refers to “the legally supported form of power which involves the right to make decisions and is supported by a set of sanctions which is ultimately coercive”, while influence refers to “the capacity to affect the actions of others without legal sanctions” (Hoyle, 1982, p. 90). The relationship between authority and influence is fluid and variable. For instance, while the headteacher has a certain degree of authority in the school, his exercise of authority is subject to the influence of other teachers who might draw on various resources to exchange and bargain with him.

Power relations often take the form of hierarchies that reflect divisions of professional positions. In higher institutions, academics at the lower levels of the hierarchy tend to experience greater vulnerability in professional development than those at higher levels. This is evidenced by Murray (2013), who explores the emotional burnout of James, a contract EFL teacher in Japan. The study shows that, in contrast to tenured academics, James is vulnerable

to a heavier workload, lower salary, and fewer research funds. Similarly, Cowie (2011) shows that the division of academics into different power ranks does not contribute to establishing collaborative work culture in Japanese universities.

The pressure to negotiate asymmetrical power relations is particularly intense for EFL academics in expanding-circle countries (e.g., China, South Korea, and Japan) with large “power distance”, which refers to “the extent to which the less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in power and consider it as normal” (Hofstede, 1986, p. 307). For instance, Tsui (2007) conducted a narrative inquiry of the professional experience of Minfang, a young EFL academic in a Chinese university where communicative language teaching (CLT) was advocated by the authority as the most valued approach to EFL learning. Her study shows that, due to the longstanding power hierarchy, Minfang was cautious about disclosing his disagreement with some pedagogical beliefs of the CLT approach to colleagues who had more teaching experiences than him. Xu’s (2017) study on a Chinese CE teacher’s experience of a national teaching contest unravels the “hierarchical power relations in the advisory team” and “the top-down pressure of winning the contest” (p. 366) as primary factors mediating her learning experience. With little negotiable resources for deep-level reflection on her teaching practice, the participant could only learn on a “superficial level” within a hierarchical power relation. Therefore, she could not strike a balance between individual and organizational needs. Additionally, Yoo (2014) discovers that the large power distance in the Korean culture constitutes a significant barrier for native speaker (NS) EFL academics to make friendly interactions with the students, who tend to show reverence to their teachers and place them in

the authoritative position. These studies suggest that negotiating the complex and asymmetrical power relations at the micro-level (e.g., classroom), meso-level (e.g., the institution), and macro-level (e.g., the society) is a significant aspect of EFL academics' professional practice. However, their negotiation efforts tend to be hampered by inadequate resources and external support. This provokes a strong sense of vulnerability among them.

2.5.2.4 Contesting cultural stereotypes

Spencer-Oatey (2000) contends that culture is a “fuzzy” concept as members of a cultural group are “unlikely to share identical sets of attitudes, beliefs and so on, but rather show family resemblances, with the result that there is no absolute set of features that can distinguish definitively one cultural group from another” (p. 4). This view suggests that a specific culture is heterogenous as variances exist among its members. One may simultaneously possess qualities that belong to different cultural groups. Therefore, the boundaries between cultures are blurred, with individuals moving between different cultural groups. However, to strengthen their connections with a particular cultural group, individuals may (often instinctively) “homogenize” others holding different values, beliefs, and behaviors (Abrams, 2002). This homogenizing process results in stereotypes that people from one culture may hold against people from other cultures.

University EFL teachers are vulnerable to various cultural stereotypes against them. This is particularly true for those “boundary-crossing” native-speaker (NS) English teachers who are pressured to address the stereotypes about them in exotic cultures. In her critical ethnography

of “Westerners” teaching oral English in China, Stanley (2013) suggests that the Chinese culture often frames “backpacker” NS teachers within the discourse of “otherness”.

Specifically, NS teachers are expected to play the roles that the Chinese culture of teaching and learning assigns to them. Instead of focusing on teaching oral English, their primary task is “to be fun, bubbly, ever-smiling, and entertaining...to represent and provide contact with the West and to validate Chineseness, defined against the foil of an Other” (p. 2). The discourse of “otherness” alienates NS teachers from the local culture and positions them on the fringe of Chinese EFL education.

There are also numerous studies expounding on how university EFL teachers in Asian countries (e.g., China and Vietnam) are vulnerable to the stereotype that their teaching methodologies and conceptions are more backward while the Western pedagogies are more advanced (e.g., Phan, 2004; Tang & Absalom, 1998). This stereotype reflects the strong influence of the prevailing “native-speakerism” in many EFL contexts. As a culturally and historically developed ideology, “native-speakerism” assumes that NS English teachers are more competent than non-native speaker (NNS) English teachers in language proficiency and classroom teaching (Holliday, 2006). While there has been a substantial body of research showcasing that, with their solid knowledge about the language system, rich expertise in bilingual learning, and insights about local cultures, NNS EFL teachers may be more qualified than NS EFL teachers in meeting the students’ learning needs (e.g., Braine, 2012; Hayes, 2009; Ling & Braine, 2007; Llurda, 2004), the ideology of “native-speakerism” profoundly shapes how EFL learners and policymakers perceive NNS EFL teachers. In

particular, those who deviate from the “ideal norms” (e.g., white male Americans) are more likely to be considered less competent in teaching (Rivers & Ross, 2013). For instance, Lee and Schallert (2008) explore how Kim (a Korean EFL teacher) manages to help a student improve his writing. The student shows little trust in Kim’s teaching competence due to her NNS background and is reluctant to revise his writing draft based on Kim’s feedback. This cultural stereotype against NNS teachers frustrates Kim and makes her confused about how to teach writing effectively. Indisputably, the dominance of “native-speakerism” in EFL education has bolstered the authoritative position of NS teachers in relation to NNS teachers. It may not only perpetuate the marginalization of NNS teachers and local pedagogies but also lead to “boundaries and antagonistic relations” between NS and NNS teachers, inhibiting the internationalization of local institutions (Trent, 2012).

In addition, stereotypes may result from asymmetric power relations embedded in a specific culture. This is well documented in numerous studies explaining how female EFL academics in Japan respond to the stereotype of “family caretakers” in a gendered and patriarchal culture, reconcile their work and family responsibilities, and overcome the various obstacles to their academic journey (e.g., Nagatomo, 2014; Tsutsumi, 2014; Yoshihara, 2018).

2.5.3 University EFL teachers’ coping strategies

As elaborated in previous sections, university EFL teachers in many countries are confronted with immense challenges to their professional practice (teaching practice, research practice, power negotiation, and contesting cultural stereotypes). In an era of performativity, these

challenges put them in a relatively disadvantaged position in higher education which can potentially exacerbate their sense of professional vulnerability (Liu, 2011; Wang, 2018). Nevertheless, the literature shows that university EFL teachers can exercise their agency to cope with these challenges to promote their professional development.

First, university EFL teachers seek to counteract cultural stereotypes against them. Phan (2004) reports a study on two Vietnam EFL teachers who, through incorporating communicative activities into their grammar teaching, manage to debunk the Western stereotype that Eastern pedagogy is deficient and backward. The findings are in line with other research (e.g., Braine, 2012; Hayes, 2009; Liurda, 2004) showcasing that NNS EFL academics may consider local cultural contexts when they practice western language teaching methodologies. Huang (2018) explores how NNS EFL academics in China grapple with the dominant native-speakerism in Chinese higher education and negotiate their relationship with NS teachers. Her study reveals various strategies taken by the NNS EFL teachers, such as “othering” NS teachers (e.g., to consider the small number of NS teachers in China as the “the other” and English as an “additional” language), reflecting on their own strengths (e.g., having shared culture and foreign language learning experience with the students), examining their specific roles as NNS teachers (e.g., “coaches” for CET), and bolstering their credibility through hard work (e.g., conscientious preparations for lessons).

Second, despite inadequate university support for doing research, EFL teachers seek to strengthen their research competence through various means. In Murray’s (2013) study,

James, a NS EFL teacher at a Japanese university, enhanced his research profile by initiating classroom-based research projects and sharing his research findings with other professionals. He also established a professional learning network with like-minded colleagues and other professional organizations to improve his research competence. Cowie (2010) reports similar findings showing that university EFL teachers may establish professional networks to conduct joint research projects with their peers. In addition, Gao et al. (2018) show that some English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers at a mainland Chinese university enriched their research profiles through conducting “interdisciplinary research”.

Furthermore, university EFL teachers resort to various strategies to improve their teaching performance. For instance, Gao et al. (2018) reveal that some ESP teachers at a mainland Chinese university improved their teaching performance through participating in professional training programs, adding “case studies” to the teaching content, collecting first-hand materials from local corporations, and pursuing higher degrees. Li and Wang (2018) also examine how some CE teachers strengthened their professional autonomy through adopting an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pedagogy.

It should be noted that how university EFL teachers deal with the challenges to their professional practice is mediated by multiple personal (e.g., age, beliefs, values) and contextual factors (e.g., resource availability, institutional culture, reforms). For instance, Yuan (2021) suggests that EFL teacher educators at “parallel” universities differ in terms of their publishing experiences. Specifically, for those at a university with scarce resources and

professional support, their agency is mainly oriented towards “survival” in the “publish-or-perish” system; while for those at a university with sufficient government support, their agency is aimed at “balancing” personal investment in teacher education and the institutional demand for publications. Huang and Wang (2019) indicate that some university EFL teachers follow distinct trajectories of professional development in the context of higher education reform. To be specific, Zhao (a novice teacher) adopted “compliance” to deal with the institutional demand for examinations; Li (a veteran teacher) resorted to “cunning maneuvers” to manage the bottom-up and top-down surveillance; Qian (a mid-career teacher) developed her own teaching method through reflections and experiments. Xu and Xun (2020) unveil three types of university EFL teachers adopting different modes of “resource utilization” to construct their knowledge: the “preparational” (i.e., teachers who obtain resources through various channels but do not fully use them), the “participational” (i.e., teachers who participate in various activities that contribute little to their research practice), and the “customizational” (i.e., teachers who conduct self-directed research projects).

2.5.4 Summary

As a site of conflicts and uncertainty, university EFL education is subject to the joint influences of individual, institutional, and sociocultural factors (Gu & Day, 2013; Pennington & Hoekje, 2014). With intensified performativity in higher education, university EFL teachers are faced with growing challenges in their professional practice. While some of these challenges (e.g., the pressure to publish) are shared by teachers of all disciplines, some (e.g., the discourse of “native-speakerism”) are unique to EFL teachers. The causes of these

challenges are complex, as they can be either intrinsic (i.e., caused by personal factors) or structural (i.e., caused by external factors). Meanwhile, these studies demonstrate that university EFL teachers are agentive professionals who may take various measures to sustain their professional development amidst precarious conditions (Biesta et al., 2015).

All the studies reviewed above indicate that university EFL teaching is a vulnerable profession. However, they are not explicitly located within the framework of professional vulnerability. Hence, they may not provide us with rich insights into the vulnerable nature of the university EFL teaching profession. Specifically, these studies do not provide us “emic” perspectives on professional vulnerability (Spiers, 2000). They do not fully capture the relationship between professional vulnerability and performativity. In addition, how university EFL teachers’ achievement of agency (as manifested in actions and cognition) is mediated by temporality remains unknown. These issues are explored in-depth in this multiple case study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This section presents the research methodology adopted in this study. Following the introduction of the three research questions, the rationale of the research methodology – “multiple case study” – is elaborated. After that, the procedures of data collection and analysis are presented. This section ends with a brief discussion of research validity, ethics, and researcher positionality.

3.1 Research questions

As is mentioned in Chapter 1, this study seeks to answer three questions:

- (1) Do university EFL teachers experience professional vulnerability?
- (2) How do university EFL teachers agentively respond to their professional vulnerability?
- (3) What factors lead to university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability?

The three research questions guide this study. Given its descriptive and exploratory nature, this study adopts the “multiple case study” approach, which can facilitate a contextualized understanding of the vulnerable professional practice of five EFL teachers at a university in mainland China (Merriam, 2009; Walters, 2007).

3.2 Rationale of the research methodology

Merriam (1998) defines qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bound phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). This definition is in line with Miles and Huberman’s (1994) view of case

as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded system” (p. 25) and Stake’s (2005) view of case “as an object rather than a process” (p. 2). A case study is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic in nature (Merriam, 2009): It is particularistic as it focuses on a particular case such a teacher or a school; it is descriptive as it aims to yield a rich and thick description of the case under investigation; it is also heuristic as its ultimate purpose is to enhance the readers’ understanding of the case.

Stake (2005) identifies three types of case study: intrinsic case study, instrumental case study, and collective or multiple case study. An intrinsic case study focuses on a single case that is intrinsically interesting and thereby worthy of investigation. A researcher with an interest in a specific case examines it for its own sake. In comparison, the purpose of an instrumental case study is not to understand the case but to understand the issues concerning the case. The case is used instrumentally for exploring issues related to the broader social and cultural context. As for a collective or multiple case study, more than one case is collected and examined by the researcher to capture the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation.

The three types of case study mentioned above are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories. For instance, this study is first of all a multiple case study as I seek to explore the vulnerable experiences of five university EFL teachers, each serving as a case which is physically bounded but subject to the influences of myriad contextual forces. Meanwhile, it is an instrumental case study since a detailed description of individual participants’ vulnerable experiences is only a “secondary interest” for me (Stake, 2005). My primary interest lies in

generating insights into the complex nature of teacher vulnerability and contribute to existing knowledge of university EFL teachers' professional practice.

Two qualitative principles are adopted in this study. First, this study combines “etic” perspectives with “emic” perspectives on the participants' lived experiences. “Emic” perspectives refer to “culturally based perspectives, interpretations, and categories used by members of the group under study to conceptualize and encode knowledge to guide their own behavior” (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 580). This “insider” view allows me to examine professional vulnerability from the vantage points of the participants. In contrast, “etic” perspectives are held by a person “who has not had a personal or lived experiences of a particular culture/society” (Young, 2005, p. 152). They are “outsider” perspectives informed by the researcher's prior knowledge and assumptions about the cultural group under investigation (Hornberger, 1995). While etic perspectives are developed from the researcher's home culture, they can be refined or rectified by emic perspectives emerging from the data (Zhu & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2013).

As mentioned in 2.1.2, it is essential to take emic views into account when we are to label a specific cultural group as a “vulnerable population” (Spiers, 2000). Therefore, while I was informed by prior knowledge about the university EFL teaching profession in mainland China (etic views), I also drew heavily on the participants' own voices and perspectives (emic views). For instance, I immersed myself in the field site to observe, experience, and examine various aspects of the participants' professional lives (e.g., classroom instruction and

faculty meetings). I also focused on multiple personal and contextual factors mediating the participants' experiences of professional vulnerability. By combining etic with emic views, I managed to develop a "holistic portrait" of the setting and to critically examine the appropriateness of my prior conceptions about university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability (Murchison, 2010; Walters, 2007).

This study also draws on a "thick description" of the participants' professional lives. According to Denzin (1994), "a thin description simply reports facts, independent of intentions or circumstance," while "a thick description gives the context of an experience, states the intentions and meanings that organized the experiences" (p. 505). In other words, thick description not only focuses on the activities taking place in a given context but also on the meanings that these activities may have for the cultural group in question. In this study, a thick description of the participants' professional vulnerability is reflected in several aspects. For instance, I carefully examined multiple performative elements that might engender a sense of vulnerability among the participants in order to provide a holistic picture of the setting. I also engaged with careful observation of the participants' behavior in various professional activities, with a particular focus on how the participants responded to emerging challenges and threats. In addition, I focused on the meanings that the participants attributed to specific activities and analyzed the various factors influencing their meaning-making. In a word, "thick description" enabled me to capture the complexity of the participants' professional vulnerability in a system of performativity.

3.3 Research site and participants

This section provides basic information about the research site (hereafter referred to as XU) and the participants. Several quality management mechanisms, including the personnel agency, position (re)appointment, teaching evaluation, and course selection, are introduced to demonstrate how the performative discourse shapes the participants' situated context. The purpose of this section is to inform the readers of the performative work culture in XU and explain why XU is selected as the research site.

3.3.1 XU, the EFL office, and EFL curriculum

My social network played an instrumental role in helping me gain access to the university: a friend of mine used to work at XU. He put me in touch with Peter (pseudonym), the director of the EFL Teaching Research Office (jiaoyanshi) at XU. With Peter's help, I could enter the university, meet the participants, observe their professional activities, and review documents pertinent to the study.

XU is located in Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi Province and the home to some prestigious universities in northwestern China. Founded in the 1960s, XU is a publicly funded polytechnic university with a strong orientation towards engineering education and research. It is considered as a "second-tier university" as it is not administered directly by the Chinese Ministry of Education (CMoE). Although XU is not an internationally renowned university, it is well regarded: XU ranks in the top 150 universities on the national list compiled by Shanghai Ranking (2021) of about 1,200 institutions of higher learning nationally.

The rapidly expanding academic scope of XU is built on a traditional strength in civil engineering, environmental science, and architecture and is consolidated through offerings in humanities, arts, and social sciences. Currently, XU consists of 20 faculties that offer more than 120 undergraduate and postgraduate programs. It comprises two campuses, the old and the new, located in the downtown and outskirt respectively.

Table 3.1 Composition of the EFL teaching force

Professional titles	Pro. & associate pro.	N=18
	Lecturers	N=88
	Teaching assistants	N=6
Qualifications	PhD	N=3
	MA	N=106
	BA	N=3
Employment status	Tenured	N=88
	Contract	N=24
Notes*: The figures are collected from the XU 2020 admission brochure. Among the 106 master's degree holders, five were pursuing doctoral degrees in different universities during the current study period. The majority of teachers studied literature, linguistics, or translation at the postgraduate level and were certified through the general teacher training programs offered by the university shortly after their induction. Therefore, few teachers have received systematic ELT training or hold relevant certificates. (Based on an informal talk with Peter, fieldnotes, 30/05/2020)		

As shown in the XU admission brochure (2020 edition), the EFL Teaching Research Office (hereafter referred to as the EFL office) is affiliated to the Faculty of Humanities (FH), a

relatively young faculty founded in 2009 as a part of the university's initiative to "broaden polytechnic students' horizons, enhance their humanity literacy, and prepare them for future competition" (*XU EFL Course Construction Plan*, 2020 edition). Apart from 61 teachers in the departments of law, Chinese literature, and drama, FH has 112 EFL teachers with diverse educational and professional background (see Table 3.1).

Most of the EFL teachers are engaged with teaching College English (CE), a compulsory course for all non-English major year 1 and year 2 undergraduates, and many EFL-related elective courses. The primary goal of CE is to "improve the students' comprehensive abilities in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation so that they could effectively use English in their future jobs and social development" (*XU College English syllabus*, 2020 edition). It is also aimed at "enhancing the students' learning autonomy and raising their cultural awareness to meet the need for national development and international communication" (*XU College English syllabus*, 2020 edition). Each semester the course culminates with an achievement test. Students who fail the test are given one opportunity to retest. During the current study period, more than 9,500 year 1 and year 2 students from different faculties were taking CE and their English proficiency levels varied from elementary to upper-intermediate. (Based on informal talks with the dean of FH, fieldnotes, 30/08/2020)

In the past seven years, the EFL office has initiated a series of reforms to upgrade the EFL curricula and instructional approaches. The purpose, as stated in the *Reform Plan for EFL*

Courses in XU (2015 edition), is to “accommodate students’ diverse learning needs” and to “improve the passing rate of CET-4 and CET-6”. For instance, since 2014, the EFL office has been offering “extended courses” for year 2 students who passed CET-4 in year 1. Since 2017, many “elective courses” have been offered to students interested in furthering their EFL learning in year 3 and year 4. Since 2020, “practical English courses” have been offered to prepare the students for CET-4 and CET-6 examinations and the National English Competition for College Students (NECCS). Furthermore, in light of the recent development in educational technologies, the EFL office has been practicing blended teaching since 2019. Table 3.2 illustrates various courses offered by the EFL office.

Table 3.2 EFL courses at XU

Course type	Target students	Course name	Mode of instruction
General course	Year 1&2 students	<i>College English</i>	Blended teaching
Extended course	Year 2 students who have passed CET Band-4	<i>Advanced English Reading, Advanced Audio-video English, Advanced Writing, British and American Cultures</i>	Blended teaching
Elective course	Year 3 & 4 students	<i>American literature, English movies, Cross-cultural communication, IELTS and TOFEL Training, English Pronunciation and Intonation, etc.</i>	Offline teaching
Practical course	All undergraduate students	<i>CET-4 & 6 training, NECCS training, Business English</i>	Offline teaching
Notes*: The course information is collected from the <i>XU EFL Course Construction Plan</i> (2020 edition).			

Since the official issuance of the *College English Curriculum Requirements* (CECR) (CMoE, 2015), higher institutions in mainland China have been granted the power to individualize EFL curricula in accordance with their own situations. In line with CECR, XU is reducing the class hours and credit points allocated to CE. For instance, students with higher English proficiency levels (as measured by their scores in the entrance examination) than their classmates are allowed to take fewer English courses and, in some cases, no English course at all. Table 3.3 demonstrates the decline of CE in XU undergraduate curriculum.

Table 3.3 The decline of CE in the undergraduate curriculum

Phase	Class hour	Credit Point
Before 2004	N=288 (four semesters)	18
2004-2014	N=256 (four semesters)	16
2014-2018	N=224 (four semesters)	14
2018-2020	N=176 (four semesters)	11
2020-?	N=144 (four semesters)	9
Notes*: The course information is collected from the <i>XU EFL Course Construction Plan</i> (2020 edition).		

3.3.2 Quality management mechanisms in XU

Blackmore and Sachs (2003) hold that the system of performativity focuses on the pursuit of efficiency and the implementation of quality-control measures such as auditing, appraisal, and reporting. This system adds to the professional vulnerability of university academics struggling to provide quality education. In the context of XU, the discourse of performativity

encapsulates multiple measures adopted by the administrators to monitor and regulate different aspects of teacher behavior. The following section introduces four primary measures, namely personnel agency (*ren shi dai li*), position appointment (*gang wei pin ren*), teaching evaluation (*ping jiao*), and course selection (*xuan ke*), in order to shed light upon the performative work culture in XU.

3.3.2.1 Personnel agency (*ren shi dai li*)

The personnel agency system was first introduced into the higher education of mainland China as a mode of personnel management in 1999 (Zhang, 2020). Under this system, government-owned talent exchange agencies are entrusted by the talents and their employers to manage their personnel affairs (Leng et al., 2014). In contrast to *bian zhi* (i.e., state-guaranteed lifetime employment in mainland China) system that has been customary since 1949, the personnel agency system requires the talents to sign fixed-term contracts (usually lasting three years) with the institution. To a certain degree, this system is congruent with the ideology of a market economy that prioritizes mobility and flexibility of the labor force. New appointees are no longer bound to the positions assigned to them. They can look for better career opportunities in other universities. Meanwhile, the universities can recruit or dismiss their employees with greater autonomy. Therefore, it can be assumed that this system contributes to optimizing the academic and teaching force in higher institutions.

As shown in its 2020 online job posting, XU implements a dual-personnel system: applicants possessing doctorates or senior professional titles (e.g., associate professors) are appointed to

bian zhi positions, while those with master's degrees are positioned under the personnel agency system and need to sign a three-year term contract with the university. The contract specifies a number of tasks they need to fulfill within the contract term. The contract is also renewable: if a teacher is considered by the faculty leaders as “qualified”, they can get another three-year term contract. A long-term contract will be provided if they accomplish all the tasks required for the second term.

3.3.2.2 Position appointment (*gang wei pin ren*)

Since 2015, XU has been implementing the position appointment system as a part of a personnel management reform which is aimed at enhancing and optimizing its academic and teaching force. According to this policy, individual academics are appointed to different positions based on their performances and competence. For instance, FH operates a dual-track system that divides its faculty members into two professional tracks, namely the teaching-oriented track (on which teaching is the primary task) and the teaching & research track (on which teaching and research are equally important tasks). Each track is organized in a hierarchical structure. Teachers on higher levels of the track need to fulfill more teaching or research tasks than those at lower levels. Salaries and bonuses are commensurate with the positions that the teachers occupy. Meanwhile, the positions are not fixed since individual teachers' productivity (e.g., number of publications and instructional hours) is reviewed thoroughly by faculty leaders every three years. Teachers who have accomplished the assigned tasks can apply for higher positions in the next term, while those who fail will

automatically be assigned to lower positions. In this regard, the position appointment system may result in fierce competition among teachers.

It should be noted that, during the current study period, the majority of EFL teachers were appointed to level-7 or level-8 positions on the teaching-oriented track. However, their tasks were not confined to teaching. As stated in the *FH Rules for Position Appointment*, teachers on level-7 and level-8 positions must teach at least 240 classes every year. They also need to publish at least one paper in a domestic key journal, apply for one provincial research project, and supervise students in provincial-level disciplinary contests to apply for higher positions (e.g., level-6). In a word, EFL teachers are expected to perform multiple professional roles to prove their competencies.

3.3.2.3 Teaching evaluation (*ping jiao*)

The teaching evaluation system has been routine in many higher institutions in mainland China. It is commonly used to provide academics with feedback for improving their instructional skills, classroom management, and syllabus design. It is also the primary tool used by the administrative units to evaluate the academics' teaching performance.

Teaching evaluation in the context of XU is jointly undertaken by the students and the teaching inspection team (*du dao zu*), which is composed of veteran teachers in various departments and faculties. Student ratings take place at the end of each semester, and the results are sent to individual teachers after they finish the grading work. In comparison,

members of the teaching inspection team typically enter the classroom to observe the teaching practice without advance notice. The evaluation is based on multiple parameters such as the teaching gestures, blackboard writing, frequency of interaction, utilization of the multimedia, classroom discipline, course design, and influences on students' overall development.

3.3.2.4 Course selection (*xuan ke*)

The course selection (*xuanke*) system is not new to higher institutions in mainland China. It seeks to give the students significant autonomy to design the study programs based on their academic interests and expectations for their intellectual and social development (Babad, 2001; Zocco, 2009). In 2015, XU decided to establish a course selection system to broaden the students' intellectual perspectives, improve their humanistic qualities, and widen their future learning and occupational possibilities (based on *XU Course Selection Guideline, 2015*). According to the policy, at the outset of each semester, students need to select at least two public optional courses (i.e., courses that are not included in their major curricula) provided by different faculties.

In 2016, all the foundational courses (e.g., CE) for year 1 and year 2 students were incorporated into the course selection system. Nevertheless, since CE is a compulsory course, the students could only select EFL teachers based on their preferences. If they were unsatisfied with the teacher, they could drop out of the class within one week after the course

begins. Meanwhile, all the EFL teachers must post their profiles on the website so that the students may know more about them before making informed course-selection decisions.

The juxtaposition of various quality-control systems indicates that pedagogical and scholarly activities at XU are strongly influenced by performativity which enshrines “productivity” and “effectiveness” of academics. EFL teachers are necessarily positioned at the nexus of various material, social, and relational conditions. They are enmeshed in a fierce competition to make themselves “marketable” to other stakeholders such as the administrators and students. Their professional work is subject to periodic evaluations and inspections. Professional rewards and recognitions are “earned” by EFL teachers who can demonstrate their competence by producing high-quality “products”. These conditions, together with the challenges facing CE teaching in XU mentioned in 3.3.1, can profoundly influence EFL teachers and their professional practice. Therefore, XU serves as an information-rich site for investigating the professional vulnerability of EFL teachers in a performative work context.

3.3.3 Research participants

The major research participants of this study are five teachers from the EFL office. They were recruited not only because they provided the richest account of professional vulnerability in the pilot study but also because they varied considerably in multiple aspects of their professional vulnerability. This section describes the pilot study and provides basic information on the participants. The purpose of this section is to highlight the strategy that I

adopted in recruiting the participants, what I learned from the pilot study, and how the findings of the pilot study informed the subsequent recruitment of participants.

3.3.3.1 The pilot study

The pilot study (Gao & Yuan, 2021) was conducted in April 2019, during which I made an initial visit to XU. As mentioned in 3.3.1, it was through Peter that I gained access to XU.

Before I arrived at XU, I discussed the research design through mobile phone with Peter and asked if he would like to introduce me to his colleagues. To my surprise, he not only accepted my request kindly but also showed great interest in the study by asking if he could participate in it. I readily agreed. So when we finally met up at XU, Peter had already notified his colleagues of the study and provided me with a list of EFL teachers willing to participate.

Recruitment of the participants was facilitated by the strategy of “maximum variation sampling”, which is aimed at “capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participants or programs variation” (Patton, 1990, p. 172). This involves two steps: first, based on dimensions of variation (e.g., gender, age, work experience, professional titles, and educational background), I identified six EFL teachers that varied from each other as much as possible. Second, I contacted each teacher and discussed the interview date. In total, seven teachers (including Peter) were recruited as the participants in the pilot study.

What I was concerned about before the interview was that some of the participants recommended by Peter may suppress their genuine feelings about vulnerability by describing their institutional lives in a favorable light. However, it turned out that they were quite candid about their vulnerabilities. This allowed me to derive rich meanings from their articulations.

The pilot study sought to answer one central question: how do a cohort of EFL academics at a university in mainland China perceive and cope with their professional vulnerability in an era of performativity? Due to the time limit, I only conducted one round of interviews with the participants. The findings show that the participants can be classified into three categories, reflecting different orientations towards professional vulnerability: (1) professional vulnerability as a state of conformity and self-learning, (2) professional vulnerability as a state of constrained agency, and (3) professional vulnerability as a state of disengagement. The study demonstrates that vulnerability is embedded in multiple aspects of the participants' professional practice, such as classroom instruction, research engagement, and academic promotion. It also suggests that the participants' responses towards their professional vulnerability seem to be mediated by a myriad of contextual and personal factors such as institutional power relations, their work experience, employment status, and career motivations. However, these mediating factors were not explored in depth. This motivated me to propose the third research question of the current study: What factors lead to university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability?

The pilot study has a significant limitation. As my time in mainland China was quite limited (one week), I could not observe the participants' professional practice extensively. Nor could I participate in their "ordinary activities" (Brewer, 2004, p. 315) to get a feel for what was happening in the field. The lack of observational data and first-hand field experiences may compromise the research credibility. Therefore, in this PhD study, I decided to extend the data collection period by incorporating more fieldwork as a major data source.

3.3.3.2 Participants of this study

While analyzing the data of the pilot study, I discovered that four participants, Vivian, Dora, Joe, and Peter (all are pseudonyms) provided the most interesting accounts of professional vulnerability. I realized that a further exploration of their experiences over a longer period of time may generate deeper insights into the complexity of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability, and how professional vulnerability is intertwined with teacher agency and the system of performativity. So I contacted them again to see if they would like to continue participating in this study. Fortunately, they all accepted my invitation and agreed to let me observe their classes in the following semesters. Meanwhile, Fiona, a veteran teacher with whom I had several informal talks in the EFL office, also showed a keen interest in the research topic and accepted my invitation to join the study.

The participants' basic biographic information appears in Table 3.4. A more personalized and detailed introduction to the participants and their career stories (based mainly on informal talks) is presented as follows. All dates and ages refer to March 2020 unless otherwise stated.

Fiona

Fiona came to XU after receiving a bachelor's degree in English language and literature in the 1980s. With a "strong passion for languages", she has been engaged with CE teaching for more than thirty years. Describing herself as an "emotional person", Flora is never satisfied with living a routine life. Therefore, at age thirty-five, she decided to pursue a doctoral degree in American literature in a coastal city in eastern China. In 2015, she was sponsored by China Scholarship Council (CSC) to visit a leading university in the United States, where she changed some of her previous views about academic life and learned that EFL teaching is a "pleasure-seeking process".

Joe

Joe came to XU in 1997 after graduating from a foreign language university in northwestern China. He chose EFL teaching as his life career due to the belief that "teaching is a profession respected by people from all walks of life". Over the past twenty years, he has been engaged in the teaching of a variety of EFL courses, such as CE, Advanced English Listening and Speaking, Business English, and English Lexicology. In 2008, he joined the short-term overseas visiting program sponsored by the provincial government and the university to study in the UK, where he learned some new EFL teaching methods and improved his English proficiency. He has a passion for EFL teaching and is keen to share his teaching experience with younger colleagues. When I met him at XU, he invited me to observe and provide feedback on his teaching.

Peter

Peter came to XU in 1999 after receiving a bachelor's degree in English language and literature from a comprehensive university in northwestern China. In 2005, he was enrolled in a Master of Literature program for in-service EFL teachers jointly provided by XU and a foreign language university. However, he had to postpone graduation due to his son's illness during that period. Therefore, it took him around five years to obtain a master's degree. In 2016, he was appointed the director of the EFL office by the dean of FH. Since then, he has been leading a series of EFL teaching reforms initiated by TAO, such as the implementation of flipped classroom pedagogy, the construction of an online CE lesson platform, the adjustment of CE instructional hours and credit points, and drafting CE syllabus. During the interviews, he expressed a strong discontent with the "bureaucratization" in XU.

Dora

Dora came to XU in 2006. Before that, she worked as a CE teacher at a private university with an orientation in translation and interpretation education. In the first few years of working at XU, Dora was one of the few CE teachers holding a master's degree. With a keen interest in cultural studies, she has travelled extensively over the past ten years. In 2013, Dora was sponsored by CSC to study at a leading university in the United States. Currently, she is collaborating with her students to operate a Public WeChat Account whereby she could share her travelling abroad experiences with the audiences and explain cultural phenomena from cross-cultural perspectives. During the interviews, Dora expressed strong discontent with the lack of institutional support for her professional development.

Vivian

Vivian came to XU in June 2013 after receiving a master's degree in translation and interpretation from a foreign language university in northwestern China. When she was in university, she was one of the "top students" in her class in academic performance. She has obtained a Level-2 Certificate of Interpretation accredited by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and won the first prize in the national college interpretation contest. In 2017, she was promoted to associate professorship due to her excellent performance in the university teaching contest. Although she seems to outperform many of her colleagues in professional development, Vivian is not satisfied with what this profession brings her. As she articulated in the first interview, this job had completely changed some of her long-held beliefs about the EFL teaching profession, making her unhappy and uncomfortable.

Thus, the five participants served as information-rich cases that, by virtue of their biographic information, allowed me to examine the complexity of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability within a system of performativity. More importantly, their different professional trajectories helped me to unpack the various ways in which personal attributes influenced experiences of professional vulnerability.

I also interviewed two non-participant teachers: Lucy, a retired EFL teacher who was reappointed by the university as a member of the teaching inspection team, and Lynn, associate dean of FH and former director of the EFL office. Then there were three year-2

students: Lee, Yang, and Gao. They were my students while I was teaching at XU. They expressed a great interest in my research and were invited to join the interview. Finally, I interviewed Snow and Shawn who were heads of the TAO. These people offered additional insights into some controversial issues raised by the focal participants. For instance, while the unmotivated students are perceived by the focal participants as a source of professional vulnerability, interviews with the students suggest that their lack of learning motivation is related to the “boring” teaching content and outdated teaching methods. So I inserted questions that aimed to elicit the participants’ perspectives on “appropriate EFL teaching methodologies” in the interview protocol. Thus, data collected from these people were used to supplement the focal participants’ views and to inform directions for subsequent research.

Table 3.4. Biographical information of the participants (Collected in March 2020)

Name	Age	Gender	Educational qualifications	Professional titles	Employment status	Years of teaching
Fiona	55	Female	American literature (PhD)	Professor	Lifetime employment	31
Joe	47	Male	Applied Linguistics (MA)	Associate professor	Lifetime employment	22
Peter	44	Male	Applied Linguistics (MA)	Lecturer	Lifetime employment	19
Dora	40	Female	Cross-cultural communication (MA)	Lecturer	Lifetime employment	15
Vivian	31	Female	Translation and Interpretation (MA)	Associate professor	Contract	6
Notes*: According to <i>XU Promotion Regulation</i> , lecturers, associate professors, and professors are different academic positions for teachers in humanities and arts. A young teacher with a master’s degree, two articles published on national key journals, and at least three years of teaching experience can apply for lecturer positions. For lecturers to apply for associate professorship, three CSSCI articles, a provincially funded research project, and at least five years of teaching experience are needed. For associate professors to become full professors, five CSSCI journals and a national social science funding research project are the minimal requirement.						

3.4 Data collection process

Data for this study is collected from multiple sources, including three rounds of in-depth and semi-structured interviews, field observation, documents, social media, and my reflective journals during the field trips. The collection period began in March 2020 and ended in June 2021 (see Table 3.5).

Due to the outbreak of Covid-19, I was unable to visit the university in the first few months (from March 2020 to July 2020) when the campus was locked down and social distancing measures were in force. However, with the help of telephone and WeChat, I could still keep in touch with the participants, observe their online activities (e.g., classes and meetings), and note down how they handled professional vulnerability during this time of stress. Field trips were eventually made after the university was reopened in August 2020, so I had rich opportunities to observe what happened at the site.

The data collection was originally planned to be completed in January 2020 (the end of 2020-2021 academic year). However, it was extended for five months after Peter invited me to teach one course (i.e., Advanced English Reading). This deepened my understanding of the teachers' professional lives and contested some of my preconceptions about university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability.

Table 3.5 Timetable of data collection

Method		Time	Focus
Interview	Round 1	March 2020 (i.e., beginning of the data collection)	The participants' biographies: educational background, English language learning experiences, career motivations, and previous work experiences.
	Round 2	July 2020 (i.e., the end of the first semester of the 2020-2021 academic year)	The participants' reflections on their online teaching experience, particularly the challenges that they encountered.
	Round 3	January 2021 (i.e., the end of the second semester of the 2020-2021 academic year)	The participants' experiential accounts of their professional vulnerability in the second semester and comments on what I observed in the semester
Observation		Throughout the research	Multiple aspects of the participants' professional practice (e.g., online and classroom teaching, group meetings, lesson preparation, and grading activities) and my own teaching
Documents		Throughout the research	e.g., Guidelines on College English Teaching, course syllabus, teacher induction materials, meeting records, textbooks, as well as various institutional documents on employment, promotion, and in-service training
Social media		Throughout the research	WeChat group discussions and the texts that the participants post on WeChat pages
Reflective journals		Throughout the research	My "insider" experiences and decision-making process during the study

3.4.1 Interview

As a major method of qualitative data collection, interviewing refers to a process in which “a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (DeMarris, 2004, p. 55). It provides the researcher with a large volume of verbal data that convey the meanings that the participants attribute to a specific cultural phenomenon

(Patton, 2002). It also helps the researcher build rapport with the participants, which contributes to the co-construction of meanings (Miller & Glassner, 2004).

During the fieldwork, I conducted three rounds of formal interviews with the participants and audio-recorded each interview for subsequent transcription. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, our native language, so that our perspectives on critical issues were expressed fully and precisely. The interviews were semi-structured, as I used open-ended rather than closed questions to promote free and natural discussions. This enabled me to negotiate and construct meanings collaboratively with the participants (Bishop, 1997). Copies of the interview protocols are shown in the appendices.

I conducted the first round of interviews by telephone in early March 2020, when the pandemic was worsening, and all the teaching work was moved online. The interview protocol was centered on “biography”, namely the participants’ previous work experience and how they perceived themselves as university EFL teachers in the context of mainland Chinese higher education. I encouraged the participants to tell their own “stories” from which I garnered rich information about their educational background, learning experiences, career motivations, and previous work experiences at XU. I paid particular attention to those “critical incidents” that the participants foregrounded in the way they talked about their professional vulnerability (Tripp, 1993). Lasky (2004) argues that critical incidents are “highly charged moments or episodes that have enormous consequences for personal change and development” (p. 38). Examining those “critical incidents” allowed me to identify the

turning points in the participants' careers and how they managed the influences that those incidents had on their professional practice. For instance, one participant, Vivian described how desperate she was when a student in her class said that CE was a useless course. That incident significantly changed her perceptions of the university EFL teaching profession and provoked a strong sense of vulnerability on her.

The second round of interviews were conducted in July 2020 at the end of the first semester. It was also a time when the pandemic had been put under control, and face-to-face interviews were made possible. The interview protocol was focused on not only the participants' general feelings about online teaching and relevant professional tasks (e.g., the grading work) but also on salient issues that emerged from my online observation. During the interviews, I invited the participants to explain major challenges they encountered during online teaching, how they perceived those challenges, and why they preferred certain coping strategies over the others.

The third round of interviews were conducted in January 2021 at the end of the second semester. The focus was then shifted to the participants' vulnerable experiences in that semester and their future career expectations. My field observation and reflections informed the interview questions on those incidents that may induce a sense of professional vulnerability on the participants. To facilitate my interaction with the participants, I also shared with them my perceptions of specific issues related to their professional vulnerability. For instance, when I mentioned the "peer classroom observation" policy initiated by TAO,

two participants (Dora and Joe) complained that they were bothered by the “pointless formalities” that prevailed in the university administration.

Interviews with the participants challenged some of my preconceptions about EFL teaching in Chinese higher education. For instance, the EFL teachers’ professional lives at XU are not necessarily bad. Some of the participants can be said to have benefitted from the system of performativity. One participant, Fiona, does not consider herself a completely “vulnerable” EFL teacher and admits that she enjoys the pleasures and sense of achievement derived from teaching English. Thus, interviews enabled me to draw a holistic picture of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability in a system of performativity.

3.4.2 Field observation

Another primary data source is field observation, which refers to “an act of perceiving the activities and interrelationships of people in the field setting through the five senses of the researcher” (Angrosino, 2007, p. 37). By observing what happens in a naturalistic setting, researchers can gain firsthand information about the lived experiences of the cultural group being studied and the particular meanings that this cultural group attributes to specific activities (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In a word, field observation is a humanistic and interpretive approach to understanding human actions and institutional practices (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

During the data collection period, field observation proved to be a powerful instrument for me to build rapport with the participants and to collect meaningful data. First, it helped me develop a “sympathetic understanding” of the participants’ live experiences in a performative work culture (Kelly, 2010). In particular, it provided me with extensive opportunities to observe how the participants agentively dealt with their professional vulnerability on an ongoing basis. Second, this approach allowed me to discover some aspects of the participants’ professional lives that I was unaware of prior to the study, adding to my knowledge about the complexity of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability. For instance, grading was an exhausting task for the EFL teachers. And this is partly due to the excessive intervention of the administration. Third, field observation allowed me to keep track of vulnerability-related issues that kept emerging during the fieldwork and use them to guide subsequent data collection.

In field observation, researchers can take on different roles that are contingent upon the research purposes, their connections with the participants, and the actual situations of the setting (Takyi, 2015). Based on the extent to which he is involved with the participants’ lives, the researcher can take on the following roles: a “complete observer” who has no direct interactions with the participants by remaining as detached as possible from the setting in order to achieve maximum objectivity, an “observer-as-participant” who keeps a distance from the participants’ actual lives and relates himself to the setting more as a researcher than as a participant, a “participant-as-observer” who becomes more involved with the participants’ lives in order to gain deeper insights into the cultural phenomenon being studied,

and a “complete participant” who becomes “native” to the setting without realizing his researcher role (Takyi, 2015).

In this study, I performed as a “participant-as-observer” in order to get a feel for what was happening in this setting. This means that, instead of being a passive onlooker, I joined the EFL office as an active “member” of it to watch, learn and engage in various professional activities such as classroom teaching, group meetings, lesson preparation, and the grading work. For instance, with the participants’ permission, I could visit their classes and carefully observed how they organized classroom activities. For online lessons, I was given the password to enter the virtual classrooms as a visitor to watch how the teachers dealt with unexpected incidents such as sudden disconnection of the Internet. I paid great attention to potential causes of their vulnerability (e.g., student absenteeism), their spontaneous reactions to those causes, and their coping strategies. I attended staff meetings, listened to the faculty leaders’ presentations, and jotted down the views articulated by individual teachers. I also had a series of brief exchanges with the participants on whatever I perceived as the potential sources of professional vulnerability. More importantly, Peter invited me to teach one course (Advanced English Reading) from March 2021 to June 2021 and to grade the final examination papers. This served as a valuable opportunity for me to experience the participants’ professional vulnerability.

My general feeling was that my presence in the setting did not affect the teachers’ behavior significantly. They were generally candid about their vulnerable “stories”. For instance, I

could hear repeated complaints from the teachers about their low salaries, their bitter publishing experiences, the inefficient administration, and a lack of student interaction in class. I attempted to jot down interesting events as they occurred *in situ* and my immediate reflections on them so that they would not be lost in my memory (Mulhall, 2003).

In total, I observed twenty lessons (each lasted for 50 minutes), attended three staff meetings (each lasted for around one hour), prepared two lessons (each lasted for two hours), taught one course (32 instructional hours), and joined the grading work (lasted for two days).

Through sustained and routinized observation, I captured some aspects of teacher professional vulnerability that I did not know prior to the study. I also built rapport with the participants as they were accustomed to my presence and accepted me as a “legitimate” member of the EFL office. Some teachers even showed a great interest in my research project and expressed their willingness to collaborate with me in the future. To avoid going too “native” and losing my ability to analyze the data objectively, I retained my “outsider” perspectives of the setting. I went back and forth between the field notes and my conceptual framework to see if the latter may be refined or enriched.

My field observation also involves numerous informal talks with the participants. As an open-ended approach, informal talks are guided by “the spontaneous generation of questions in a natural interaction, typically one that occurs as part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork” (Gall et al., 2003, p. 239). They are more like conversations between “partners” than between the “researcher” and the “subjects” (Schutt, 1999). They are highly responsive

to situational changes and can help the researcher pursue information in whatever feasible direction (Patton, 2002). I had informal talks with the participants immediately after each observation period when those interesting “scenes” were still fresh in my mind. I shared with them how I thought about those “scenes” and invited them to comment on my interpretations. I also talked with them on various other occasions ranging from the short breaks between classes to lunch hours in the university canteen.

Informal talks proved fruitful. They helped me identify the aspects of professional vulnerability I would otherwise not discover. For instance, in WeChat group discussions, the participants described how some administrative units compelled them to fulfill tasks that were irrelevant to their professional development. This led me to conclude that “pointless formalities” which prevailed in the university administration may be an important source of the participants’ professional vulnerability.

3.4.3 Institutional documents

Institutional documents are also an important source of data. They serve as “social facts” that are produced, shared, and used in socially organized ways (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). During my fieldwork at XU, some institutional documents (e.g., job postings, teacher induction materials, contract format, and rules for position appointment) were accessed directly on the university website. In contrast, other documents (e.g., peer classroom observation reports) were obtained with the participants’ permission. Meanwhile, Peter periodically sent me some documents that he thought were relevant to this study, such as textbooks (N=4), course

syllabus (N=5), *Guidelines on College English Teaching* (2015 & 2020 edition) (N=2), *XU CE Course Construction Plan* (2020 edition) (N=1), *Reform Plan for EFL Courses* (N=1), grading brochure (N=1), promotion regulations (N=1), *Regulations on Course Selection and Teaching Evaluation* (N=2), *XU 2020-2025 Five Year Development Plan* (N=1), and performance appraisal forms (N=1).

The values of these documents are reflected in three aspects. First, they contain important information about institutional rules, regulations, and requirements. While reading these documents, I became more familiar with the performative work culture at XU. Second, these documents allowed me to identify potential sources of the participants' professional vulnerability. For instance, while reading the induction materials, I noticed that tenured positions were only provided for teachers with doctorates. This suggests that EFL teachers, many of whom only have master's degrees, may be pressured to pursue doctoral degrees in order to secure their jobs. So I added to the interview protocol several questions about the participants' views on the necessity of furthering their education. Third, by comparing the multiple drafts of some documents, I identified several policy changes that had taken place over a long period of time. For instance, before 2006, the teachers were not allowed to temporarily leave the teaching position to pursue higher academic degrees due to an inadequate EFL teaching force. However, since 2007, FH has required them to pursue higher degrees as the university was preparing for the upcoming national-scale undergraduate teaching assessments led by CMoE. Changes like this provided a basis for me to examine how institutional policies mediated the participants' professional vulnerability.

3.4.4 Social media

With the development of information technologies, social media has become an increasingly important source of qualitative data. McKenna et al. (2017) define social media as “computer-based tools (such as websites and apps) that enable people to create and share content with other people and/or participate in a community” (p. 88). Currently, social media are often related to web 2.0 applications (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) that are dependent on computer and mobile technologies (Fuchs, 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As a platform for synchronous and asynchronous communications, social media not only help individuals produce and disseminate meaningful content (Cohen, 2011), but also enable researchers to “lurk” in ready-made data sets to observe the participants’ activities and interactions over an extended time period (McKee, 2013; Taylor & Pagliari, 2018).

With the participants’ permission, I collected eighteen messages that they posted and circulated on WeChat, a commonly used Chinese instant messenger which “provides a multimodal platform for one-on-one and group interactions through text, audio and video” (Qi & Wang, 2018, p. 72). In the virtual community created by WeChat, the participants post their comments on specific issues and share various news and articles that arouse their interest. I paid particular attention to those messages indicative of the participants’ vulnerability, perceptions, and coping strategies.

To facilitate the co-construction of meanings, I created a WeChat group wherein the participants were invited to discuss vulnerability-related topics with each other on a weekly

basis. The topics were centered around the salient themes that emerged from my field observation and did not cover personal or sensitive issues that may induce uneasiness on the participants. For instance, after observing classroom teaching for two weeks, I initiated a group discussion on the students' unwillingness to communicate in class and encouraged the participants to share their views on this problem. I received many responses from the participants. To minimize the influence of my subjectivity, I did not question the participants' views during the discussions. Instead, I acted as a moderator whose primary task was to initiate questions, control the directions, and stay open to whatever the participants articulated. Thus, WeChat provides the participants a comfortable environment to discuss controversial issues. While observing their ongoing interactions in the WeChat group, I identified similarities and differences among the participants in terms of how they perceived and coped with their professional vulnerability.

3.4.5 Reflective journal

Qualitative researchers need to take a reflective stance towards the impact that their subjectivity and positionality can have on the research outcomes (Stanley, 2013). In qualitative research, reflexivity is associated with “examining how the researcher and intersubjective elements impact on and transform research” (Finlay, 2003, p. 4). It enables the researcher to clarify the incongruence between data and his conceptual framework, acknowledge the limitations in his prior assumptions, and generate deeper insights into the cultural phenomenon being studied (Birks et al., 2008; Watt, 2007). So reflexivity is conducive to analytical thinking and theory development (Vicary et al., 2017).

To facilitate reflexivity, I kept altogether 20 reflective journals throughout the data collection period. Maxwell (1996) argues that reflective journals can help the researcher “convert thought into a form that allows examination and further manipulation” (p. 11). Therefore, I documented in detail my “insider” experiences, particularly the dilemmas I encountered and the decisions I made along with the progression of the study. This was done when something interesting (e.g., the grading practice) stimulated me to explore further, or when sufficient data had been collected for close examination.

Keeping reflective journals benefited this study in two aspects. First, it enabled me to keep track of events occurring in the field. For instance, through reading my reflection on what happened on Teachers’ Day, I concluded that external recognition and respect served as an essential professional interest for the participants. A lack of such recognition from the administration and the students can increase the teachers’ sense of professional vulnerability. Second, keeping journals allowed me to capture the shifting nature of my epistemological and ontological assumptions, which was crucial for mitigating the influences of my subjectivity. This could be illustrated by my reflection on the participants’ online teaching performance during the pandemic. They demonstrated a high level of agency in operating the online teaching platform, familiarizing themselves with the software, and arranging online exams. This contrasted with my prior assumption that university EFL teachers from socioeconomically underdeveloped areas (e.g., northwestern China) may lack the technological literacy necessary for conducting online teaching.

3.5 Data analysis

Prior to data analysis, I transcribed all the interviews verbatim and word-processed them with field notes, documents, WeChat messages, and reflective journals. The files were stored on the desktop and then imported into the qualitative data analysis software program NVivo 12 for coding and categorization. Following that, the dual approach of “top-down” and “bottom-up” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), which enabled me to move between the data set and tentative conceptual framework iteratively and recursively, was employed to attain a holistic portrayal of the participants’ vulnerable experience.

3.5.1 Data analysis from top down

According to LeCompte and Schensul (1999), “top-down” is a deductive analyzing process which involves “dividing data into piles according to their congruity with the principal concepts informing a program” (p. 47). Qualitative researchers do not begin data analysis with a blank sheet, as they already have multiple pre-established assumptions about the phenomenon under investigation (Tsui, 2012). These assumptions not only provide the researcher with concepts that may be directly used as initial codes but also serve as points of reference when researchers are interpreting the data.

I began analyzing the interview data with a “start list” of concepts (e.g., “vulnerable population”, “micropolitical actions”, and “iteration”) undergirding the tentative conceptual framework. For instance, the notions of “open vulnerability” and “protective vulnerability” (Lasky, 2005) were used to identify meaningful units that are indicative of the participants’

positive (e.g., *“why not take it [vulnerability] as a driving force”*, Dora, interview 2) or negative (e.g., *“I won’t play the game”*, Vivian, interview 2) stances towards certain aspects of their professional vulnerability. Another example pertains to my adoption of “iteration”, “projectivity”, and “practical-evaluation” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) as initial codes for segments that reflect how the participants’ responses towards professional vulnerability are mediated by their past experience (e.g., *“According to my own learning experience, grammar is foundation of language learning”*, Dora, interview 1), influenced by contingencies of the present (e.g., *“we can only comply with it”*, Peter, interview 2), and directed towards the future (e.g., *“it’s my dream to become a researcher”*, Fiona, interview 2).

A similar approach was used in analyzing field notes, documents, WeChat messages, and reflective journals. For instance, informed by such concepts as “effectiveness”, “marketization”, and “quantification”, I meticulously read all the institutional documents to identify elements of the performative ideology (e.g., *“Eligible applicants for associate professorship must have at least three articles published in Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI) journals or equivalents”*, *XU Promotion Regulation*) which might add to the participants’ experience of professional vulnerability. I also marked striking sections that could be further explored in subsequent interviews. For instance, while reading my field notes on Peter’s observed lesson, I was attracted to his emotional response towards a student who arrived late to class. Although this section was roughly coded under the category of “practical-evaluation”, it raised a serious question about the reasons behind his emotional responses. Thus, I added one more question (i.e., *“Why were you so angry about the*

student?”) in subsequent interview, with the aim of uncovering factors mediating Peter’s sense of vulnerability related to students’ misbehavior.

3.5.2 Data analysis from bottom up

While the “top-down” approach provided me with a set of ready-made codes that could be used to roughly categorize the data, my prior conceptions were not always congruent with the data set. In particular, there were multiple themes within the data set that the tentative conceptual framework failed to capture or could not explain adequately (as is illustrated by my experience of interpreting Peter’s reaction towards student misbehavior). Therefore, I also adopted the “bottom-up” approach as a complement to the “top-down” approach.

In contrast to “top-down”, “bottom-up” is “a systematic inductive thought process that clumps together individual items at the specific level into more abstract statements about the general characteristics of those items as a group” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 68). In other words, salient themes or categories that were of potential relevance to the research questions were constructed from the data rather than from any pre-established conceptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Table 3.6 demonstrates how the “bottom-up” approach was performed.

The initial coding began with a process of carefully reading the data to get an impression of the participants’ overall experience of professional vulnerability. This process allowed me to generate multiple recurring patterns that were organized around specific “indigenous

concepts” (Patton, 2002) used by the participants to describe their experience of professional vulnerability. For instance, Fiona repeatedly mentioned “self-esteem” (e.g., “*I won’t comply with their [administrators] decisions at the cost of my self-esteem*”, interview 3) as an ethical stance that she would take when coping with her vulnerability related to the administrators’ disrespectful behavior. Thus, “adhering to self-esteem” was used to codify segments that were of semantic relevance (i.e., indicating the important role of “self-esteem” in Fiona’s experience of professional vulnerability).

In the second stage, I examined all the initial codes systematically for “recurring regularities” (Patton, 2003, p. 11). In particular, I put them under different higher-order categories based on their “internal homogeneity” (i.e., the extent to which the initial codes cohere in a meaningful way) and “external heterogeneity” (i.e., the extent to which differences among the initial codes are discernible) (Patton, 2003, p. 11). For instance, codes such as “expressing empathy to a student struggling with his study” and “delivering food to the students while the campus was locked down” were categorized as “rapport-building”, which indicated a proactive approach towards professional vulnerability. A new category was created if I found one code was not compatible with other categories at hand.

Finally, I contrasted all the categories with each other to form overarching themes which led to the refinement of the tentative conceptual framework. This was performed through “within-case analysis” and “cross-case analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Regarding within-case analysis, I carefully examined the experiential account of each participant with

reference to the categories developed in the previous stage. This allowed me to become intimately familiar with each participant and generate insights into what was unique about the participant. Meanwhile, I conducted “cross-case analysis” in search of commonalities and differences in the participants’ experience of professional vulnerability. I sought to synthesize my own knowledge about each participant and to construct broader themes that may properly explain the complex nature of teacher vulnerability. For instance, through comparing the participants’ accounts of their experiences with student evaluation, I found that these teachers’ professional vulnerability pertained to a strong feeling that their claimed authority and autonomy as qualified university EFL teachers was put at stake. This finding, coupled with the participants’ descriptions of some disrespectful behaviors of the administrators and students, led me to conclude that a lack of social recognition served as an important source of teacher vulnerability.

In summary, the combination of “top-down” and “bottom-up” analysis proved an effective approach to weaving a rich fabric of description and observation (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In particular, I could dig into a large volume of qualitative data to examine the unique experience of individual participants and to identify shared patterns in their accounts of professional vulnerability. More importantly, this approach allowed me to examine the appropriateness and applicability of the tentative conceptual framework in the specific setting of XU and to refine it in light of the emerging themes in the data.

Table 3.6 Examples of the “bottom-up” approach

Segments of Data	Initial Code	Category	Theme
We dare not think about changing the way administration functions.	Lacking the courage and ability to change the status quo	Compliance	Passivity (lacking agency)
We can't change or get rid of it unless we have the power.			
We must follow with the rules because complaints are useless.	Lacking the will to communicate or argue with administrators		
The teachers did not argue with the TAO staff as they knew that that was the way TAO operates.			
I don't really care about the results (of the student evaluation)	Being indifferent to student evaluation	Disengagement	
Why should I care about how others evaluate my teaching performance?			
I'm immune to those harsh comments.			
It's too late for a mid-career teacher like me to pursue a doctoral degree.	Reluctance to furthering education		
I've no plan (to pursue a doctoral degree) as I have already missed the chance.			

3.5.3 The issue of translation

In qualitative research where more than one language is used in data collection and analysis, the issue of translation poses epistemological and methodological challenges for the researcher. It deals with the distance between the actual meanings conveyed by source texts and the meanings interpreted in target texts (Temple & Young, 2004).

As mentioned earlier, Mandarin Chinese and English are used in data collection and presentation respectively. Thus, I adopted two strategies to reduce the potential loss of meanings caused by the act of translation and thereby strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. First, informed by Halai (2007), I carefully checked the words and expressions in

the source excerpts to see whether there are any equivalents in standard English; if that is the case, the equivalent English words and expressions are used. Otherwise, I used the quotes directly from the source texts and provided an English explanation. As an example, to deal with the concept of “*tang ping*”, which a participant mentioned in the interview, I directly used this word in the excerpt while adding the English explanation (i.e., a mentality that many young people in China adopt to withdraw from all forms of social competitions) to it. Second, as suggested by Edwards (1998), back translation can be used to evaluate the equivalence between source and target texts. Thus, I translated the excerpts from Chinese to English and vice versa to avoid ambiguities and ensure greater accuracy.

3.6 Credibility and ethics of the study

Another issue central to qualitative research concerns the establishment of credibility, which refers to “the element that allows others to recognize the experiences contained within the study through the interpretation of participants’ experiences” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 152). Qualitative researchers normally use credibility to describe the trustworthiness of their interpretations of the cultural phenomena being studied (James & Busher, 2006).

I adopted two techniques to ensure the credibility of the findings. The first technique is “triangulation”, which refers to “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (Denzin, 1989, p. 234). There are four types of triangulation: data triangulation refers to observing a social phenomenon under a variety of conditions (e.g., persons, places, and time); investigator triangulation refers to the involvement of more than one researcher in

the analysis of the data; theory triangulation emphasizes the use of more than one theoretical perspective to examine the data; methodological triangulation is related to the use of multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, documents, and reflective journals (Denzin, 1989). The credibility of this study is enhanced through “data triangulation” and “methodological triangulation”. In terms of “data triangulation”, I observed the participants’ professional practice on different occasions (e.g., classroom teaching and faculty meetings) and in different periods of the semester (e.g., at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end). This technique enabled me to obtain rich information about the multiple aspects of the participants’ professional lives and to examine the dynamic and shifting nature of their professional vulnerability over an extended period of time (Lasky, 2005). In terms of “methodological triangulation”, I drew on data collected from multiple sources such as interviews, field observation, documents, social media messages, and reflective journals. The collected data was then compared and contrasted with each other to inform my interpretation of the participants’ behavior and conceptualization of their professional vulnerability in the system of performativity.

The second technique is “member-checking”, which Glesne (2006) defines as “sharing interview transcripts, analytical thoughts, and/or drafts of the final report with research participants to make sure you are representing them and their ideas accurately” (p. 38).

During the study, this technique enabled me to identify several inaccuracies of the interpretations of the data. For instance, while reading my initial analysis of the data, Fiona said that the “mainstream system” appeared in her description of her publishing experiences

referred to “the editors and publishers” rather than “the EFL teaching community” (informal talk, 25/09/2020). In another informal talk, Joe rectified my misinterpretation of “outdatedness” appeared in his comments on research policies. He said what he intended to express was not that EFL academics “should not be required to do research at all”. Instead, he meant “more emphasis should be placed on teaching rather than research” (informal talk, 10/08/2020). Thus, the technique of “member-checking” proves helpful in enhancing the trustworthiness of the data.

Qualitative researchers are also inclined to view ethics as a part of their everyday research practice (Jones, 2010). Guillemin and Gillam (2004) suggest two dimensions of research ethics: “procedural ethics” (i.e., seeking approval from the ethics committee and consent from the participants) and “ethics in practice” (i.e., dealing with the emerging ethical issues in the process of data collection). In terms of procedural ethics, approval was sought from the Ethics committee of The Education University of Hong Kong before I embarked on the project. I also briefed the participants and dean of FH at XU on the aims, purposes, and nature of this study so that I could conduct interviews, engage with field observations, and access important documents. Pseudonyms were adopted to guarantee the anonymity of the participants and the research site. In terms of “ethics in practice”, I meticulously attended to various ethical issues that emerged during the data collection process. For instance, I stopped audio-recording the interview when one of the participants did not wish his complaints about the dean of FH to be recorded. I did not include another participant’s remarks on the ideological issues related to the CE curriculum in the data upon his request.

I was also mindful of the ethical dilemmas in collecting data from social media. While social media serve as a “public space” within which the participants can share their views, this does not mean that the participants consent to have their online information collected, analyzed, and disseminated to potential audiences (McKee, 2013). Hence, social media has no clear divisions between the “public” and “private” spheres. Meanwhile, there has been many cases in which the participants were eventually traced and identified by determined individuals through examining the data indicative of their identities (Zimmer, 2010). Therefore, given the complicated nature of the ethical issues related to social media, I took several measures to protect the participants’ anonymity. For instance, I sought consent from the participants to collect excerpts from their WeChat pages. I constantly asked myself how I would feel if I had my messages disseminated to the public (McKee, 2013). Mindful of the participative nature of ethics (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Jones, 2010), I also invited the participants to check the data and decide with me what should be retracted or deleted.

3.7 Researcher positionality

Qualitative researchers need to constantly reflect on their positionality, given that the production of knowledge is mediated by how they see themselves and are seen by others (Merriam, 2002). Bourke (2014) argues that positionality represents “a space in which objectivism and subjectivism meet” (p. 3). In this study, my positionality is based on the belief that I am both “a novice researcher” (seeking to develop an objective understanding of the participants’ vulnerable experiences) and “a former university EFL teachers” (with some prior knowledge about the EFL teaching profession).

First, as “a former university EFL teacher” with more than five years of teaching experience, I came to the setting with a set of pre-established beliefs about the various factors shaping the professional vulnerability of university EFL teachers in mainland China: large classroom size, the pressure of teaching to the test, a large proportion of students who are unwilling to communicate in class, and the dominance of a structural approach to language teaching. Sharing my previous work experience with the participants allowed me to build rapport with them. In particular, after hearing my “vulnerable” stories (e.g., the arduous process of grading at the end of each semester), some participants considered me a trustworthy friend with whom they could share their own stories of professional vulnerability.

Meanwhile, I kept a distance from the “former university EFL teacher” role so that my subjectivity would not inhibit me from analyzing the data objectively. I knew that professional vulnerability varied across contexts (Kelchtermans, 1993); therefore, part of my prior knowledge about university EFL teachers might not be applicable to specific context of XU. As “a novice researcher”, I sought to examine and interpret the specific conditions at XU. I allowed the participants to express their views freely. I remained open with whatever emerged from the setting and kept thinking about what could be done to refine the tentative conceptual framework. For instance, I discovered that non-tenured young EFL teachers might be more resourceful and agentive than their senior colleagues in coping with professional vulnerability. This contrasted with my prior work experience. I also reflected on the power relations embedded in data collection and managed to build respectful relationships with the participants. Thus, I invited the participants for their comments on the research findings.

In addition, it is advocated that qualitative researchers help the participants form a sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon being studied and empower them to transform their status quo (Pillow, 2003). Initially, I was uncertain whether my involvement in the research would bring any positive changes to the participants, given the explicit distance between my identity as a novice researcher and their identity as in-service teachers. However, with the progression of the study, the participants showed great interest in my role as a PhD student from Hong Kong and my research background. Some of them even considered me a trustworthy friend with whom they could exchange views on foreign language education and research. Joe and Dora asked me to comment on their teaching. They found my comments interesting and useful. After reading the information sheet, Fiona and Vivian expressed an interest in this study and exchanged with me on how to design and conduct qualitative research. They unanimously agreed that participating in this study deepened their understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the university EFL teaching profession. Dora even sought advice from me on how to apply for a PhD in Hong Kong. She held that pursuing a doctorate in language education and relevant fields is necessary for a university EFL teacher's ongoing professional development. These are evidence of "reciprocity" between the researcher and the participants in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings in order to demonstrate the complexity of the participants' professional vulnerability. It comprises six sections, reflecting the major themes generated from the data: general perceptions of professional vulnerability, vulnerability and teaching practice, vulnerability and research practice, vulnerability and administration, vulnerability and social recognition, and vulnerability and language proficiency. Each section comprises several sub-sections, presenting the most relevant data for understanding the participants' professional vulnerability.

4.1 General perceptions of professional vulnerability

I began the first round of interviews by asking the participants why they chose tertiary EFL teaching as their life-long career and how they thought about their career lives. My purpose is to examine if there are any notable gaps between the participants' imagined and real career lives, which may serve as indicators of their professional vulnerability.

4.1.1 Motivations to become university EFL teachers

The participants explained various motivations behind their career decisions. Some of these motivations are intrinsic, while others are extrinsic. For instance, reflecting on her motivation for entering the EFL teaching profession, Fiona said:

Excerpt 1

I have been teaching for more than thirty years. In the past, we had little pressure to do research, and our primary task was to teach. ...I chose it because I believed that

this job could help protect my self-esteem, that is, I could focus wholeheartedly on language teaching without worrying about other stuff. I have a passion for language because it can help improve my critical thinking ability. (Fiona, interview 1).

This excerpt reveals two intrinsic motivations behind Fiona’s career choice: a need to protect her self-esteem and a passion for language teaching. As she explained in an informal talk (10/09/2020), this profession induced a sense of accomplishment on her because teaching the English language allowed her to “influence the mentality of the younger generations in a subtle way”. This sense of accomplishment supports her continuous investment in the EFL teaching profession.

In comparison, the other participants’ career choices are more influenced by extrinsic motivations related to the attractions external to the teaching, such as “financial stability” (Peter, Joe), “flexible work schedule” (Vivian, Peter, Dora), “housing subsidies” (Joe), “vacations” (Joe, Dora), and “simple interpersonal relationships” (Vivian):

Excerpt 2

There were urgent demands for university EFL teachers. I had many choices. But I chose to be a university EFL teacher. ... The teaching profession was an “iron bowl”. I didn’t need to worry about unemployment. The university even allocated a “welfare” apartment to me. ... Teaching is everything at that time. There were no such things as doing research or student evaluations. So I felt quite relaxed and thought, “Let me keep this state forever”. (Joe, interview 1)

Apparently, Joe was attracted to the EFL teaching profession by the seemingly favorable working conditions at the university many years ago. His early career experience is shared by the veteran teachers in his office. Specifically, many mid and late-career teachers were nostalgic for those “good old days” when they enjoyed a relatively higher position in the university academic hierarchy: they were not required to fulfill non-teaching tasks; the students were hard-working and polite; they were not evaluated regularly by different agencies. As Lynn puts it, “university EFL teaching was regarded as a decent and admirable profession at that time” (interview). Although they encountered some challenges such as managing the class and preparing the students for the exams in their teaching practice, they were largely satisfied with what the EFL teaching profession offered them.

4.1.2 An emerging sense of professional vulnerability

While the participants are largely satisfied with their early-career experiences, their attitudes towards the university EFL teaching profession have undergone significant changes over the past few years. When I introduced the notion of “professional vulnerability” to the participants, they instinctively nodded and acknowledged outright that they felt vulnerable to multiple challenges in their ongoing professional development:

Excerpt 3

When I hear the term “*professional vulnerability*”, I could not help thinking of pressure, obstacles, or something that I couldn’t overcome on my own. Even if I work hard, I’m deemed to encounter a “bottleneck” or some insurmountable difficulties. There are many aspects that I cannot control. Even those aspects I used to have control over are subject to simplified quantification now. (Fiona, interview 1)

This excerpt shows that Fiona initially describes “professional vulnerability” in a negative light, as is illustrated by her use of such words as “pressure”, “obstacle”, and “bottleneck”. The phrase “could not help thinking of” indicates that she instinctively associates “professional vulnerability” with a situation wherein she does not have a full control of her professional practice. In a similar vein, Dora perceives coping with “professional vulnerability” as “far beyond my capacity”:

Excerpt 4

I’m faced with a lot of challenges, but I can’t address them all. I feel powerless and fragile. ...If I could fulfill those tasks, I would not feel vulnerable. However, it is far beyond my capacity (to fulfill the tasks). (Dora, interview 1)

Apparently, Dora’s experience of “professional vulnerability” is imbued with negative feelings of “powerless and fragile”. The reason for her negative feelings lies in the fact that she could not fulfill the “performative tasks” imposed on her by the university.

Excerpt 5

I have a sense of crisis, fearing that I may lose my job. ...In the past, I was vulnerable to such challenges as managing the class and heavy workload, but I could bear it because I got an “iron bowl”. Now I’m a bit worried about how long I could remain in this position. If fewer and fewer students selected my course, would I be appointed to other positions? (Joe, interview 1)

As the above excerpt shows, Joe’s experience of “professional vulnerability” is linked to the pressure to maintain his position. Despite his “tenured teacher” status with an “iron bowl”, he

is vulnerable to reappointment which is likely to occur if “fewer and fewer students” select his course. In comparison, as a “non-tenured” teacher, Vivian appears to be more worried about contract renewal:

Excerpt 6

I love teaching, so I was devoted (to teaching) in the beginning. However, the past few years have made me feel unhappy. Every now and then, I doubt if I have made the right choice or not. ...I have many tasks to accomplish. I’m worried about getting low scores in various evaluations. I’m worried that my contract would be terminated at any time. I’m worried about losing my job. ...No matter how hard I try, I don’t feel happy. (Vivian, interview 1)

So while Vivian has a great interest in EFL teaching, she feels vulnerable to myriad stressors linked with performative tasks, student evaluations, and contract renewal. This strong sense of professional vulnerability has led Vivian to call into question her career choice motivation and taken a toll on her self-efficacy. Her point is echoed by Peter, referring to his past work experience:

Excerpt 7

It is an incremental feeling. For example, the first few years of my work at XU was full of “happiness”. This job brought me a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. ...However, I’m becoming increasingly vulnerable in recent years: the university keeps putting forward new requirements. Most of them are about research and management. My stress has never been reduced. I have little control over what I am doing. This makes me sick. (Peter, interview 1)

The phrase “an incremental feeling” is indicative of Peter’s perception of “professional vulnerability” as a dynamic construct. In particular, professional vulnerability has become an increasingly significant aspect of his career life in recent years. It is linked to increased stressors and a lack of control over his professional practice.

The above excerpts illustrate the participants’ negative framings of professional vulnerability, which are largely shaped by the shifting working conditions at XU. In their early career years, the participants experienced a low level of professional vulnerability: They were free from the incessant pressure to “perform” and could fully engage with their teaching practice. In recent years, however, the implementation of performativity has changed the working conditions at XU in ways that the participants are not familiar with, agree with, or support. As a result, the participants are experiencing a growing sense of professional vulnerability.

Given that all the participants acknowledged the vulnerable aspect of their professional practice, I continued to explore their perceptions of “vulnerable population”. In a WeChat group discussion (10/03/2020), the participants unanimously agreed that they were members of a “vulnerable population” that needed external assistance. For instance, Peter argues that the university EFL teachers have some features that are shared by “vulnerable populations”:

Excerpt 8

Of course, we are (a vulnerable population). We have low salaries. We are marginalized in this university. We have enormous pressure to meet the requirements. ... We share all the features of a vulnerable population. (Peter)

Dora makes a similar point, arguing that it is not a shameful act to disclose their vulnerability to others:

Excerpt 9

There's nothing to be ashamed of telling others that we are a vulnerable population. We have all those features (of a "vulnerable population). We can't deny it. (Dora)

Vivian expands the discussion, highlighting the pivotal role of university in helping them address professional vulnerability. She also perceives professional vulnerability as a shared experience among EFL teachers across different universities:

Excerpt 10

I believe we are. After all, we can't overcome professional vulnerability without the help of the university. ...I have many friends teaching English in other universities. They have similar experiences. (Vivian)

Fiona places great emphasis on acknowledging their professional vulnerability. She used the metaphor of ostrich to describe the act of hiding professional vulnerability in front of others:

Excerpt 11

We must boldly acknowledge our vulnerability. To deny (that we are a vulnerable population) is to bury the head in the sand like an ostrich. (Fiona)

Joe comments on Fiona's view, arguing that vulnerability exists across professions and university EFL teachers are no exception:

Excerpt 12

All professions are vulnerable. ...Some professions may be more vulnerable than us, but we are still a vulnerable population. (Joe)

The above excerpts demonstrate that the participants are not insulted by the notion of “vulnerable population”. They take an open stance towards their status as a “vulnerable population” by willingly disclosing the vulnerable nature of their professional practice.

With the study approaching its end, however, some participants had undergone changes in their initial perceptions of vulnerability and its impact on teacher professional development. They dismissed the idea that professional vulnerability was a purely negative state and voiced a need to embrace and live with vulnerability. The following excerpts are illustrative of this attitudinal shift:

Excerpt 13

I’m vulnerable. However, I feel less vulnerable whenever I look at other professions. Many people lost their jobs during the pandemic. My friend couldn’t even pay the mortgage. ...As long as I think about these, I feel lucky because this profession is more stable than other professions: The university keeps paying salaries, and the three-month vacations offer me plenty of time to be with my family. I feel safe. ...So I should be grateful. (Vivian, interview 3)

This excerpt shows that Vivian dilutes the negative impact that professional vulnerability on her psychological well-being through comparing her vulnerable experience with that of other professions. In particular, professional benefits such as economic stability and vocation that

are linked to EFL teaching trigger positive emotions of feeling “lucky”, “safe”, and “grateful” on Vivian, making her feel less vulnerable.

Excerpt 14

All professions are vulnerable. It doesn't matter where we are and which university we work at. We often complain about being vulnerable, but why not take action to change the situation? It is a part of this profession. If you can't bear it, just resign. But if you don't want to resign, learn to live with it. Complaints won't solve the problem. Why not take it as a driving force? (Dora, interview 2)

Dora seems to take a more positive stance towards vulnerability as “a driving force” to her professional development. Viewing vulnerability as a universal condition of all professions, she articulates a need to enact her agency to “live with it”. Similarly, Joe develops a balanced view towards professional vulnerability and becomes aware of its constructive role in helping his personal growth:

Excerpt 15

I've been contemplating the notion of vulnerability over the past few months. While it entails crisis, it also predicts opportunities. It is a driving force and a stimulus. Self-improvement is achieved in the process of coping with it. (Joe, interview 3)

Thus, professional vulnerability is a dynamic construct that hinges upon how the participants experience and conceptualize it across situations. The participants are not necessarily passive in experiencing professional vulnerability. They can be agents of change who are capable of coping with professional vulnerability. As Dora puts it, “we are human beings, so we can

always come up with solutions to it” (posted message on WeChat, 12/05/2021). Through constantly reflecting on their day-to-day professional practice, they are likely to ameliorate the negative impact of professional vulnerability on their self-confidence and self-esteem.

To summarize, while the participants were attracted to the university EFL teaching profession by various intrinsic and extrinsic factors, they have been experiencing a growing sense of professional vulnerability over the past few years due to the shifting work conditions brought by performativity. However, there seems to be a lot of confusion around the sources of their professional vulnerability under the system of performativity. At the same time, while their changed perceptions of professional vulnerability entail a sense of agency and empowerment, it remains unclear what strategies are adopted by the participants to cope with their professional vulnerability. These will be touched upon in the following sections.

4.2 Vulnerability and teaching practice

In some ways, teaching practice is the most crucial source of the participants’ professional vulnerability. This is because all the participants are appointed as teaching-oriented faculty members whose primary obligations are EFL teaching and other related activities aimed at preparing the students for the high-stakes CET and postgraduate entrance exams (based on *XU CE Course Construction Plan*, 2020 edition). Explaining their reasons for choosing teaching-oriented positions, the participants argued that teaching tasks seemed more “accomplishable” (WeChat group discussion, 15/04/2020) than other tasks like research.

However, this does not necessarily mean that their teaching practice is free of vulnerability.

Indeed, teaching vulnerability seems to be the most immediate and persistent issue facing the participants. Under the system of performativity, the participant's teaching vulnerability pertains to a general lack of learning motivation among the students, using educational technologies in the class, and the negative impact of the course selection and student evaluation mechanisms.

4.2.1 A general lack of learning motivation among the students

All the participants agree that they are vulnerable to a general lack of learning motivation among the students, which is manifested in such behaviors as unwillingness to participate in group activities, deferment of home assignments, and chronic truancy (based on WeChat group discussion, 15/04/2020). My field experiences testify to the very existence of such vulnerability:

Excerpt 16

Although the teachers check the attendance regularly, many students play truant. Once in Joe's class, around half of the students were absent. ...Sometimes, the students do not even hide their lack of interest in the course. Once in Peter's class, the students unanimously took seats in the back rows. It may be because Peter told them that he would ask some students to perform a dialogue on the lectern. So when Peter asked if any volunteers would like to perform, they all lowered their heads in order to avoid direct eye contact with him. ...Occasionally, I could catch a handful of students taking a nap, chatting with their neighbors, or playing games on mobile phones. They may withdraw during the class. As for my teaching, some students who had been absent for nearly a whole semester appeared in the class in the final

week. The reason might be that they simply wanted to hear me talking about the exam. (Reflective journal, 20/05/2021)

Among the participants, Vivian seems particularly vulnerable to the students' lack of learning motivation. Transcending her past experience as an undergraduate student at a foreign language university to her current teaching practice at a polytechnic university, Vivian experiences a significant tension between her imagined and real career life, which can be illustrated by the following "critical incident":

Excerpt 17

When I was at university, the learning climate was very good. The majority of the students were hardworking. I was so proud to be one of them and wished to become an EFL teacher in the future. I had never thought that I would be a vulnerable EFL teacher. However, after teaching for a couple of months, I felt vulnerable. They never paid attention to me. I asked the monitor, "I saw you guys absent-minded, so don't you like the course?" To my surprise, he stared at me and said, "Frankly, I don't see the point of learning English in university." The expression on his face made me depressed. I cried a lot that night. (Vivian, interview 1)

According to Vivian, that incident triggered a strong sense of disillusionment on her because the students did not seem to recognize the great efforts she that had made to prepare the lessons. Being vulnerable to the students' lack of EFL learning motivation, Vivian is apprehensive about her career prospect and keeps wondering how long she may remain in this profession:

Excerpt 18

I know that they (the students) may not love English as much as I do, but their antipathy towards English was beyond my expectation. I couldn't change their attitudes towards English. I became worried. I thought that they didn't like my teaching style. ...What should I do to make them love me? If they didn't like me, they would not select my course for the following semester. ...My class would be terminated. I would not be able to meet the requirement for workload. To make matters worse, I may be allocated to other positions or even be fired. ...It's a chain reaction. (Vivian, interview 1).

As Vivian is not a tenured teacher like the other participants, it is not difficult to understand why she is so concerned about this vulnerability: The students' lack of EFL learning motivation might be interpreted by TAO as an indicator of her incompetence in EFL teaching, and this could mean an early termination of her job contract. Therefore, this vulnerability is interconnected with a sense of insecurity. Nevertheless, veteran teachers like Joe also experience such vulnerability:

Excerpt 19

In my early career years of teaching, the students were hardworking. They always gave you much feedback and used every opportunity to ask questions that they encountered in their learning process. You could feel that the efforts you made were worthwhile. ...However, I have become more vulnerable to disengaged students. It seems that they are not as hardworking as their predecessors. Few of them listened to me in class. ...I feel tired of motivating them. (Joe, interview 1)

In a later talk (17/04/2020), Joe said that his teaching was vulnerable to “dilemma situations” in which the students were unwilling to participate in “designed pair/group activities”. For instance, in his *Advanced Audio-video English* course, Joe invited the students to participate in short role-plays based on different lesson themes such as campus life, shopping and sports. He wanted to encourage the students to use target-language structures and act them out in the front of the classroom. From his perspective, such activities provide most students with valuable opportunities to improve their oral fluency. However, as I observed, many students simply read their textbooks or recited the model dialogues they found elsewhere. Lee, who was Joe’s student two years ago, explained his perception of this phenomenon:

Excerpt 20

We don’t want to make grammatical mistakes. We are afraid that if we made mistakes, Joe would give a low rating of our daily performance. So the safest way is to find a model script online, memorize it, and then recite it. Meanwhile, this activity has little to do with the final exam. We would like to spend more time on it if it were related to the final exam. (Lee, interview)

In a WeChat group discussion (30/09/2020), the teachers shared various reasons behind the students’ explicit lack of EFL learning motivation. For instance, citing a lesson on the retirement of David Beckham, a former English footballer, Fiona said that the “outdated teaching materials” may be a demotivating factor in students’ EFL learning. Joe and Peter attributed the students’ inattentiveness in class to electronic products. They argued that current students were “addicted to” electronic products such as mobile phones in class for non-academic purposes. Vivian and Dora attributed the students’ unwillingness to speak in

class to their inadequate English language proficiency. They considered the majority of the students as “low-intermediate EFL learners”. This is confirmed in my classroom observation:

Excerpt 21

The students’ language output is quite limited. Many only produced isolated words like “yes” or “no” to answer the questions. The few students with seemingly higher proficiency levels produced incomplete or ungrammatical sentences. They could not argue their opinions or understand what their partners were talking about. (Reflective journal, 16/09/2020)

Thus, the students’ inadequate English proficiency makes the participants vulnerable to a dilemma: while they are teaching English, they must analyze the texts and explain the grammatical structures in Chinese so that the students can properly understand their views. This means that the participants are unlikely to provide the students with sufficient language input, which is essential for improving their EFL proficiency.

4.2.2 The pressure to use educational technologies

Using educational technologies in the classroom is another important aspect of the participants’ teaching vulnerability. During the study, the participants frequently mentioned how their use of educational technologies in the classroom was vulnerable to multiple challenges. This problem was complicated by the pandemic, during which the participants were compelled to shift their teaching mode from a face-to-face environment to a completely online one.

4.2.2.1 Overall experiences in using educational technologies

Using educational technologies is salient in Fiona's description of her teaching vulnerability. She experiences a strong sense of "technological vulnerability" (interview 1) in her teaching practice because the technology-facilitated teaching mode is somewhat different from the conventional teaching mode that she has been accustomed to since her induction three decades ago. She made the following statement, citing her teaching of the *Selective Readings of British Literature* course:

Excerpt 22

I'd prefer the conventional method to teach *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Sonnet Eighteen*: I read the text first and analyze it. Then I invite the students to raise questions. ...In comparison, younger teachers may prepare a lot of audio-visual materials like film clips to make the lessons more attractive. I remember one of my colleagues used a clip from *My Own Swordsman* (a Chinese action drama) to explain the meaning of the famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be, that's a question". Although the clip was a bit mischievous, the students were really excited. ...So I'm struggling with this technological vulnerability. It really hard for me to master such skills as editing and dubbing. Some students even complained about my old-school teaching method in the evaluation form. (Fiona, interview 2).

The other participants seem to experience greater vulnerability in integrating educational technologies with their teaching practice. This may be due to the fact that they are engaged in the teaching of CE to prepare the students for the high-stakes exams such as CET-4 and 6, both of which are subject to the influences of institutional and national policies. For instance,

in response to the national “Double World-Class Project”² and the goal to build 10,000 “Golden Courses”³, XU has been implementing an undergraduate education reform in recent years. This reform aims to develop a number of high-quality online courses for students with diverse learning needs. It emphasizes incorporating educational technologies into teaching general courses such as CE.

However, there exists confusion among the participants regarding the role that educational technologies play in their teaching practice. The following excerpts extracted from a WeChat group discussion (08/10/2020) about the use of technology in the classroom illustrate such confusion:

Excerpt 23

I mainly use PowerPoint in class. However, does PowerPoint meet TAO’s criteria for “technology”? (Peter)

This excerpt reflects Peter is confused about what count as “real” technologies. Joe expresses a similar concern:

² The “Double World-Class Project” was launched by the Ministries of Education and Finance and the National Commission for Development and Reform in 2017 to promote the construction of many world-class universities and first-class academic disciplines (Song et al., 2021). It aims to help universities, particularly the fewer elite ones, optimize their disciplinary and institutional structures through government funding and policy favor. Unlike prior initiatives such as Project 211 and Project 985, the “Double World-Class Project” runs on a five-year cycle and employs dynamic adjustment to regulate the funding and the number of selected universities and disciplines. Therefore, it brings in a competition mechanism that can potentially break the labelling effect by encouraging all universities to strive for greater excellence in teaching and academic research output (Peters & Besley, 2018)

³ “Golden courses”, which is against “water courses”, is the rhetoric used by CMoE to refer to a series of innovative and challenging first-class courses (CMoE, 2019).

Excerpt 24

I only use Word and PowerPoint in class. ...But they (TAO) are referring to more advanced “technologies”, like MOOC or something. I’m not sure. (Joe)

Dora’s use of technologies in class seems to be motivated by a practical need to grapple with student evaluation:

Excerpt 25

I’m not a technophile. However, I must use technologies because the students will evaluate me. (Dora)

Likewise, Vivian has a low level of technological literacy. And she is also vulnerable to the pressure to use technologies in class due to the influence of student evaluation:

Excerpt 26

Word is the most frequently used technology in my class because it’s easy to use. ...I use it because I want to tell the students, “See, I’m using technologies. Don’t give me low marks in the evaluation”. (Vivian)

So the participants’ technological vulnerability seems to be caused by their confusion about what count as “educational technologies” and the rationale behind the university’s advocacy for technology-facilitated teaching. Given their inadequate technological literacy, the participants show little interest in technology-facilitated teaching practice. Even if they use some “educational technologies” in class occasionally, they seem to be instrumentally motivated (e.g., to meet the criterion for educational technologies in the student evaluations).

Therefore, it is unsurprising that the participants experience a high level of technological vulnerability in their teaching practice.

Furthermore, the students' inattentiveness in class may also add to the participants' sense of technological vulnerability. My reflection on Peter's observed lesson illustrates this point:

Excerpt 27

Peter felt excited because he was the first one to try the “flipped classroom” approach. He was eager to use Rain Classroom (an application designated by TAO) to work with the students on the problems they encountered in online learning. To my surprise, however, many students were silent. ...He raised his voice and asked, “Have you guys watched the videos?” And a few students shook their heads. A sort of embarrassment and disappointment appeared on his face. ...Lucy, who happened to be observing the class, also frowned at the situation. ...After the class, Peter sighed, “What can I do to motivate them?” (Reflective journal, 25/11/2020)

Clearly, Peter is vulnerable to inattentive students, whose unwillingness to interact with him in class undermines his adoption of the “flipped classroom” approach. While he tried to motivate the students in multiple ways, such as adding “fun materials” to the teaching content. The awful experience of adopting the “flipped classroom approach” has led Peter to contest the rationale behind TAO's promotion of technology-facilitated teaching.

4.2.2.2 Online teaching during the pandemic

The participants' technological vulnerability reached a peak in February 2020 when the university decided that all courses must be taught online in response to the outbreak of

Covid-19. The teachers were informed about this just one month before the new semester began, so they had limited time to familiarize themselves with the operation of the designated online teaching and learning platform.

During their online teaching practice, the participants were vulnerable to multiple challenges. As Peter revealed in an informal talk (18/06/2020), one such challenge was that some students from the underdeveloped rural areas did not have access to computers or stable network. Gao confirmed this, saying that “some of my classmates complained that they could not even afford to buy computers for themselves” (interview). Another challenge had to do with the stability of the teaching system. To give an example, the system occasionally broke down, and it might take several minutes for the system to return to normal. In one class, Vivian could not show audio materials due to the incompatibility of the software. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge seemed to be some students’ academic misconduct:

Excerpt 28

One section in the exam requires the students to read a long passage and make a summary. However, many students submitted their summaries in Chinese. I contacted them, and they insisted that there was something wrong with the system because their original summaries were in English. Then I consulted the technicians and they said that the platform was completely fine. They also said that the only possible explanation is that those students used the automatic translation function on the webpage to read the passage, and then they forgot to switch off the function when they wrote the summaries in English. ...Finally, I gave those students zero and no one complained. I think they felt guilty. (Peter, interview 2)

Peter's statement is supported by Yang, who mentioned that some students resorted to "ghostwriters" to help them with online assignments:

Excerpt 29

I don't like the online assignments. They are all about grammar and vocabulary. I only watch the movie clips and TED shows. And it often takes me around two hours to finish one unit. It's too time-consuming. However, you must remain online because the background program tracks your learning process and, if you miss certain parts, you won't get the credits. Therefore, to have more time for leisure activities, some classmates purchased services from online ghostwriters who could do the exercises for them! (Yang, interview)

The above excerpts show that EFL teachers are vulnerable to academic misconduct by the students. This can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of their online EFL teaching practice. However, the students do not seem to be worried about possible sanctions against this unethical behavior because "there are so many students doing this and therefore it has become a default behavior" (Yang, interview). The other reason is that there is a lack of judgement criteria that TAO might adopt to identify cases of academic misconduct and to execute sanctions correspondingly:

Excerpt 30

We do have rules and guidelines on regulating the students' academic behavior. However, there's little we can do to prevent them from plagiarizing online. ...Many online exercises are objective questions, so you cannot say that some students plagiarized simply because they provided the same answers. There is also a lack of

reliable techniques that can help us identify traces of ghost-writing. We don't know how to address this problem. (Snow, interview).

The participants' technological vulnerability is thus complex. It partly results from their inadequate technological literacy and understanding of the rationale behind the university's push for technology-facilitated EFL teaching. It also pertains to such student behaviors as inattentiveness and academic misconduct that may negatively affect the participants' use of educational technologies in class.

4.2.3 Influences of course selection and student evaluation

The participants' teaching vulnerability is also enhanced by the implementation of the student evaluation and course selection policies. Although both policies increase the likelihood that teaching excellence is rewarded⁴, they pose a threat to what the participants perceive as favorable conditions for university EFL teaching.

4.2.3.1 Contesting the effectiveness of the policies

While describing their teaching vulnerability, the participants kept contesting the effectiveness of both policies (e.g., in helping to improve their teaching performances) which the administration claims. For instance, they often criticize the student evaluation mechanism for making them vulnerable to "unreliable" evaluation results. In a WeChat group discussion

⁴ In XU, the top ten teachers in student evaluations are awarded "The Most Popular Teacher" Prize of the year. Teachers who have been awarded this prize three times successively will be promoted to associate professorship. Hence, it can be said that this policy serves as an "incentive for teachers to improve their instructional skills". (Based on interview with Shawn, 13/12/2020)

(08/10/2020), the participants contended that the students should not have “the final word” in judging whether a teacher was qualified or not, insisting that “multiple voices” should be incorporated into the evaluation process. My teaching practice in XU suggests that, while the students are an important stakeholder in EFL teaching, they do not seem to take the evaluation seriously:

Excerpt 31

I thought my evaluation result would be bad because my class had a high absentee rate. So when I saw the result, I was surprised to find that I was given “excellence” in every aspect. ...However, I ranked among the lowest ten percent of the teachers in FH. How ridiculous it is! (Reflective journal, 26/05/2021)

Dora is also vulnerable to such an embarrassing situation. She received positive comments from the students but was ranked the lowest among all the teachers in FH. She swore at the result after the dean decided that half of her annual allowance would be taken off as punishment for her “unsatisfactory teaching performance”:

Excerpt 32

I’m so tired of it! You know, this mechanism (student evaluation) is a joke. Now that the inspection team says highly of my teaching performance, why do they (TAO) pick on me? Why don’t they pick on those lazy students? They’re freaking mental! (Dora, interview 2)

Lee’s remarks also confirm my observations:

Excerpt 33

It's wasting time to write down my comments. I don't think that my comments will result in any changes (in my teacher's teaching). However, TAO says that we must do the rating work, or we will not be allowed to select courses in the following semester. So I rate each item recklessly, like giving the seller a five-star rating after buying a commodity online in exchange for more coupons. (Lee, interview)

So it can be said that the student evaluation mechanism fails to provide the participants with reliable feedback as the students tend to rate their teachers randomly. Peter comments on this seemingly “ridiculous” phenomenon:

Excerpt 34

It's not really about your competence. We're all “excellent” and the gap between us is minute. However, you are left behind as long as there is a gap. Even if you're “excellent” in teaching, you're considered “disqualified”. (Peter, interview 3)

Peter argues that many teachers, whom he considers as “excellent teachers”, are disqualified by the student evaluation mechanism unjustifiably. This means that the great efforts that they make to improve their teaching performance are not recognized by the university and their claimed authority in EFL teaching is called into question.

As an important component of the teaching quality control system, the course selection policy which is promulgated by TAO also adds to the participants' sense of teaching vulnerability.

While TAO claims that this policy can “grant the students great autonomy in individualizing

their learning plans” (*XU Regulations on Course Selection*), the participants are skeptical about the students’ ability to make rational course selection decisions:

Excerpt 35

I doubt if they have an idea of “good” teaching. There are many parameters that they must consider before selecting a course. I guess they presumably look at our photos and then select a nice-looking teacher they think might be good-tempered. (Joe, interview 1)

Interviews with the students suggest that their course selection decisions are primarily informed by their limited knowledge of the teacher’s grading leniency. Lee’s statement is illustrative of this point:

Excerpt 36

We believe all the teachers are same. They are equally qualified to teach. So we simply select teachers whose courses are easy to pass. (Lee, interview)

Likewise, Gao resorts to senior schoolmates for information about EFL teachers’ grading leniency, despite her belief that all teachers are “more than qualified” to teach her:

Excerpt 37

As a freshman, I know nothing about the teachers and the course. My English is so poor that every teacher is more than qualified to teach me. ...But before selecting teachers, we will consult senior schoolmates who may tell us which teacher is lenient in grading. ...Since we don’t want to learn English, easy to pass the exam is the most important criterion for us. (Gao, interview)

Yang also agree that grading leniency is the top criteria for the students when they select courses, although he would prefer teachers who can “really” help improve his English:

Excerpt 38

I’d like to select a teacher who can really help me (to improve my English), but, as far as I know, most of my classmates prefer to select teachers who seldom check the attendance and tend to give high marks. (Yang, interview)

These students’ statements indicate a phenomenon in which their course selection decisions are oriented towards utilitarian objectives (i.e., passing the exams without actually studying) rather than the pursuit of effective teaching (i.e., teaching practice that lead to improvement in their English language proficiency and effect changes in their personal development). This could result in an embarrassing situation where “teachers who are strict but competent in EFL teaching” may not be selected by the students (based on informal talks with Lynn and Lucy). Hence, the participants are vulnerable to dubious effectiveness of the course selection policy.

4.2.3.2 Large class sizes

A negative consequence of the course selection policy is that it makes the participants vulnerable to large class sizes, which pose a significant challenge to their teaching practice.

The following excerpt shows how I felt about the large class size on the first day of my teaching at XU:

Excerpt 39

Although Peter had told me in advance that there would be many students in the class, I was shocked to see that there were 93 names on the list! This starkly

contrasts to my teaching experience elsewhere five years ago when each class had at most thirty students. ...So the classroom was more like an auditorium. I had to use the microphone on the lectern to make my voice louder and clearer. ...After one hour, I had a sore throat. I began to feel regretful to accept Peter's invitation. ...I am lucky because I only teach one class. What about other teachers teaching three classes? Why doesn't TAO divide this class into three? (Reflective journal, 03/03/2021)

In addition to physical challenges such as sore throat and fatigue, I found it difficult to get to know the students. I was inclined to think about them as a whole rather than thinking about them as individuals, a problem that Dora sums up, "the class is so large that you cannot practice individualized teaching" (Dora, interview 1). Vivian also wonders if her vulnerability to large class sizes can undermine her teaching performance:

Excerpt 40

You can't select the students, so you're vulnerable to a situation where you have students with a wide range of proficiency levels, spanning from elementary to upper-intermediate. How can you meet the diverse learning needs of the students? You can only treat them as a whole. (Vivian, interview 1)

Vulnerability to large class sizes also makes it difficult for the participants to organize group activities, which should have been valuable opportunities for students to practice their English holistically and meaningfully. Lucy notes this in TAO's annual supervisory report:

Excerpt 41

Large class size creates a situation wherein only a few students can engage in dialogues or read the scripts (most of which are prepared in advance) while most

students simply stand by and focus on their own business. Given the dearth of opportunities for the students to speak English, it seems that a large class size frustrates both the teachers and the students. (2020/2021 supervisory report)

In addition, vulnerability to large class sizes means that the participants do not have sufficient time to get to know each student in class. This constrains their ability to build rapport with the students, which is essential for effective EFL teaching. Reflecting on his teaching experience before 2015, Peter argues that it is becoming increasingly difficult for him to develop stable relationships with the students:

Excerpt 42

Before 2015, we taught administrative classes⁵, each of which had only around thirty students. Once we were assigned to a cohort of students, we would teach them for two academic years. So, we had a long time developing close relationships with the students and learning about them. However, since 2015, we have been teaching elective classes, each of which has more than sixty students from different departments. And we teach different students each semester. So it's unrealistic to remember all the names and match them with the faces. ...There are times when some students say hello to me, but I can't think of their names. That's very embarrassing. (Peter, interview 2)

In a WeChat group discussion (01/12/2020), the participants shared their perceptions of the various factors behind their vulnerability to large class sizes. One such factor had to do with the students' general preference for "teachers who are lenient in grading", which was

⁵ Upon entry into university, students from the same major are divided into different administrative classes, fixed through their four academic years in the university.

confirmed by the student participants in the previous section. Thus, teachers who are known for their grading leniency are likely to attract more students than their colleagues. Another factor pertains to the “low teacher-student ratio”. During the study, the teacher-student ratio was at an average of 1:85 students (based on interviews with Snow and Shawn). Such a low teacher-student ratio made it challenging for the participants to interact with their students during limited instructional hours (36 hours per semester). However, presumably due to “the limited funding for humanities disciplines” and the “national trend to reduce the credits of CE in tertiary education” (Lynn, interview, 30/12/2020), XU has recruited few EFL teachers since 2015. This leaves the issue of large class size largely unsettled.

4.2.4 Coping with teaching vulnerability

Despite their vulnerable teaching practice, the participants are capable of enacting their agency to mitigate the negative impact that teaching vulnerability has on their professional performances. This section elaborates on the concrete strategies taken by the participants to cope with different aspects of their teaching vulnerability.

4.2.4.1 Negotiating instructional approaches

Negotiating their instructional approaches appears to be an important strategy that the participants take to respond to their teaching vulnerability. Their negotiation efforts involve a process in which they keep reflecting on their teaching experience and selecting among multiple instructional approaches that they believe can help motivate the students. Vivian’s experience best illustrates this strategy:

Excerpt 43

I keep reflecting (on my teaching practice), and the result (of reflection) is that I no longer view myself as a teacher. I'm more of a "waitress" providing services to my "customers". All I can do is to make them satisfied. If they are happy, I will be safe.
(Vivian, interview 1)

Clearly, Vivian experienced a shift in her professional identity while negotiating her instructional approaches. She views herself as a "waitress" whose primary task is to make the "customers" happy and satisfied. Therefore, she must adopt instructional approaches that can motivate the students to learn English. One such approach is "fun" (interview 1). As Vivian states, the students pressurize her "to be fun" through their responsiveness and unresponsiveness in class and feedback in end-of-semester evaluations. Initially, she rejected the idea of being "fun" as it might distract the students from "learning the language *per se*" (interview 1). However, she finally accepted this approach, admitting that it was more appropriate for a "commercialized" educational environment:

Excerpt 44

It's not purely about education. It is a kind of like "commerce". All I can do is to view it from a commercial perspective. I must provide whatever "services" the customers expect of me. I must be a fun teacher to entertain them. I have no choice.
(Vivian, interview 1).

The above statement indicates that the system of performativity influences how Vivian copes with her teaching vulnerability. For Vivian, being "fun" means that part of her teaching must be "performance-like" (interview 1). So she frequently tells jokes or discusses fun issues which, although are irrelevant to the teaching content, can raise the students' interest so that

they might consider her as a “good” EFL teacher and choose her courses in the following semester. This “fun” approach plays a prominent role in Vivian’s teaching. As an example, to explain the concept of “culture shock”, Vivian shared her travelling experiences in the United States with the students:

Excerpt 45

We came into a Mexican restaurant and sat down. The waiter came to us and gave us the menu. When we saw the menu, we were like “Oh—my—god!” (Stretched her voice and the students laughed). It was like a “*tian shu*” (which literally means “a book from heaven”) for me! (The students laughed) Do you know what “*fajitas*” and “*horchata*” are? (The students shook their heads). You can’t find these words in the dictionary. ...I felt very embarrassed and somehow did not know how to order. The waiter looked at us like this (Rolling his eyes and the students laughed again).
(Vivian, ‘observed lesson’, 10/12/2020)

Vivian contends that “good teaching performance” is represented by “a high score in student evaluation” and “a high registration rate of my course” (interview 1). The two interrelated aspects of “good teaching performance” serve as short-term goals that she seeks to achieve. They are also the major criteria adopted by the administration to decide if her contract should be renewed in the next appointment period. Therefore, the “projective” orientation of agency plays an important role in Vivian’s response to teaching vulnerability. In fact, I also felt the pressure to be “fun” while teaching at XU. So I added fun elements to the teaching content occasionally:

Excerpt 46

The students seem more responsive to the light topics that I talked about than any other planned content. ...They listened carefully when I shared with them the culture

shock I experienced in other regions and countries. Some students even asked me questions (in Chinese) about the prejudices that Hong Kong people had against mainland people. ...They asked many questions, but none of their questions were about the language. (Reflective journal, 27/05/2021)

Other participants also believe that being fun can help raise the students' interest in the course. Their "fun" approach takes a variety of forms, such as gently making fun of the EFL teaching profession (Joe and Dora), using fun anecdotes (Dora), playing fun film clips (Peter and Joe), and choosing fun examples to explain specific language phenomenon (Fiona, Dora, and Joe).

That said, fun elements are unequivocally reflected in the participants' teaching practice. This seems to be influenced by practical knowledge about their situated context and their long-held beliefs about EFL learning. Vivian explains the rationale behind her fun teaching:

Excerpt 47

I used to think that it (being "fun") was a "forced decision". However, it is a direction worthy of endeavor now. I'm trying to reach a balance by taking the students' diverse learning needs into account. While I may use some "fun" elements, I also teach grammar and vocabulary so that they can get some "real knowledge" about the language. What I mean is that I try to teach grammar in a fun way, a way that can attract the students' attention. I think this approach works because I've got a high evaluation score! I feel much less vulnerable now. (Vivian, interview 2)

This excerpt shows Vivian manages to control the extent to which "fun" elements are represented in her teaching practice. Instead of entirely relying on "fun" teaching, she accords primacy to teaching grammar and vocabulary. In other words, she tries to make a balance

between “being completely fun” and “being completely spoon-feeding” (interview 1). This enables her to satisfy the diverse learning needs of her students. Examples of her balanced approach include, but not limited to, her use of animation pictures to teach the students vocabulary related to cosmetics and sharing the story of *Haidilao* (the largest hotpot chain in China) with the students to explain the meaning of the word “entrepreneurship”. As Vivian states, this balanced instructional approach “ameliorated my sense of teaching vulnerability” (interview 1) because the students gave her high scores in the evaluation.

In comparison, “fun” elements play a less prominent role in other participants’ teaching practice. While they share some funny anecdotes with the students occasionally, they tend to teach in conventional ways (e.g., focusing on the teaching of grammar) with the belief that teachers should be “a bit more serious” (based on WeChat group discussion, 16/10/2020). Such a teaching philosophy may in part be attributed to their past learning experiences. This is evidenced by Dora who emphasizes the importance of grammar in EFL learning:

Excerpt 48

You can be funny, but you’ve got to know what is more important for the students. Many of them performed well in the entrance examination, but that’s the result of the “sea of exercises” tactic (which means spending much time doing endless exercises). They’ve mastered the skills to choose among A, B, C, and D, but they may not really understand the deep structures of the language. That’s why they perform badly in translation and writing. According to my own learning experience, grammar is the foundation of language learning. So teaching should not be completely “funny”. You need to be serious about it most of the time. (Dora, interview 1)

This excerpt shows the influence of “iterational” dimension of agency in Dora’s coping with her teaching vulnerability. Specifically, her past language learning experience has led her to conclude that grammar is crucial and therefore, she should downplay “fun” elements in her teaching. She admits that this approach does not help reduce her sense of teaching vulnerability. The students do not seem to take on board her teaching method, as is evidenced by her low score in the evaluation. However, she insists on teaching this way, believing she is “doing the right things for the students” (interview 1).

4.2.4.2 Appropriating educational technologies

In contrast to my previous EFL teaching practice elsewhere in mainland China, the participants in this study exhibit a relatively high level of agency in coping with their technological vulnerability. For instance, despite her enormous pressure to learn new educational technologies, Fiona is well aware of the great benefits that educational technologies can bring to her instructional performance:

Excerpt 49

Author: Are you insisting on the conventional teaching approach?

Fiona: Not really. I do think that technologies are important for EFL teaching nowadays. They can make the course more vivid and attractive. Actually, I have been learning some new technologies in recent years.

Author: What technologies?

Fiona: Well, I learned how to edit a film and insert the clips into PowerPoint. I learned how to use video editing applications such as iMovie and QuickTime Pro to create micro-lectures. I also attended some very good online workshops on educational technologies.

Author: How do you learn these techniques?

Fiona: With the help of my younger colleagues and students [laughing]. While I'm an expert in language, I know little about language-teaching technologies. In this regard, young teachers and the students are "masters" from whom I can learn a lot. Sometimes I send the PowerPoint to them before the class and invite them to see if anything can be refined. And while using them, I will consider what should be done next and how to use them wisely. So I feel less vulnerable now. The students seem to be more interactive in the class. And I can see many positive comments on my use of educational technologies in the student evaluation. (Fiona, interview 2)

This excerpt indicates that "practical-evaluation" plays an instrumental role in helping Fiona cope with her technological vulnerability. In particular, she is well aware of the need to adjust her instructional approach to the exigencies of the changing educational environment. So she is engaged in improving her technological literacy by actively seeking help from her younger colleagues and the students and attending relevant online workshops. Meanwhile, this excerpt shows that Fiona embraces "epistemic vulnerability" (i.e., acknowledging her weaknesses and limitations in using educational technologies) which helps her grow professionally.

The participants' agency is also reflected in how they coped with their technological vulnerability related to online teaching during the pandemic:

Excerpt 50

When they (TAO) told me that we would teach online, I was anxious because we'd never tried that before. Fortunately, our tradition is to jointly prepare the lessons one semester in advance to have more time for content refinement. Therefore, before the pandemic outbreak, we already had a lot of teaching and learning materials. We also consulted the technicians in Tencent about the platform's operation many times and

had a series of meetings and discussions in our WeChat group about how to handle possible difficulties. We became accustomed to online teaching quickly. We've done an excellent job. (Peter, interview 2)

The above excerpt indicates two orientations of agency that mediate how the participants cope with their technological vulnerability. First, the “iterational” orientation of agency, which is reflected in their past efforts to prepare the lessons jointly, enables the participants to spare more time to familiarize themselves with the designated platforms for online teaching. Second, the “practical-evaluative” orientation of agency, which is achieved through collaboration and actively seeking help from the technicians, helps participants address the emerging problems in their online teaching practice in a timely manner.

4.2.4.3 Responding to student evaluation and course selection

Interviews with the participants allude to the constrained enactment of agency in coping with their teaching vulnerability related to student evaluation and course selection. This can be partly attributed to the power hierarchy that discourages the participants from challenging centrally-imposed initiatives.

Nevertheless, the participants adopt specific strategies to dilute the negative impact that such vulnerability has on their teaching practice. For instance, Vivian resorts to what she called “bribery” (informal talk, 08/10/2020), such as distributing chocolates to the students and giving them *hongbao* (money contained in red envelopes) during holidays in exchange for the students' positive comments on her teaching performance. She also pays great attention to her

appearance by dressing appropriately to leave a good impression on the students. In addition, she tries to be “lenient in grading” (informal talk, 08/10/2020) so that more students would select her course. However, Vivian holds that these “immoral” strategies contradict her will:

Excerpt 51

I don't want to do it, but I have no choice. After all, I don't have tenure. I must try my best to secure this job. These strategies might be immoral, but what else can I do? Sometimes you've got to put morals aside in order to survive. Only in this way can you become less vulnerable. (Vivian, interview 2)

This excerpt indicates the influence of “practical-evaluative” agency. In particular, her strategies aim to “achieving a satisfactory result in the student evaluation” (Vivian, interview 2). As she states, this is due to her non-tenured status. In comparison, other participants, all are tenured EFL teachers, refuse to achieve high evaluation scores at the cost of what they perceive as the “appropriate instructional approaches”. This is illustrated by the following excerpts from a WeChat group discussion (23/07/2020):

Excerpt 52

I don't care about the results. I have already achieved what I wished to achieve at a young age. There is no need for me to compete for those honors. I just want to teach each lesson well and wait for retirement. (Fiona)

Excerpt 53

I've been teaching for about twenty years. So I have a better understanding of my teaching competence than other people. While I'm still vulnerable to bad results, I'll insist on my own teaching philosophies. (Peter)

Excerpt 54

I did try to make some changes to my teaching approaches. And I could see that the students were more attentive in the class. However, I'm still vulnerable to bad results. So, whatever, I'll insist on what I believe is the best approach. (Dora)

Excerpt 55

I'm vulnerable to bad results, but I'm kind of detached now. I don't care about how they think about me, so long as I'm satisfied with my performance. (Joe)

These participants' coping strategies are more influenced by the "iterational" orientation of their agency. In particular, they hold tightly to their routinized instructional approaches to ward off the emotional and psychological burdens that teaching vulnerability places on them.

4.2.5 Summary

This section has examined the participants' teaching vulnerability regarding unmotivated students, the pressure to use educational technologies, and the negative impact of student evaluation and course selection. The three aspects of teaching vulnerability are interrelated: The students' lack of EFL learning motivation constrains the participants' use of educational technologies and adds to their pressure for satisfactory results in student evaluation and course selection. Meanwhile, incorporating educational technologies into their teaching practice serves as a major criterion against which the students and university evaluate their teaching performances. Therefore, teaching vulnerability is complex and multifaceted.

How the participants cope with the three aspects of teaching vulnerability is also intriguing. On the one hand, they exhibit a relatively high level of agency in addressing micro-level vulnerability (e.g., unmotivated students and the use of educational technologies). For instance, they collaborate with each other and seek help from the technicians to improve their technological literacy. They are also capable of selecting different instructional approaches to cope with their teaching vulnerability: Vivian adopts a balanced approach that combines “fun” elements with grammar teaching. Influenced by the “projective” orientation of agency, this approach aims to help Vivian achieve satisfactory results in the student evaluation. In comparison, other participants (e.g., Dora) adopt more conventional instructional approaches that downplay the role of “fun” elements and emphasize the teaching of grammar and vocabulary. This seems to be influenced by the “iterative” orientation of their agency which is reflected in their past EFL learning experiences and long-held beliefs about the importance of grammar teaching. On the other hand, the participants exhibit constrained agency in coping with macro-level vulnerability, which is related to the student evaluation and course selection initiatives. The reason might be that this aspect of teaching vulnerability is bound up with centrally-imposed policies and the participants, due to their marginality in the university power hierarchy, are disempowered challenge these policies. This will be elaborated in 4.4.

4.3 Vulnerability and research practice

While all the participants are appointed on the “teaching-oriented” track, they are vulnerable to the undue pressure to conduct research and get their research outputs published in prestigious journals. This is because the top-down performance review system has structured

their research productivity into the review process and used it as a benchmark for promotion, contract renewal, and salary increase.

4.3.1 A lack of research motivation among EFL teachers

There is a notable lack of research motivation among EFL teachers at XU. For these teachers, doing research seems to be a minor aspect of their professional practice. Some of them even hold that they should not be required to do research at all, given that they are all hired on the “teaching-oriented” track. My field observation suggests that research rarely becomes a topic of the EFL teachers’ daily conversations and that they show little interest in the research seminars organized by FH. An informal talk with a teacher on the university shuttle illustrates my impression:

Excerpt 56

Most of their conversations were about familial issues, the “poor” salary and treatment, and the “awful” students. They seldom talk about research, with which I’m most concerned. ...Today, I couldn’t help asking a teacher sitting next to me on the shuttle bus, “Have you applied for any research projects this year?”. She stared at me and said, “What did you say? Research project? I don’t even dare to think about it”. Another teacher sitting in the front row heard my question and laughed, “Wow, if you want to find a researcher, you may go to other departments!” (Reflective journal, 10/11/2020)

The above excerpt provides a depressing picture of lacking research motivation among the EFL teachers. Initially, I attributed this phenomenon to my “outsider” role, with which they felt uncomfortable sharing their own research experiences. However, as “legitimate”

members of the EFL office, Fiona and Dora report similar embarrassment. Fiona said that she felt ostracized by some of her colleagues with whom she sought to apply for some research projects collaboratively and discuss academic issues. Dora said that it was “virtually impossible” (Dora, interview 2) to build a research team with her colleagues. The lack of an established research work culture in XU thus serves as a vital factor contributing to the vulnerability of some research-active EFL teachers (e.g., Fiona).

4.3.1.1 Inadequate research expertise

It is also notable that many EFL teachers do not have sufficient research expertise in their respective areas, particularly those in their mid or late-career stages. This might be partly attributed to the evolving university policies over the past two decades. According to my informal talk with Lynn (26/08/2020), most mid and late-career EFL teachers commenced their teaching careers immediately after obtaining their bachelor’s degrees in English language and literature. Due to a shortage of EFL teachers from the 1980s to the early 2000s, the university imposed on them heavy teaching loads and did not encourage them to pursue higher degrees. As a result, many EFL teachers received little research training:

Excerpt 57

We didn’t even know what research was about at that time. ...Promotion was based mainly on seniority. Once the school had some quota for promotion, the senior teachers got promoted first. ...Everything goes as planned, and you just needed to wait patiently. (Joe, interview 2)

However, with the growing demand for publications in recent years, lacking research expertise has become a hinderance to EFL teachers' promotion. A quick search of their publication records reveals that many of them, except a few, have only one or two articles published in provincial-level journals and that they do not seem to have clear areas of research interest:

Excerpt 58

I was surprised to see that one teacher should have published articles in literature, linguistics, translation, education, and even management! What on earth are her research interests? ...Another teacher even co-authored papers in Marxism with a teacher from the Department of Philosophy! I'm not sure if she knows something about Marxism, but she doesn't seem to have any degrees in philosophy. ...It also seems that they don't know much about research methodologies because many articles are simply reflections on their work experiences. (Reflective journal, 07/10/2020)

Without sufficient research training and clear areas of research interests, it is unsurprising that many EFL teachers could hardly meet the elevating demand for research productivity which, in the context of XU, is normally measured in terms of "publishing at least three articles in CSSCI journals" and "securing the National Social Science Fund" (*XU Promotion Regulations*). Peter laments this phenomenon:

Excerpt 59

Occasionally, I say to myself, "OK, it's time to do some research". But I dismissed this idea so long as I found there were so many papers to read. ...I don't even know

how to conduct empirical studies, like formulating a hypothesis, collecting data, and using the software. (Peter, interview 2)

Therefore, lacking research expertise discourages Peter from progressing in his academic journey. Likewise, Vivian's research vulnerability is also engendered by a lack of research training. While she obtained her master's degree before induction, she only had "minimal knowledge about doing research" (Vivian, interview 2). She did not receive much "systematic mentoring" (Vivian, interview 2) from her supervisor. So she perceives meeting the stringent institutional demand for publications as a "virtually impossible task" (Vivian, interview 3).

4.3.1.2 Ambivalent beliefs about the value of research

The participants' research vulnerability is also attributable to their ambivalent beliefs about the value of research. Data suggests that the participants gauge the value of research from various perspectives ranging from pedagogical benefits to psychological satisfaction. Among them, Fiona is the only person who envisages doing research as beneficial to "broadening my horizon" and making her into "a critical thinker of the English language" (Fiona, interview 2). She gains a strong sense of accomplishment from publishing articles in high-ranking journals. In contrast, other participants are uncertain about the potential benefits that doing research could bring to their professional practice. In a WeChat group discussion (15/10/2020), these teachers held that research and teaching should be harmonized and inform each other. However, they were unsure of the extent to which the research outcomes in their respective fields (e.g., linguistics, literature, translation) could enhance their teaching performance:

Excerpt 60

While the authoritative figures in our field claim that research benefits teaching, I don't see any benefits it can bring to my teaching practice. (Peter)

Excerpt 61

I have read some papers on linguistics, but I don't know how to apply those abstract theories to my teaching practice. (Joe)

Excerpt 62

Research is done for the readers, not for us. My own teaching experiences are more reliable than those "cold" data. (Vivian)

Excerpt 63

Can Shakespeare or Chomsky tell us how to teach English well? (Dora)

These statements indicate a belief that research is theory-laden and could not provide immediate answers to instructional problems. For the participants, the value of research only consists in career advancement and job security, and they would rather draw on their practical experiences than the implications of some scholarly work to improve their teaching performances.

The EFL teachers' skeptical attitude towards the value of doing research is partly shaped by their previous learning experiences. As noted in Table 3.1, most teachers studied literature, linguistics, cross-cultural communication, or translation at their graduate level. Only three teachers hold degrees in TESOL and other related fields (Lynn, informal talk, 26/08/2020).

This means that most of them have not received systematic research training before and hence are unclear of the practical benefits that EFL-related scholarly work can bring to their teaching practice. This explains why they are unmotivated to engage in research as a part of their professional practice. Indeed, teachers from other departments shared similar incredulity about the value of EFL research. This can be evidenced by my encounter with a Math teacher in the teachers' lounge during the break time:

Excerpt 64

He (the Math teacher) was surprised (and curious) to hear me talking about my PhD thesis. He laughed, "What is your research all about? What's the point of having EFL teachers do the research? Your main task should be helping the students pass CET 4 and 6, right?" ...I'm not surprised about his "surprise", nor do I feel humiliated by his words. After all, I have heard many teachers from science departments question the value of our research work. (Reflective journal, 04/05/2021)

My experience is echoed by the participants, who perceive the teachers in other departments as having "a sense of skepticism" about the value of EFL research (WeChat group discussion, 15/10/2020). This skepticism is a source of professional vulnerability for the participants, as it reinforces their institutionally constructed image as "instructors providing services to the other departments" (Fiona, interview 2).

4.3.1.3 Unfavorable academic environment

The participants' research vulnerability also pertains to an unfavorable academic environment characterized by inadequate institutional and social support for EFL research. This can be

manifested in the arduous work of grant reimbursement. To be specific, XU requires teachers to provide detailed descriptions of the expenditure (often in the form of tax invoices) related to designated research grants and submit their request forms to the accounting office for audit (based on *XU Research Regulation*). The request forms must be supplemented with checklists approved by the university, such as “books”, “printing”, and “office appliances”. However, the request is a complex, rigorous, and time-consuming process which significantly exacerbates the participants’ research vulnerability. For instance, Fiona says she feels like a “beggar” (interview 2) whenever she collects additional invoices from her colleagues and friends. Dora states that it is a “headache” for her to “paste each invoice on the form” and then “wait in a long queue in the accounting office” (interview 2). Peter argues that he would rather “give up applying for reimbursement” than “spending a long time accumulating invoices” for a project which accounted for “only 2,000 yuan” (informal talk, 9/10/2020).

Another important condition of the unfavorable academic environment pertains to a lack of mentoring or, in Dora’s words, “hands-on experiences” (Dora, interview 2) from senior researchers. Dora is particularly concerned about this problem:

Excerpt 65

There is no such a thing as “apprenticeship” in FH, you know, like imparting hands-on research experience from the older generation to the younger generation. ...Shouldn’t there be someone teaching us how to write proposals or complete the application form? ...Since we have never received such guidance, we are often knocked out of the application in the first round. (Dora, interview 2)

Dora's statement is confirmed by Lynn, who says that FH does not have "big potatoes" who may "share something insightful to other teachers" (Lynn, interview). This is partly due to a general lack of research expertise among the EFL teachers. However, it may also result from the inadequate support and resources that FH provides for EFL teachers to improve their research competence. This is evidenced by my observation of a faculty meeting where the director of the Academic Research Office spent a long time introducing the National Social Science Grant and encouraging EFL teachers to apply for it:

Excerpt 66

The teacher sitting next to me stood up and asked the dean if the school could invite any established scholars in her field (second language acquisition) to give her some advice for writing the proposal. The dean said, "You may contact the scholars first and I will see if the school has enough money for them." ...She sat down and whispered to me, "Why doesn't he just say NO?". (Reflective journal, 15/10/2020)

This incident gives me the impression that FH receives insufficient financial support from the university regarding research activities. Indeed, humanities disciplines, such as EFL teaching, might be more vulnerable to financial cuts than other disciplines (e.g., engineering) where the university has a traditional strength (Lynn, informal talk, 26/08/2020).

Perhaps it is the "hidden rules" underlying the publication market that constitute the most significant source of the participants' research vulnerability. During the interviews, the participants unanimously point to some domestic key journals for lacking transparency during the reviewing process. For instance, Peter uses *ni niu ru hai*, a Chinese idiom which

literally means “a clay ox plunges into the sea—never to be heard from again”, to describe his “bitter” publishing experience:

Excerpt 67

It’s like *ni niu ru hai*: you submit the paper to a journal, but never receive any replies from the editors. Maybe they think the paper is too bad to comment. (Peter, interview 2)

As is the case with Peter, Joe says that the “editors’ silence” make him feel like “a headless chicken wandering around in the research field” (Joe, interview 2). Dora and Vivian suffer from greater frustration and exhaustion in their publishing endeavor. As Dora mentioned, a journal editor rejected her paper directly by referring to the “hidden rule” that “authors must possess doctorates or senior professional titles” (Dora, interview 2). For Dora, this “hidden rule” not only reflects rising benchmarks for paper submission and acceptance but also reflects an entrenched bias among journal editors in mainland China against teachers with low academic positions (e.g., those without doctorates or senior professional titles). Meanwhile, this “hidden rule” contradicts the university promotion rule, which lays an overemphasis on teachers’ research productivity. Vivian uses “Catch-22” to explain this dilemma metaphorically:

Excerpt 68

It’s like Catch-22. On the one hand, we (young teachers without doctorates or senior professional titles) must publish papers in key journals. On the other hand, those journals only accept papers submitted by “big potatoes”. (Vivian, interview 2)

Vivian points to the paradoxical nature of publishing, which results from the stringent institutional requirement for publications and high benchmarks for paper acceptance. These contradictory requirements for publishing can have a demoralizing impact on many young EFL teachers struggling with their research vulnerability.

The black publishing market (publishing via agencies that charge a large amount of money) in mainland China also exacerbates the participants' research vulnerability:

Excerpt 69

After I had been rejected many times, a colleague recommended a publishing agency to for me. I contacted it and was told that I must pay 20,000 *yuan* to get the paper published. ...It was pricey. I didn't want to do it. However, I was eager to apply for a lectureship then, so I transferred the fee to their account. I was worried about whether they were swindlers. ...Fortunately, my paper was accepted without making any revisions. ...I am disgusted with that experience. I don't want to do it anymore.
(Vivian, interview 2)

This excerpt shows that Vivian managed to get her paper published in an “unconventional” way. It might have been a common practice for many university EFL teachers to publish their papers in key journals via agencies (based on informal talks with several non-participant EFL teachers). Dora condemns the black publishing market for “giving priority to profits” (interview 2). Vivian holds that publishing via agencies is “a hypocritical game” (WeChat) that she must play in order to “survive” in a performative work culture. Likewise, Peter

argues that publishing is about “whether you can afford it or not” rather than “whether the articles are worth publishing or not” (interview 2).

4.3.2 Coping with research vulnerability

Data suggests that the participants employ various strategies to cope with their research vulnerability. These strategies, ranging from proactivity to passivity, reflect the participants’ different attitudes towards their research vulnerability.

4.3.2.1 Pursuing higher academic degrees

As noted earlier, most mid and late-career EFL teachers began to teach at XU immediately after obtaining their bachelor’s degrees. Few of them possess doctorates in such fields as language education and applied linguistics. This means that they are in a lack of training in doing research, which adds to their research vulnerability. A possible solution to this problem might be to enhance their research competence through pursuing higher academic degrees such as PhD. However, many EFL teachers at XU lack the motivation to further their education. In a WeChat group discussion (15/05/2021), the participants shared some reasons behind this phenomenon:

Excerpt 70

I’d never thought about pursuing a doctoral degree. ...In my years, promotion was based on seniority. The routine was to teach for some years, get promoted, and retiring. ... So after I was promoted (to associate professorship), I lost the motivation to improve (my research ability). (Joe)

This excerpt suggests that Joe's lack of motivation to pursue a doctorate can be attributed to his current status as an "associate professor", a professional title linked to "stability" and "a comfortable life after retirement" (based on informal talk with Joe). In comparison, Peter's indifference to pursuing a doctorate is strongly influenced by his early-career life:

Excerpt 71

We were not concerned about our academic degrees in the first few years. After obtaining a master's degree, I thought, "OK! That's it! Now I can enjoy the teaching work for the rest of my career". ...So I'm used to that way of life. It's hard for me to change my mind. ...It's too late for a mid-career EFL teacher like me to further his education. (Peter)

Apparently, the "iterational" dimension of agency plays an important role in shaping how Joe and Peter perceive the need to further their education. As they are accustomed to the past and routinized professional lives in which research was not compulsory for promotion, they are not psychologically prepared to undertake research work at their mid and late-career stages. Correspondingly, they do not have the motivation to cope with their research vulnerability through pursuing higher academic degrees.

Institutional policies are also an important factor mediating the participants' decision to further their education. Unlike young teachers who are pressurized to pursue doctoral degrees

now⁶, mid and late-career teachers were not allowed to pursue higher degrees in their early career years when FH had an inadequate EFL teaching force:

Excerpt 72

I wanted to pursue a doctoral degree. I was single and had time. However, the dean told me, “We don’t have enough CE teachers. You can’t leave the teaching position now. Otherwise you’ll be fired”. ... Now I’ve got married. I need to raise my children. I don’t want to do it anymore because I have missed the chance. (Dora)

As an early-career teacher, Vivian is also unmotivated to pursue a doctoral degree. This is perhaps because she has already been promoted to associate professorship, which she describes as “an attractive title” for many young female university teachers:

Excerpt 73

I used to consider pursuing a doctoral degree for promotion. It (associate professor) is an attractive title. As long as you are promoted to associate professorship, you get the tenure. And you no longer need to worry about being “disqualified”. ... So after I was promoted to associate professorship, I lost the motivation (to pursue a doctoral degree). (Vivian)

The shift in Vivian’s attitudes towards pursuing a doctoral degree indicates an absence of “projectivity” in her experience of research vulnerability. For Vivian, the value of pursuing a doctoral degree simply lies in promotion. She perceives promotion as her most important

⁶ Based on *XU Guidelines on the Construction of the Teaching Force* (2018 edition), incentives such as salary increase, start-up research funds, housing subsidies, and reduced teaching loads are provided to teachers after they complete their in-service doctoral studies and obtain doctorates in their respective fields.

career goal. She does not take a long-term perspective that enables her to foresee the positive impact that a doctoral degree can have on her research performance. Therefore, her research engagement entered “a period of stagnation” (Vivian, interview 3) after she was promoted to associate professorship.

In comparison, Fiona has a passion for the English language and regards EFL teaching as “a pleasure-seeking process” (Fiona, interview 1) through which she gains a strong sense of accomplishment. This passion for language serves as an important motive behind her research engagement. She firmly believes that doing research is an integral part of her identity as a university EFL teacher. So after teaching CE for twenty years, Fiona went to a top university in southeastern China to pursue a doctoral degree in American literature:

Excerpt 74

It’s my dream to become a researcher. I don’t want to live like a fish in the bowl. I want to experience something new ...I spent two years reading academic papers, developing a research interest, and preparing for the exam. (Fiona, interview 2)

“A fish in the bowl” is Fiona’s metaphorical perception of her career life prior to her doctoral studies. Her reluctance to “live like a fish in the bowl” reflects the influence of her personality which is manifested in a readiness to take up challenges and a keen interest in doing research. However, her decision to pursue a doctoral degree as a way to cope with her research vulnerability is driven by a “dream to become a researcher”. This reflects the influence of the projective dimension of her agency. Whereas Fiona expresses strong

resentment towards the system of performativity that adds to her research vulnerability, she holds that doing research can help her grow both intellectually and professionally:

Excerpt 75

If you do some research, you may take a different perspective on yourself, your work, and the discipline you belong to. You'll become more rational and critical and have greater competence in problem-solving. Therefore, my passion for research remains unflagging even if I am about to retire. (Fiona, interview 2)

So Fiona takes a relatively positive attitude towards her research vulnerability, believing that doing research would contribute to her ongoing development as an EFL academic. This belief is an important motive behind her continuous investment in research and allows herself to be more resilient in withstanding research vulnerability than other participants.

However, Fiona refuses to push herself too hard on her research journey. She adopts a protective stance towards her research vulnerability when she feels incapable of accomplishing some institutionally imposed research tasks. This protective stance reflects what Fiona refers to as the “let nature take its course” strategy:

Excerpt 76

I'd compare the process of doing research to the growth of a tree. It may take some teachers just three years to grow up as a researcher, while for me this period may be longer. Therefore, I'd apply for a lower position where I feel capable for accomplishing the research tasks, even if this means a possible reduction of my allowance in the next appointment term. While I was prolific in the past two years, I

feel less motivated to engage in research this year. This is normal. So my philosophy is that don't push yourself too hard and just let nature take its course. ...I can meet the requirement by publishing many "useless" articles in one year, but that would be against my original intention: I want to do some solid research. (Fiona, interview 2)

So Fiona's coping strategy is informed by a clear understanding of the "zigzag nature" (interview 2) of doing research and the limitations in her research competence. As she argues in an informal talk (16/06/2020), she refuses to "publish articles for the sake of publishing" and firmly believes that "she can do solid research only when she is in a relaxed environment". She is disillusioned with performativity that lays an overemphasis on productivity while ignoring the "zigzag nature" of doing research. By applying for lower positions, she aims to create an environment where she could "do some research with less pressure" (interview 2).

4.3.2.2 "All I can do is to cross the river by touching stones"

Dora is also agentive in doing research. However, her research practice is subjugated by a constellation of personal and contextual factors. During the interviews, she repeatedly mentioned that the courses she took at the postgraduate level focused more on "general introduction to the theories" than "systematic elaboration on the research methodologies" (interview 2). Meanwhile, the absence of an established research culture in her office and inadequate institutional support (mainly in the form of researcher mentorship) also serve as hinderances to her research endeavor:

Excerpt 77

I heard that teachers in other departments, like civil engineering, have established research teams in which members can learn from each other. ...However, such things do not exist in our department. All I can do is to cross the river by touching the stones, that is, take one step, think about the direction, revise the plan, and then take another step. (Dora, interview 2)

The expression “cross the river by touching the stone” indicates Dora’s belief that she may learn how to do research by actually “doing” it. This might be a reasonable approach, given the inadequate institutional support that she receives from the university. In this case, Dora’s agency is manifested in both “actions” (e.g., “taken one step”) and “reflection” (e.g., “think about”) that enable her to become more self-reliant in coping with her research vulnerability. Indeed, reflection proves helpful for Dora to cope with her research vulnerability. Through reflection, she could examine her research practice critically and clarify directions for self-improvement. The following WeChat message well explains how reflection operates in Dora’s academic writing practice:

Excerpt 78

I used to read the literature aimlessly without writing anything, believing that academic reading should go ahead of academic writing: one could not write anything if without sufficient reading. However, after reflecting upon my experience of writing the proposal over the past two weeks, I realize that reading must go in tandem with writing. ...Writing will tell you what should be read about next and save you much time searching for the most relevant articles in the vast literature. (Dora, WeChat, 10/19/2020)

The above excerpt highlights the constructive role that reflection plays in helping Dora cope with her vulnerability related to academic writing. Through reflection, Dora relinquished her long-held belief that academic writing and academic reading were independent processes, acknowledging that both processes were complementary and might occur simultaneously.

In addition, Dora is proactive in using external resources to cope with her research vulnerability. As she recounts, she registered for many online courses on language research methodologies, reviewed many articles, sought advice from experienced researchers, and even collaborated with her students to analyze data. This is reflected in the following WeChat messages:

Excerpt 79

The student is an “expert” in statistics. I asked him if he could teach me how to analyze quantitative data, and he willingly agreed. Emoji (laugh). (13/06/2020)

Excerpt 80

I highly recommend this online course to you! It explains the complex and abstract process of quantitative data analysis in a way everyone can understand. (7/10/2020)

Excerpt 81

A member of the review committee said that some of the articles cited were irrelevant. ...This is thought-provoking. I will revise the proposal based on his comments. Emoji (fighting) (15/9/2020)

The strategies shown in the above excerpts are manifestations of the “practical-evaluative” dimension of her agency, which enable Dora to solve immediate problems (e.g., revising the research proposal and analyzing quantitative data) related to her lack of research expertise.

Whereas Dora considers research as having little value to her teaching practice, she seeks to comply with the institutional requirement for publications. The reason is that she is eager to “survive” in the system of performativity. As she states, the frequent evaluations of her research productivity serve as a “sword of Damocles” that keeps warning her of “the possibility of being redeployed or fired by the university” (Dora, interview 1). In this sense, research vulnerability becomes a driving force behind Dora’s sustained self-improvement efforts within the system of performativity.

4.3.2.3 “Let’s *tang ping*”

Unlike Fiona and Dora who are making sustained efforts to raise their research profiles, other teachers resort to “*tang ping*” as a primary tactic to cope with their research vulnerability. “*Tang ping*”, which literally means “lying flat” in Chinese mandarin, is a buzzword that has been gaining popularity on the social media of mainland China since 2021. It refers to a mentality that young people adopt to reject all forms of social competition. Joe uses this buzzword to describe his passiveness in coping with research vulnerability. Indeed, passiveness is inherent in many EFL teachers’ experiences of research vulnerability (as suggested by their lack of motivation to engage in research). In the context of XU, this

“passiveness” encompasses detachment and a cynical attitude towards the academic culture wherein research takes precedence over teaching.

Prior work experiences significantly influence these teachers’ explicit passiveness in coping with their research vulnerability: they are nostalgic for early career years when their promotion was based mainly on seniority and research was not a mandatory task for them. Their research awareness was not strong then because the tenure system created a “comfort zone” wherein they were free from the pressure to conduct research and could commit themselves wholeheartedly to the enterprise of EFL teaching. However, attachment to this “comfort zone” hindered their ability to foresee and prepare for the incoming upheaval in higher education. Consequently, they are vulnerable to the elevated research pressure that comes along with the implementation of performativity:

Excerpt 82

It is too late for teachers in my age to learn doing research now. My energy is waning, so I don’t understand why we should spend the remaining years on something we can’t handle. ...So, just let’s *tang ping*. (Joe, interview 2)

I envy young teachers. ...They have the energy and time to fight for brighter futures. They have competitive edges in doing research. ...I would rather focus on teaching because it is one of the few things that I have control over. (Peter, interview 2)

The above excerpts show that Joe and Peter take passive stances towards their research vulnerability. They detach themselves from all forms of research activities. These excerpts

allude to a reduced sense of academic efficacy that comes along with aging bodies and waning energy as an important factor behind Joe and Peter's explicit passivity in coping with research vulnerability. Indeed, lacking academic efficacy seems to be pervasive among many mid and late-career EFL teachers in XU (based on informal talks with many non-participant EFL teachers). It serves as an obstacle to fostering a favorable academic culture.

Likewise, Vivian is passive in coping with her research vulnerability. However, compared with Peter and Joe, Vivian's passivity is more influenced by her painful publishing experience. As mentioned earlier, she paid a large amount to an agency to get her paper published in a key journal. This incident turned her psychological world "upside-down", making her incredulous about the "fairness and rationality" of the research evaluation system:

Excerpt 83

That disgusting deal turned my world upside down. From then on, I realize that this game has no fairness and rationality. Maybe those teachers with senior professional titles all contacted agencies or even purchased ghostwriting services. ... Anyway, I won't play the game. I don't want to become a member of the dirty game. (Vivian, interview 2)

Apparently, Vivian's passive stance towards research vulnerability is attributable to her disappointment with the publishing industry dominated by shady agencies and compromised editors. She conceives herself as a young EFL teacher struggling with the unfavorable academic culture in mainland China. Without sufficient resources and external support, she feels disempowered to challenge the unfavorable academic culture and to safeguard her

academic integrity. Consequently, she adopts “disengagement” to withdraw herself from the intense pressure to publish.

4.3.3 Summary

This section has examined the participants’ experiences of research vulnerability. The data suggests that the participants’ research vulnerability is largely manifested by a state in which they lack the motivation to engage in research as an integral part of their prescribed professionalism. Four aspects of research vulnerability are identified: a lack of research motivation, inadequate research expertise, ambivalent beliefs about the value of research, and an unfavorable academic environment. The first aspect is attributable to the absence of an established research culture at XU. The second aspect is related to the evolving university policies that deprived many mid and late-career EFL teachers of the opportunities to receive research training in their early career years. The third aspect is manifested by a long-held belief that doing research brings little benefits to their teaching practice. The fourth aspect pertains to inadequate institutional support and the “hidden rules” underlying the act of publishing. Taken collectively, these aspects make a powerful statement to why research—particularly in the context of XU—is such a daunting task for EFL teachers.

Data also shows that the participants adopt multiple approaches towards their research vulnerability. Through self-initiated learning activities (e.g., pursuing doctoral degrees, reflection, using online resources, and seeking help from others), Fiona and Dora exhibit higher levels of agency than Peter, Joe, and Vivian in coping with their research vulnerability.

This difference alludes to the pivotal role of personal factors such as personality and past work experiences in mediating their experiences of research vulnerability.

4.4 Vulnerability and administration

Whereas administration plays a vital role in supporting EFL teachers' professional development, the participants often cite it as a major source of their professional vulnerability. While some teachers satirize the low work efficiency of the administration staff in addressing their immediate needs, some complain about excessive administrative interventions in their professional practice (based on informal talks with some non-participant teachers). I also hear some teachers cursing the nepotism among administrators. These negative remarks by EFL teachers reflect an unproductive and antagonistic teacher-administrator relationship that may exacerbate their disempowerment and low work morale.

4.4.1 “Pointless formalities”

“Pointless formalities” is a term used by the participants to describe their vulnerability to the bureaucratic administrative system. It is an “annoying situation” (Peter, interview 2) in which the administration staff requires EFL teachers to take on additional duties that could not bring tangible benefits to their professional practice. For instance, Vivian and Fiona complain about the course selection and student evaluation policies, arguing that both policies are nothing more than “pointless formalities” that have little to do with improving their teaching performance. Joe states that the “significance” of a large proportion of his work lies in “helping administrators meet the demands of their own evaluations” (Joe, interview 2). As

director of the EFL teaching office, Peter expresses a strong dislike of “pointless formalities”, arguing that much of the work imposed from above deprives him of plenty time and energy that he should have invested in more meaningful tasks:

Excerpt 84

I should have more time to focus on improving myself, but they (TAO) keep assigning non-teaching duties, like filling baffling forms, writing countless summaries, preparing various materials for inspections by senior administrative units, and so forth. I don't know what benefits these things can bring to me. And I don't think that they know, either. They just say, “it's good for the students”. ... You know, they also have the pressure of evaluation, so they just listen to what the leaders say. They never care about how we think about it. (Peter, interview 2)

The above statement indicates that Peter's professional vulnerability is significantly exacerbated by the growing administrative tasks that the university requires him to fulfill. Despite their claimed benefits to students' EFL learning, these “trivial tasks” do not seem to benefit Peter's professional practice. As Peter suggests, the arbitrary decisions made by TAO seem to be more influenced by a practical need to muddle through the evaluations by senior administrative units rather than a pedagogical purpose of improving the quality of EFL teaching. My field observation also speaks to the strong influences of “pointless formalities” on EFL teachers' professional practice:

Excerpt 85

Today is Teachers' Day. To celebrate this festival, TAO asked Peter to convene a group meeting during which we were required to study the Teachers' Letter of

Commitment. ...He asked us to sit around the table and pretend we were discussing some issues about teachers' moral quality. All he did was taking some photos. And then the "meeting" was over. He told me afterwards, "We are all responsible teachers, so what's the point of having us read the Letter collectively? Are we all morally disqualified? They must be wanting the photos as a proof that they have done something to improve the teachers' moral quality". (Reflective journal, September 16th, 2020)

Excerpt 86

Peter went into the office in a hurry when we were busy grading. He distributed copies of the peer class observation format to us and asked us to give the completed formats back to him in an hour. Everyone knew Peter's intention: since we all teach on the same day, we have no opportunities to observe each other's class. We had no choice but to fabricate the content. Joe asked me, "Allan, can you tell me what you taught on April 7th? I will make very positive comments on your teaching. You can also comment on my teaching, and I hope that your comments are positive too." (Reflective journal, May 12th, 2021)

From the vantage point of the administrators, moral construction and peer class observation are important means for cultivating a qualified teaching force. However, both incidents described above turned out to be "formalistic shows" that did not seem to bring any practical benefits to EFL teachers. The reason might be that, in a performance-oriented work culture, the administrators are vulnerable to the pressure to collect records of excellent management. Such pressure is alleviated through constantly putting forward new requirements for the teachers. Lynn puts it, "they simply want to show to the leaders that they have done

something, but care little about the outcomes” (interview). Reflecting on her own experience of managing EFL teaching affairs years ago, Lynn explains this “ironic” situation:

Excerpt 87

It’s ironic because the well-intended policies end up being dramas played by everyone. Indeed, they (TAO) seldom think carefully about how to implement the initiatives effectively. They only tell us what to do but never consider the actual situation. (Lynn, interview)

Apparently, TAO does not consider the practical situations (e.g., lacking time to engage in peer class observation) facing EFL teachers when they make some decisions about improving the quality of EFL teaching. This is an intractable problem, as the asymmetrical teacher-administrator relationship discourages EFL teachers from negotiating means of improving their teaching performance with the administrators.

4.4.2 Low work efficiency

The participants’ administrative vulnerability also pertains to some administrators’ low work efficiency. Fiona shares an incident that illustrates this phenomenon:

Excerpt 88

I contacted them (The Technology Support Office) to see if they could come to check the projector. They said that they were busy at that moment and would check it tomorrow. ...I came to the classroom the next day and found the projector was still unrepaired. I contacted them again and was told again that they would repair it the

next day. ...I gave up. I don't know why they are always busy! (Fiona, WeChat group discussion, 11/06/2020)

Fiona's experience is echoed by the other participants. For instance, Vivian provided an incident in which she kept urging TAO to allocate a multimedia classroom for teaching listening. Dora used "a crawling snail" to describe TAO's slowness in arranging the final-exam schedule. While teaching at XU, I experienced a strong sense of administrative vulnerability which was not weaker than that of the participants:

Excerpt 89

After the exam result was announced, three students contacted me, saying they were given "extremely low marks" for their class performance. ...I flipped through the mark sheets and found that I entered the wrong marks in the system. I immediately contacted TAO and asked them how to change the marks. They asked me to fill an application form with the seal of FH and send the form to them. So I followed their instructions. ...After one week, I found the marks were not changed, so I gave Wong (a TAO staff) a call. He said that the system was under maintenance, and it would be back to normal in two weeks. ...After two weeks, I found the marks still unchanged. I contacted Wong again and he said that I had to provide additional materials. ...After another two weeks, I went to Wong's office, and he was a bit impatient. ...In the following month, I tried to soothe the students, promising them that the marks would be changed before the end of the semester. ...In August, just a few days before the commencement of the new semester, I sent a short message to Wong, telling him that the students were very angry. However, he did not give me a reply. Then, I had no choice but to ask Snow if she could talk with Wong. It seemed that Wong listened to his senior's words because, soon after my talk with Snow, the marks were changed. (Reflective journal, 03/09/2021).

Snow comments on Wong's performance, saying, "there are so many tasks for us to complete every day and that we have to rank them according to their importance" (Snow, interview).

However, her words do not clarify the criteria they adopt to judge the importance of different tasks, nor offer a persuasive explanation of my vulnerability to inefficient administration. In my view, this is attributable to my "outsider" role whose immediate needs can never precede over those of full-time teachers. However, Peter says that this is a situation many EFL teachers are "accustomed to" and that I may "learn to live with it" (Peter, interview 3). To some extent, Peter's view is representative of the EFL teachers' general response towards inefficient administrators, which is elaborated on later in this section.

4.4.3 Excessive interventions

The participants criticize some administrators for frequently intervening in their professional practice, arguing that excessive interventions erode their self-esteem and autonomy. This can be illustrated by two incidents that I encountered during my fieldwork at XU: Joe's participation in the microlecture teaching contest and the end-of-semester grading work.

4.4.3.1 Joe's participation in the microlecture teaching contest

In September 2020, Joe participated in the microlecture⁷ teaching contest organized by TAO. His excellent performance in the contest won him the first prize and a handsome bonus. The dean of FH also praised Joe for "winning a big honor for the school" (field notes, faculty

⁷ Microlectures are "short instructional videos or audio fragments that explain a tightly defined topic" (olde Scholtenhuis et al., 2021, p. 458). In flipped classroom approach, microlectures are provided to the students as learning materials before they physically attend classroom sessions.

meeting, 07/10/2020). However, Joe said that he was “disgusted” with this contest as he was “forced” by the school to participate in it:

Excerpt 90

I wanted to be more autonomous. I didn’t want to participate in this contest at all. I was afraid to lose the contest because it would be shameful for a veteran teacher like me. However, I was forced to participate in it. ...His (the dean) secretary called me, “Considering your rich experience in language teaching, we nominated you to participate in this contest on behalf of our school.” She also promised that if I could win the contest, she would give me “excellence” in the end-of-semester evaluation. ...I had to show her that I had a sense of collectivism. ...So it was against my will. It made me feel vulnerable! (Joe, interview 2)

This excerpt shows that Joe is vulnerable to administrative interventions that constrain his professional autonomy. His participation in the microlecture teaching contest was not voluntary, as suggested by the dean’s nomination. His intuitive resistance to this contest can be attributed partly to the enormous psychological burden he might experience during the preparation stage. He could not bear the consequence of losing the contest, as it might be considered a sign of ineffective teaching and a denial of his “experienced teacher” image. Meanwhile, the dean’s nomination was more like a “political task” (Joe, interview 2) imposed on him. He felt powerless to reject it lest that it would leave the dean with an impression that he did not have a strong sense of “collectivism”. Therefore, he had to put aside his discontent and commit himself to the contest. This passivity, of being designated to complete a task that he had little interest in, significantly exacerbates Joe’s sense of professional vulnerability.

4.4.3.2 The end-of-semester grading work

Grading final exams is an important task that EFL teachers must fulfill every semester. To make the grading work efficient, Peter normally divides the teachers into several groups, with a veteran teacher being the group leader and other teachers grading different sections of the exam paper. The arduous grading work normally takes two and half days, during which the teachers need to accomplish multiple tasks such as grading the exam papers, registering scores, writing summaries, printing grade sheets, and sending the grade sheets to different departments. Not only do the teachers suffer from eye strain and back pains, but they also lack the autonomy to set grading criteria:

Excerpt 91

The section that I graded was “spot dictation”, which required the students to fill in blanks with the words they heard. I thought it was an easy task because there was only one answer to each blank. However, it turned out to be a challenging and even “ridiculous” task. ...While grading the papers of art major students, Peter asked me to be “lenient”. He said, “Give the student full mark as long as the root is right”. I was confused and asked him to give me an example. He pointed to a blank which should be filled with the word *sustainable* and said, “if the student wrote *sustain*, it would be acceptable”. Oh gosh! How can full marks be given for a wrong answer? Is it fair for students who give the correct answers? (Reflective journal, 15/12/2020)

This incident stands in contrast to my previous teaching experience at another university in mainland China, where EFL teachers have the discretion in grading. However, this incident seems to be nothing more than a normal practice. Dora disclosed a more extreme example:

Excerpt 92

It's nothing to be surprised about. We are more lenient when grading physical education major students: if three letters are correct, they will get the mark! (Dora, interview 2)

This seemingly “ridiculous” rule of being “excessively lenient in grading” (Fiona, interview 2) provokes confusion, frustration, and aversion among many EFL teachers (based on informal talks with some non-participant teachers). I often hear some teachers complain about how guilty they feel when they have to give a total mark to a wrong answer. Acknowledging the importance of “being fair and objective” in the grading practice, Peter explains the rationale behind this lenient grading approach:

Excerpt 93

TAO has a requirement for the overall passing rate and the proportion of students in each grade level. They believe an ideal result of the exam analysis should follow “normal distribution”. If we graded the papers strictly, the passing rate would be low, and they would question the effectiveness of our teaching. To avoid unnecessary trouble, the school require us to be lenient in grading. (Peter, interview 2)

Peter's statement indicates that administrative interventions exacerbate EFL teachers' sense of professional vulnerability by depriving them of discretion in grading. From his point of view, grading leniency is an “irresponsible decision” made by FH leaders to achieve a high score in the school evaluation led by TAO, the result of which determines the amount of funds it receives from the university. Thus Peter and his colleagues alike are forced to relinquish their “fairness and objectivity” in grading.

4.4.4 Coping with administrative vulnerability

In this part, I refer to Peter's experiences to elaborate on how the participants cope with their administrative vulnerability. I have three reasons: Peter acts as the liaison between the EFL teaching office and different administrative units; he has rich experience in managing administrative tasks and a good knowledge of the prevalent bureaucracy among administrative units; in addition, his coping strategies largely reflect the attitudes and views of his colleagues (this is confirmed by my informal talks with many non-participant teachers during the fieldwork).

As director of the EFL teaching office, Peter needs to fulfill many administrative tasks. Not only is he responsible for managing various teaching-related activities (e.g., collective lesson planning, constructing online teaching platforms, and organizing final exams), but he is also pressured to implement the decisions made by different administrative units. He spends much of his work time "running between my office and TAO" (Peter, interview 2). Through his day-to-day contact with TAO staff, Peter develops a clear understanding of the bureaucratic administration, which exacerbates his sense of professional vulnerability:

Excerpt 94

In our university, a newly appointed administrator may have some *guan xi* (connections), like being the relative of a department head. This leads to nepotism. They (administrators) tend to view the university as a company run by themselves ...and so in their mentality, we are expected to be docile employees who willingly follow their directions and complete the assigned tasks without complaints. Thus, we are deemed to be a vulnerable group. (Peter, interview 2)

In a WeChat group discussion (15/10/2020), Joe and Vivian used “*ya men*” (government offices in feudal China) to explain their understanding of the bureaucratic administration. They perceive some administrators as “feudal officers” whose primary job is “not to support us but to maintain their control over us” (Joe). For Peter, it is unrealistic for EFL teachers to “fight against” *ya men*, which has been existing in the Chinese culture for thousands of years:

Excerpt 95

We dare not think about changing the way administration functions at the university. ...It (“*ya men*” culture) has been there for thousands of years, and we can’t change or get rid of it unless we have the almighty power to fight against the higher education system in this country. Now that we don’t have such power, we can only comply with it. (Peter, interview 2)

This excerpt shows that Peter adopts “compliance” as the primary tactic to cope with his administrative vulnerability. While this tactic is influenced by the “iterational” (i.e., knowledge of the bureaucratic nature of administration that he has acquired over time) and “practical-evaluative” (i.e., knowledge of the scarce resources and connections that EFL teachers can maneuver at present) dimensions of his agency, it aims to protect him and his colleagues against potential risks in the future such as losing their jobs (projectivity). As Peter puts it, “after all, it is a feasible and safe strategy that can help us avoid direct confrontations with those who have the final word on our career prospects” (Peter, interview 3).

Talking with other teachers, I find that not all of them are satisfied with Peter’s overt compliance with the administrative decisions. Some teachers say he is “too good-tempered to

resist the pressure from above” (fieldnotes, 16/11/2020). Some even express a wish that Peter can “stand up to the administrators’ decisions and fight for our own rights” (fieldnotes, 16/11/2020). Commenting on these views, Peter says that he is not as “good-tempered” as some of his colleagues may think. Indeed, he believes that it is necessary for him and his colleagues alike to negotiate favorable workplace conditions with the administrators. He claims that he is not a completely “obedient implementor” (interview 2) of all administrative decisions. Occasionally, he uses some “sleight of hand” (interview 2) strategies to disguise the EFL teachers’ non-participation in mandatory professional activities (as is in the case of peer class observation). He even adopts more active strategies (e.g., openly reproaching the decisions made by TAO) to cope with administrative vulnerability. However, the entrenched bureaucracy in administration and asymmetrical teacher-administrator power relations make it difficult to “get our voices heard at the bargaining table” (Peter, interview 2). This makes him feel guilty. He shared with me an incident in which TAO asked EFL teachers to print the mark sheets by student majors and send the copies to different departments:

Excerpt 96

I guess they (TAO) were deliberately picking on us. The student composition is super complex. In a class of sixty students, I may have two civil engineering students, one environmental science student, three mechanical engineering students ... students in various majors. Then they asked us to print the mark sheets by student majors and send the copies to different departments! Can you imagine how much work we had to do? Why didn’t they do the work? It was supposed to be their work, right? ...So I went to TAO with Lynn and asked them if they could reconsider this ridiculous decision. We even quarreled with them, but we didn’t convince them. I felt guilty because I failed to protect our rights. (Peter, interview 2)

As the above excerpt shows, Peter's employment of "confrontation" proves unsuccessful in helping him negotiate the printing work with TAO. This incident intensifies his sense of administrative vulnerability. So he resorts to "compliance" which, although passive and conservative, can at least protect him and his colleagues against potential sanctions by TAO.

Nevertheless, with the performance control being tightened in recent years, it seems that most of the EFL teachers have come to a deeper understanding of the rationale behind Peter's compliance with administrative decisions (based on informal talks with several non-participant teachers). While grading the final exam papers, I heard many grievances from the teachers, such as "we couldn't do anything to change them (the administration), "we have to be humble because we are in an inferior position", and "we dare not expect more as long as they assure us a place in this university" (fieldnotes, 12/05/2021). Dora's comments well reflect EFL teachers' perceptions of administrative vulnerability and attitudes towards Peter's coping strategy:

Excerpt 97

It's not easy for Peter to act as a liaison between the office and the administration. Whoever in his position would experience similar vulnerability. After all, you can't expect the administration to respect and carefully consider the views of a marginalized group like us. We must follow the rules because complaints are useless. ...This is not unique to XU, as my friends in many other universities also have similar experiences. Therefore, we are all vulnerable. (Dora, interview 2)

Dora's point suggests that many EFL teachers perceive Peter's overt "compliance" with administrative decisions as an appropriate strategy. It also indicates that the marginality of EFL teachers in the university power hierarchy contributes to their sense of administrative vulnerability.

4.4.5 Summary

This section has examined the participants' vulnerability related to university administration and their coping strategies. The participants are generally vulnerable to an administrative system that does not seem to play a constructive role in helping their professional practice. Their administrative vulnerability comprises three parts. First, they are vulnerable to "pointless formalities" in which different administrative units impose on them a large amount of performance-oriented tasks (e.g., the moral construction meeting and peer class observation) that turn out to be ineffective in improving their professional performances. Second, they are vulnerable to the low work efficiency of some administrators who are slow in addressing their immediate problems. Third, they are vulnerable to excessive administrative interventions which prevent them from gaining mastery over their own affairs.

The three parts highlight the complex and power-laden nature of university EFL teachers' administrative vulnerability. Specifically, their administrative vulnerability is closely related to a bureaucratic and hierarchical approach to administration and is enhanced by the centrally imposed "pressure to perform". The asymmetrical teacher-administrator relationship and inadequate bargaining resources discourage the participants from bluntly rejecting those

administrative decisions that they perceive as irrelevant to their professional development. In order to survive the tight performance evaluations, they resort to “compliance” by passively implementing the decisions made by the administration. While the participants occasionally adopt confrontation to cope with their administrative vulnerability, it proves unsuccessful in an administration-dominated work context. This situation contributes to the marginality of EFL teachers in the university power hierarchy, which is discussed in the following section.

4.5 Vulnerability and social recognition

Social recognition of their professional competence and values constitutes another salient theme in the participants’ descriptions of their professional vulnerability. It is an essential non-material workplace condition that they claim they are entitled to as part of their professional practice. Throughout this study, the participants repeatedly mention that they are vulnerable to inadequate recognition of their professional values from other people, such as the students, the administrators, and teachers in other departments. This vulnerability is combined with a sense of devaluation and being disrespected that undermines their ongoing professional development. In this section, I present four sub-themes, namely the “objectification” of EFL teaching, a lack of respect from the students and administrators, low salaries, and decreased workload, in order to unpack the complexity of this vulnerability.

4.5.1 The “objectification” of EFL teaching

The participants cite the “objectification” of EFL teaching as an important factor adding to their vulnerability to inadequate social recognition. Inherent in the “objectification” is a

continuous feeling that they are treated by the university instrumentally. For instance, the student evaluation and course selection policies (see 4.2.3) entail a “commodification” process in which the participants are pressurized to attract potential “customers” of their courses. Joe’s experience illustrates this phenomenon:

Excerpt 98

I used to think that I’m a good teacher. However, when I first saw the students’ comments a few years ago, I found I was not that good. ...If I were a novice teacher, I would accept those negative comments because I lacked the experience. But I’m a veteran teacher with more than twenty years of teaching experience. I feel shameful when I fall behind my young colleagues in student evaluations...like a commodity that keeps receiving negative comments from the consumers. (Joe, interview 2)

According to Joe, the student evaluation initiative makes him feel that his instructional practice is like a commodity open to comments and discussions. As a veteran teacher, Joe believes that his rich experience in EFL teaching allows him to “have the final word on my teaching competence” (informal talk, 12/11/2020). However, the above statement suggests that the student evaluation policy has a demoralizing effect on Joe’s teaching, with the students’ comments being used by the university as the most important benchmark for judging his teaching competence. This poses a threat to his claimed professionalism and makes him vulnerable to a sense of being devalued.

Vivian also feels that her teaching practice is prone to “commodification”. This feeling becomes strong when it comes to the students’ selecting EFL courses prior to each semester:

Excerpt 99

We are like commodities! TAO posts our personal information on the website to let the students know more about us. ...Do you think freshmen can make rational choices without attending the class? Maybe they simply look at our photos and select nice-looking teachers. ...But why can't we select the students? I want to teach students interested in learning English, not those who come to my class just for credits! (Vivian, interview 2)

So Vivian holds that the course selection process should be bidirectional, with “the students and teachers selecting each other” (Vivian, interview 2). However, the “commodification” of her teaching practice suggests that the course selection process is “unidirectional” in the sense that teachers are deprived of the power to select the students based on their preferences. This embodies an imbalanced student-teacher relationship, which makes Vivian feel disrespected and belittled. Fiona also explains her perception of “objectification”:

Excerpt 100

They (administrators) treat us like standardized parts. ...They presume that the teaching and research processes can be quantitatively measured by certain standards that they believe are “fair”. However, we are not identical. We have different understandings about what are the best approaches.So the system (of performativity) is quite unfair because it ignores our individuality and disparages our values. (Fiona, interview 3)

This statement suggests that Fiona perceives EFL teachers' vulnerability to objectification as resulting from performativity, in which the administrators seek to quantify their professional performances. The concept of “individuality”, as Fiona explained in a subsequent informal

talk (12/12/2020), is what makes her “a unique teacher with adequate professional discretion”.

It is a vital belief underlying her continuous investment in EFL teaching. Hence, she naturally feels devalued by various performance-control measures that work to erase her individuality.

Fiona’s vulnerability to inadequate social recognition was enhanced after she came back from the United States as a visiting scholar:

Excerpt 101

When I was visiting Berkeley, all the professors and staff wore big smiles. They are free to select teaching approaches and research topics. After coming back, however, I became disillusioned with stifling atmosphere. ... We are like sardines stuffed into the shuttle bus that travels a long journey to the village every day. This is our routine life. We are treated as teaching instruments rather than humans. (Fiona, interview 3)

So Fiona’s professional vulnerability seems to be compounded by her unpleasant experience of reverse culture shock. In particular, the experience of studying in the United States instills Fiona a strong belief that individuality and professional discretion are essential conditions for her ongoing professional development. However, such a belief is in stark contrast with the workplace conditions at XU, where a performance-oriented work culture constrains her professional practice, making her vulnerable to devaluation.

4.5.2 A lack of respect from the students and administrators

For the participants, vulnerability to inadequate social recognition entails a sense of being disrespected by their significant others, particularly the students and administrators. In a

WeChat group discussion (21/05/2020), the participants unanimously agree that respect from the students and administrators is an important motive behind their ongoing investment in the EFL teaching profession.

However, such respect seems to be diminishing in recent years. Describing her experience in managing the class, Vivian acknowledged that some disrespectful behaviors of the students (e.g., skipping class despite her warning of the possible sanctions) made her “so vulnerable” that she even considered “leaving this profession forever” (Vivian, interview 1). Citing an incident where she came across a student who did not greet her, Dora argued that “students nowadays are not as polite as those many years ago” (Dora, interview 2). Other student behaviors such as those described in 4.2.1 (e.g., taking a nap in class) are also interpreted by the participants as indicators of disrespect.

The participants are also vulnerable to the disrespect of the administrators, particularly those working in performance-control units such as TAO. Although they can feel the respect from the administrators (e.g., TAO distributed cakes to individual teachers on Teachers’ Day) occasionally, they are largely vulnerable to the disrespectful attitudes of the administrators in most cases. One such example has to do with the urgent notice from TAO about implementing the “graded-teaching” mode:

Excerpt 102

Last night, Peter shared an urgent notice in the WeChat group, asking all the teachers to inform their students that they must take a proficiency test this weekend. The

notice was from TAO. The reason for having this test is that TAO wants to implement the “graded-teaching” mode, that is, classifying the students into different grades based on their English proficiency levels and teaching each grade with different materials. This provoked an uproar from the teachers. A veteran teacher shouted, “The students have been in my class for nearly two weeks, but now they’ll be graded and assigned to another teacher? What’s wrong with them (TAO)? Are they mental?” (Reflective journal, 10/09/2020)

Commenting on this incident, the participants voice strong resentment against TAO that often makes arbitrary decisions about EFL teaching without seeking their advice in advance (Based on WeChat discussion, 11/09/2020). They believe their training in EFL teaching provides them with the knowledge which should allow them to decide what is best for the students. They hold that the issues of “what to teach” and “how to teach” in class are parts of their expertise, and hence, their views and suggestions must be taken seriously by any policy makers aimed at improving the quality of EFL teaching. However, this “urgent” and somewhat “hasty” decision about “graded-teaching” makes the participants feel that the professional expertise they have developed through years of teaching is ignored by TAO. They feel that they are excluded from the decision-making circle and are made invisible. This adds to their sense of professional vulnerability.

The participants appear to be more vulnerable to administrator disrespect than they are to student disrespect, as the words “administrators” and “administration” occur much more frequently than the word “students” in their descriptions of vulnerability to disrespect. Joe explains:

Excerpt 103

In most cases, I could bear the students' disrespect. After all, I have some control over their academic performances. They know it, so they won't go too far. ...But my vulnerability to administrators' disrespect is much stronger: they are the "boss", while I am an "employee". I may be awarded for my good performance, but I can hardly gain their respect. Our positions are fundamentally unequal. (Joe, interview 3)

So Joe's experience of professional vulnerability is fortified by the asymmetrical power relation between the teachers and the administrators. In particular, the authentic teacher-administrator relationship (characterized by respect and equality) is replaced by one predicated on the "leading/being led" (Joe, interview 3) binary. Feeling incapable of escaping such a work culture, he naturally feels vulnerable to a lack of respect from the administrators.

4.5.3 Low salaries

Low salaries are commonly considered and reported by the participants as one of the most significant factors exacerbating their experiences of vulnerability. Salaries, together with bonuses and welfare apartments, are not only economic in nature but also represent material rewards for excellence in performance.

Like my previous teaching experience elsewhere in mainland China, the salaries that XU provides for EFL teachers seem "quite uncompetitive" (Lynn, interview 3). This engenders low teacher morale and makes it difficult for FH to attract "excellent talents" such as well-known professors and doctoral graduates from top universities (Lynn, informal talk, 08/30/2020).

For the participants, their vulnerability to low salaries is entangled with a perception of low professional and socioeconomic status. For instance, Peter and Dora claim that they have yet to benefit from the welfare that the university offered to their senior colleagues in the late 1990s, such as the allocation of welfare apartments. This makes them feel that their contribution to the “university construction” over the years is ignored by the administrators (Based on an informal talk with Joe and Dora, 09/11/2020). Fiona says that the salary provided by the university was “humiliating”, making her feel that the “sacred enterprise of imparting knowledge to the younger generation” is a “cheap and meaningless physical act” (Fiona, interview 3). As a young EFL teacher, Vivian seems to experience greater vulnerability to low salaries than the other participants. She describes at length how the “humiliating” salary has overthrown some of her preconceptions about the university EFL teaching profession:

Excerpt 104

When I was in postgraduate school, I admired my supervisor a lot. She seemed to be a rich and elegant lady with a decent job. I wish I could become a teacher like her. After I got the teaching post, she said, “I don’t want to discourage you, but this job may not be as high-paying as you think”. I didn’t take her words seriously because my passion for teaching outweighed my desire for money. ...However, when I saw my pay slip of the first month, I felt down. The amount was only 3,400 RMB! I didn’t even meet the tax payment standard! (Vivian, interview 3)

As the above excerpt suggests, Vivian’s vulnerability to a “humiliating” salary reflects a stark contrast between her imagined and real professional lives. This vulnerability generates a

demoralizing effect on her professional practice, making her feel regretful of the “hasty decision” (interview 3) that she made about her career choice. Lacking practical knowledge about the working conditions such as salary in higher institutions prior to her induction is an important factor that engenders such vulnerability.

Vivian’s vulnerability to low salary is exacerbated by her dual identity as both an EFL teacher and a young mother. During the interviews, she frequently mentioned how the low salary made it difficult for her to support the family and jeopardized her emotional well-being:

Excerpt 105

I’m not only a teacher. I’m also a mother. Raising children is as equally important as teaching the English language. However, the poor salary can barely cover my living expenses. ... I’m struggling to make ends meet every day. And that is why I always feel vulnerable. When I wake up every morning, the first word that appears in my mind is always “money”. (Vivian, interview 3)

The participants’ vulnerability to low salaries becomes stronger when they compare their salaries with those of the administrators and teachers in other departments. In a WeChat group discussion (09/02/2020), they expressed their admiration for engineering teachers who reaped financial benefits from externally funded R&D (research and development) projects:

Excerpt 106

I know many engineering teachers who are not reliant on the salary offered by the university. A large proportion of their income comes from lucrative R&D projects

funded by some companies. They are living a life that many of us have been dreaming of. (Dora)

Excerpt 107

While they can turn their knowledge into patents that can be sold at a favorable price, we can only make a living through teaching the language. Then how can we become members of the so-called “middle class”? (Vivian)

Excerpt 108

While they are well-paid for their research endeavor, we are not paid fairly for our teaching work. Isn't teaching more important than research in undergraduate education? (Fiona)

Excerpt 109

Regarding year-end bonuses, engineering teachers are always well-paid for the research fund they receive. However, the bonus that we receive from the university is incompatible with the heavy teaching loads we carry. And this makes me feel that our work is devalued. (Joe)

The great emphasis that the participants place on teaching is understandable, given that they are all hired in “teaching-oriented” positions, where teaching constitutes the primary source of their income. However, as the above excerpts suggest, the values of teaching and research are not equally reflected in their salaries. Given that the university puts great values on their research productivity, EFL teachers are deemed vulnerable to low salaries.

The participants' vulnerability to low salaries is also exacerbated by how people in other professions perceive their economic status. In an informal talk (11/26/2020), Vivian mentioned a friend who claimed to have bought four apartments in downtown by running a foreign language training school. She feels inferior to her friend because she could not "live an equally decent life". From her point of view, "the respect that an individual gains from other people" is embodied in "the amount of money that he can earn". In this regard, the work of EFL teachers within "the system" (i.e., public universities) and that of "businessmen" like her friend do not seem to be equally respected by society. Peter also shared an incident in which an engineer persuaded him to leave the EFL teaching profession:

Excerpt 110

I came across him at a job fair held on campus. He was my student many years ago, but now he is a successful engineer working in a Fortune 500 company. ...He asked me how much I could earn each month. I told him, and he looked shocked. He asked, "How come XU offers you such a low salary? To be honest, recent graduates who joined our company earn much more than you. Why don't you take a new job?" It seemed that he felt sorry for me. (Peter, interview 3)

Peter rejected the engineer's idea that he should resign from the university, as he still maintained "a passion for EFL teaching" (Peter, interview 3). In fact, he feels uncomfortable with the engineer's words that sound "somewhat insulting" as if the EFL teaching profession, in the eyes of others, is composed of "poor and didactic teaching craftsmen" and is not a respectable profession in a "commercialized society" (Peter, interview 3). The engineer's words pose a threat to Peter's self-esteem and add to his sense of professional vulnerability.

However, Peter is inclined to agree that, in a system of performativity, a significant salary increase depends on an academic's ability to complete tasks that go beyond what is normally required of "teaching-oriented" teachers and that can bring immediate and tangible benefits (e.g., research funds) to the university. Thus, he should not expect to "make a big fortune" simply through teaching, which is all too often a "sideline" for many "wealthy professors" (Peter, interview 3).

4.5.4 Reduced workload

The participants' vulnerability to inadequate social recognition is also related to the reduced workload. As mentioned in 1.2 and 3.3.1, the past few years have witnessed a gradual decline of CE as a compulsory course in many higher institutions in mainland China. XU is no exception in following this national trend, as seen in its consistent efforts to reduce the hours and credit points allocated to CE (see Table 3.3).

For the participants, the reduced workload signals public skepticism about their capacity to cultivate graduates with a global outlook. It results in a survival crisis, rendering them vulnerable to unemployment in the near future. Therefore, vulnerability to reduced workloads can take a toll on the participants' sense of self-worth and professional commitment. Vivian, for instance, articulates that she has at once thought about "looking for part-time jobs" in response to "the rapidly shrinking workload" (informal talk, 07/04/2021). Peter is also highly concerned about this problem:

Excerpt 111

The turning point was in 2015 when Lynn told us that the university was considering cancelling CE courses for sophomore students, which meant that we wouldn't be able to fulfill half of the workloads required of us. ...While the plan was abandoned in the end, the university has been consistently marginalizing CE in recent years. ...So I always feel nervous. I dare not to hear them (TAO) say, "well, the class hours will be reduced next semester". (Peter, interview 3)

The decline of CE in undergraduate education may partly be explained by the stereotypical image of CE as a "water course" (i.e., courses that are characterized by boring content, sloppy classroom management, high-passing rates, and perceived irrelevance to students' future career development) in comparison to more "useful courses" like Advanced Mathematics and Engineering Graphics (based on interviews with Shawn). From the students' perspective, the perceived "water" nature of CE is an important factor that leads to their disengagement from EFL learning:

Excerpt 112

To be honest, CE is quite boring. Not only is the content boring, but also the teaching method is tedious. ...My teacher is responsible, but her teaching style is unattractive. Whenever I listen to her analyzing the text, I feel sleepy. It is a typical "water course". (Gao, interview)

Apparently, Gao perceives "boring" learning content and "tedious" teaching method as defining features of a "water course" like CE. Lee holds a similar view:

Excerpt 113

I do believe that CE is a necessary course. However, the content is too simple for me, and the teaching method is a kind of outdated. I doubt if I could really improve my English proficiency by taking this course. It's too "water". (Lee, interview)

Yang questions the status of CE as a compulsory course for all non-English major students, arguing that he does not foresee any chances to "speak English in the workplace":

Excerpt 114

I don't think that all students must learn English in university. CE should be provided to those with an interest in English or who plan study abroad in the future. ... We are not majored in English. We are majoring in engineering. Most of my classmates will work in China after graduation. So I don't foresee any chances that we will speak English in the workplace. I wouldn't take the course if it were not for the exam. (Yang, interview)

The above excerpts suggest that the students are struggling to perceive a need to undertake CE. Their course-taking decisions are simply motivated by a practical need to pass exams that could not test their language competence meaningfully and holistically. They hold negative attitudes towards the role of CE in the undergraduate curriculum: Gao and Lee criticize the limited effectiveness of CE teaching; Yang contests the legitimacy of CE as a compulsory course for all non-English major undergraduates. These negative remarks by the students may partly explain their disengagement from EFL learning in university (see 4.2.1).

Meanwhile, the students' negative attitudes towards CE may reinforce the stereotypes they hold against EFL teachers. In a series of informal talks, the students used some negative, even disparaging metaphors such as "hypnotist" (Gao), "PPT reader" (Lee), and "monodrama actor" (Yang) to portray their teachers. These metaphors indicate that the students do not fully recognize the value of EFL teachers in promoting their academic and personal development. This further intensifies the participants' vulnerability to inadequate social recognition.

The skepticism about the value of CE also seems to exist among teachers in other departments. This can be illustrated by my informal talk with two architecture major teachers whom I came across in the library:

Excerpt 115

They (the architecture major teachers) said that there must be something wrong with the teaching methodologies because many students didn't improve their speaking and writing skills after learning CE for two years in university. They complained about their former CE teachers who spoke English with a strong Chinese accent and relied heavily on PPT in class. One of them even held a radical view that English test should be removed from the postgraduate admission exam and that CET4 and 6 should be cancelled. ...He hates English, I'm sure. But his attitudes towards English are understandable, as he used to be a "victim" of English: he had taken the postgraduate admission exam twice due to his "awkward" English proficiency level. (Reflective journal, 28/04/2021)

The informal talk mentioned above suggests that the quality of CE teaching and the role of CE as an integral component of Chinese higher education is called into question by some

non-EFL academics at XU. The two teachers' EFL learning experiences allude to the inert knowledge problem in which they spend many years learning English only to struggle to use it. In this regard, CE teaching is of dubious effectiveness. The two teachers can be said to be representatives of academics who are highly supportive of reform initiatives that purport to weaken CE teaching in higher education. This goes some way to explaining why the participants are vulnerable to the inadequate social recognition of their values.

4.5.5 Coping with inadequate social recognition

As elaborated in 4.4, the participants' work context is characterized by bureaucratic administration, which entails an imbalanced power relationship between frontline teachers and the administrators. The bureaucratic nature of administration is inherently problematic as it affords EFL teachers little leeway to alter the decisions made by the administration and to negotiate their professional interests. In such a work context, "compliance" appears to be a practical and secure tactic for the participants to cope with their administrative vulnerability. However, this tactic may also lend itself to being adopted by the participants to handle their vulnerability to a lack of respect from the administrators, who are assumed to have greater control over their professional practice.

That said, the participants also adopt some proactive tactics to cope with their vulnerability related to inadequate social recognition. These tactics include adhering to personal values, building rapport with the students, and offering elective courses to the students.

4.5.5.1 Adhering to personal values

Coping with vulnerability involves taking stances and choosing values. As a representation of the “iterational” dimension of agency, personal values are developed through the participants’ past experiences. They are activated and adopted by the participants to ensure the appropriateness of their responses towards vulnerable situations at hand. As an example, Peter adheres to “*zun shi*” (i.e., showing reverence for the teachers), which is deeply rooted in the Chinese traditional culture, to cope with inadequate respect from the students:

Excerpt 116

A student arrived fifteen minutes after the class began. He didn’t say anything like, “sorry, I’m late because...” or “may I come in, Peter?” Instead, he crossed the podium and sat in the back row. Then, Peter said, “don’t you know that a late student should ask for the teacher’s permission before entering the classroom? Did your counsellor tell you that being late for class is immoral? Why are you so impolite?” ...Peter was angry. ...The way that he scolded the student was beyond my expectation because I had the impression that he was a good-tempered man.
(Reflective journal, 08/03/2021)

Apparently, Peter was infuriated by the student’s seemingly “impolite” behavior. The three consecutive questions that he raised were verbal indicators of his intense anger. In a later talk (10/03/2021), Peter argued that the student’s behavior was impolite and disrespectful, and it made him feel that his authority was infringed. By using some seemingly “harsh words” against the student, Peter intended to remind the student of the importance of “*zun shi*”.

The participants also attach great importance to protecting their self-esteem when they cope with their vulnerability related to inadequate social recognition. For instance, while teaching constitutes a major source of their income, Vivian and Dora would not live on “begging alms from the university” (WeChat group discussion, 17/09/2020). They wish to become “economically independent professionals” (WeChat group discussion, 17/09/2020). Accordingly, they seek additional income sources outside the university: Vivian is teaching part-time in a language training school, while Dora is hired as a part-time translator by a trading company. Talking about her slender income, Fiona said that she would rather doing many part-time jobs than complying with institutional rules blindly at the cost of her self-esteem:

Excerpt 117

My self-esteem is the bottom line. I won't comply with their decisions at the cost of my self-esteem. While I don't have the power to select textbooks, I may choose to teach certain parts of the textbooks espoused by TAO or to prepare additional learning materials for the students. In doing so, I can partly safeguard my self-esteem. And this makes me feel less vulnerable. (Fiona, interview 3)

Fiona constructs her pursuit of professional self-esteem as a “negotiation” process, in which she manages to “balance” between TAO's decision on textbook selection and her practical beliefs about “appropriate teaching materials that can advantage both the teachers and the students” (interview 3). As Fiona recounts, this balancing act allows her professional knowledge about language teaching to be put into practice and bolsters her professional identity as a university EFL teacher.

4.5.5.2 Building rapport with the students

Rapport-building is the primary tactic adopted by the participants to cope with a lack of respect from the students. It allows the participants to develop equal and trustful relationships with the students. Vivian seeks to build rapport with her students, often in a subtle and implicit way:

Excerpt 118

Once I came across a student in the café, and I asked him, “Are you doing well in your major study?”...I knew he was majoring in architecture, so I continued asking, “How is the design studio going?”...I also said, “I have a friend. He is an architect. He often complains about staying up late at night to do the drawing work.”...He nodded his head and said, “Yes! You’re right! We’re busy...” I asked these questions to show him that I really cared about him and I understood his difficulties. Since then, the student has become more attentive in class than before. We even have eye contact! I feel that he recognizes my endeavor. (Vivian, interview 2)

Therefore, rapport-building proves effective in helping Vivian cope with her vulnerability to a lack of student respect. This strategy entails the concept of “reciprocity” which, in her own words, is reflected in “the teachers and the students respecting each other” (informal talk, 01/09/2020). She holds that the achievement of “reciprocity” is based on her extending love and care to the students outside class.

Other participants also adopt rapport-building to cope with their vulnerability related to student disrespect. This can be illustrated by what I observed during the campus lockdown:

Excerpt 119

The university decided to lock down the campus, so the students are required to stay in the dorm. The lockdown period is expected to last for at least one month. For many students, it's a physical and psychological torture. I see them complaining on WeChat and other media platforms. ... This morning, Peter said that we should pay close attention to the students' psychological conditions and offer them assistance whenever they need it. He said, "although we are not psychologists, timely exchange with the students can help them get through the harsh time." Many teachers echoed Peter's suggestion. (Reflective journal, 03/01/2021)

Excerpt 120

Had a rich and meaningful day. As a volunteer, I delivered food and water to my students residing in the dorm. I also talked with several students who wanted to go home. ... They all thanked me. One student even gave me a warm hug. Suddenly, I felt that it's all worth it. I'm proud to be their teacher. (Dora, WeChat, 09/01/2021)

The rapport-building tactic shows that the participants draw on their "practical-evaluative" agency. It is informed by a detailed evaluation of the practical learning conditions facing the students (e.g., heavy academic burdens and campus lockdown). As they feel responsible for the students, the participants believe that they must act to help the students withstand their plight. Inherent in this tactic is the intention to reconstruct a trustworthy student-teacher relationship, which enables the participants to gain respect from the students.

4.5.5.3 Offering elective courses to the students

As mentioned in 3.3.1, the EFL teaching office has been offering a wide range of elective courses to undergraduate students since 2017. This initiative, led by Peter and supported by

his colleagues, is geared towards the students' diverse learning needs and, more importantly, assisting EFL teachers to cope with their vulnerability to reduced workloads (Peter, informal talk, 05/05/2020). As shown in Table 3.2, a variety of elective courses are offered to the students, including courses for students who require a command of English in certain disciplines (e.g., *Business English*), courses aimed at preparing the students for proficiency tests (e.g., *IELTS Training*), and courses designed to help the students broaden their horizons and learn about different cultures (e.g., *British and American Societies*) (based on *XU EFL Course Construction Plan, 2020 edition*).

Explaining the rationale behind his initiative, Peter argues that EFL teachers' vulnerability to decreased workloads entails both risks and opportunities. While this vulnerability is associated with an increased risk of unemployment, it compels EFL teachers to reformulate their knowledge structure through preparing and offering new courses:

Excerpt 121

We (EFL teachers) are vulnerable to this irreversible trend (the decline of CE). The only possible solution is to adjust the curriculum. ... While I used to complain about it, I learn to accept it now. It gives me a good opportunity to learn something new and to prepare new courses. ... One may feel tired of teaching CE for so many years. And teaching a new course is more exciting. (Peter, interview 3)

Peter's statement suggests that he resorts to "adjustment" by taking a relatively open stance towards his vulnerability to decreased workloads. He holds that he may benefit from this vulnerability which entails a chance for personal growth and development. Therefore, he

embraces this vulnerability by willingly opening himself to the possibility of “having fewer classes to teach” (interview 3). Meanwhile, Peter’s statement alludes to the joint influences of the “practical-evaluative” and “projective” orientations of agency behind his offering of new courses. That is to say, this initiative is motivated by a practical need to meet the institutional demand for workload and is aimed at helping his career development. In addition, his initiative is also informed by personal beliefs and understandings about the irreversibility of the national trend of declining CE.

While I was in XU, the participants offered various elective courses to the students, such as *Business Correspondence Writing* (Joe), *Cross-cultural Communication* (Dora), *Selective Readings in English Poetry* (Fiona), *Watching and Understanding English Movies* (Vivian), and *Selective Readings in English Print News Media* (Peter). Among them, Dora can be said to have benefitted the most from teaching elective courses. She works collaboratively with some students to operate a Cross-Cultural Communication WeChat Public Account through which she manages to upload various learning materials regularly:

Excerpt 122

Finally, I’m able to teach this course! I have a keen interest in cross-cultural communication and am willing to share my experience and understanding of foreign cultures (with the students). ...There was a lot I could learn from the students, like technical issues. ...With their help, I learned how to upload multimodal learning materials to the account, which has attracted more than 1,000 subscribers so far. Since there are much more students (selecting this course) than I thought, I need to

arrange one more class. So I'm less worried about the workload pressure than before.
(Dora, interview 3)

So teaching an elective course proves effective in helping Dora cope with her vulnerability related to the reduced workload. In the case above, Dora works collaboratively with her students to address some technical problems involved in creating and operating a WeChat Public Account for the cross-cultural communication course. This helps Dora improve the quality of her teaching practice and contributes to her technological literacy, which is conducive to her professional development.

4.5.6 Summary

This section has examined the participants' professional vulnerability regarding inadequate social recognition. From the participants' point of view, this vulnerability encapsulates multiple unfavorable working conditions such as the "objectification" of their professional work, a lack of respect from the students and administrators, low salaries, and the reduced workload. It not only adds to the participants' marginalization in the institutional power hierarchy, but also generates a demoralizing effect on their professional commitment.

When the participants describe how they experience such vulnerability, the system of performativity is often referred to as an important mediating factor. For instance, the participants cite the course selection and student evaluation policies as important factors that deprive them of the power to make decisions that they believe are the best for the students.

Meanwhile, since performativity places an overemphasis on the academics' research

productivity, the participants, most of whom are hired for the teaching-oriented positions, are vulnerable to low salaries. In addition, a series of performance-control measures (e.g., the “graded-teaching” mode) challenges the participants’ claimed authority in EFL teaching and poses a threat to their discretion in making pedagogical decisions.

The participants adopt both passive and proactive strategies to cope with their professional vulnerability regarding inadequate social recognition. On the one hand, they exhibit passivity in coping with parts of their vulnerability to administrator disrespect. This might be attributed to the asymmetry of the teacher-administrator relationship that leads to the nonnegotiability of teacher respect. On the other hand, they adopt some active strategies (e.g., adhering to personal values, building rapport with the students, taking part-time jobs, and providing elective courses to the students) to reduce their experiences of vulnerability. These strategies demonstrate how the “iterational”, “practical-evaluative” and “projective” orientations of teacher agency work to help the participants withstand inadequate social recognition of their professional competence and values.

4.6 Vulnerability and language proficiency

The last theme that emerge from the participants’ description of their professional vulnerability is their perceived lack of language proficiency. I use the term “language proficiency” here instead of “English proficiency”. As I will show, this is because some participants experience discomfort when they try to switch between English and Chinese, indicating their limited proficiency in both languages.

4.6.1 “We can’t speak the language properly”

Recounting her life experience in the United States, Fiona says that her inability to communicate with native speakers effectively in everyday situations makes her feel vulnerable. In particular, her sense of confidence as a veteran university EFL teacher was greatly shaken because the language training that she had received in mainland China many years ago proved ineffective in helping her overcome the “linguistic barriers” in an exotic culture:

Excerpt 123

I didn’t have any problems speaking English in the workplace. I was very familiar with the terms and concepts, so I could talk freely with the professors and PhD students about everything in my research field. However, when I went to the supermarket, the parking lot, the bank, and the grocery, I got lost. ...I couldn’t even come up with the word “shopping cart” at that moment. So it feels like the English that I have learned for many years is fake. (Fiona, interview 1)

Fiona perceives her language vulnerability as a sign of her inadequate communicative competence. This detracts from her confidence as a veteran university EFL teacher. As she says, “I lack the confidence to stand on the podium to tell the students how to improve their oral fluency” (interview 1).

Meanwhile, Fiona talked at length about her limited Chinese proficiency. Although she is a native speaker of Chinese, she is vulnerable to inadequate Chinese proficiency after learning

and teaching English for many years. Her sense of vulnerability becomes salient when it comes to her engaging with academic writing and exchanging in Chinese:

Excerpt 124

I would say that, in terms of academic writing, my English is far better than my Chinese ... When I was writing that book at Berkeley, it took me much longer to complete a Chinese chapter than an English chapter. Likewise, I feel comfortable making presentations in international conferences because I can speak accurate and standard academic English. However, I feel uncomfortable communicating with domestic scholars, as I'm unsure if I could make my views clear to the audience. It's challenging for me to come up with the Chinese equivalents of some English terms instantly. (Fiona, interview 1)

As is discussed in 4.2.1, given the students' explicitly low levels of English proficiency, the participants use Chinese as the primary medium of instruction in class. This results in a demand for the participants to demonstrate high levels of Chinese proficiency that would allow them to clearly explain grammatical structures and the meanings of vocabulary items. However, Fiona's teaching performance is hampered by her vulnerability to insufficient Chinese proficiency:

Excerpt 125

Fiona: So the word "denunciation" ... It is the noun form of "denunciate", which means "to condemn". In Chinese, it means, um... it means... *qian ze*. Am I right?

(No responses from the students)

Fiona: Anyone can look up the dictionary?

One student: Yes, it means *qian ze*.

Fiona: OK (sighing), I need to improve my Chinese. (Fiona ‘observed lesson’, 08/03/2021)

So while Fiona understood the propositional meaning of the word “denunciation”, her seemingly inadequate Chinese proficiency made it difficult for her to translate “denunciation” into Chinese and to make her explanation intelligible to the students. She admits that, as a “Model Teacher” (i.e., a title conferred to outstanding senior teachers by the university), she could not even provide “standard language input” to the students. Commenting on Fiona’s embarrassing experience, Dora made the following point:

Excerpt 126

We (EFL teachers) tend to believe that our English is better than most Chinese and our Chinese is better than most foreigners. However, the fact remains that neither our English nor Chinese is proficient. We can’t speak the language properly. We can never overcome this, and we are naturally vulnerable to it. I had this feeling when teaching elementary-level Mandarin Chinese to international students at our university (Dora, interview 3).

Dora said that she had “underestimated the enormous difficulties” (interview 3) that native speakers like her might encounter in teaching Mandarin Chinese. Specifically, she felt it “virtually impossible” to keep speaking Chinese throughout the class. She had to “code-switch” by “uttering some English words every now and then”. In a WeChat group discussion (14/01/2021), the participants attributed this “embarrassing situation” to their

long-term ignorance of the importance of learning Chinese and the deeply-held misbelief that native Chinese speakers are naturally “good speakers of Chinese”.

The participants’ language vulnerability may also come from comparison. For instance, Vivian experiences a strong sense of vulnerability when her students and people outside the EFL teaching profession demonstrate seemingly higher proficiency levels than herself. The incident described below illustrates this:

Excerpt 127

The boy made a perfect presentation on the designated topic (global warming and the greenhouse effect). His English was excellent. And he spoke fluently. He might have been abroad before because he’s got a very strong American accent. His English is even better than many EFL teachers I know. (Reflective journal, 11/09/2020)

Vivian comments on this incident, admitting that she feels “inferior” to the students and non-EFL academics who demonstrate fairly high communicative competence in English:

Excerpt 128

Although he made a few mistakes in the tense, he is an excellent speaker. To be honest, I get pressure from him. Imagine a teacher who has been learning English for more than twenty years cannot even speak English as well as her student ... What’s more, many teachers in other departments also speak good English now. They graduated from top universities, received good training in academic English, and got the chance to study abroad ... So we are vulnerable to such a situation: the younger

generations and those outside this profession can speak better English than us. This makes me feel guilty! (Vivian, interview 3)

While observing Vivian's teaching, I was impressed by her fluency in English speaking.

Random talks with some of her students and colleagues confirmed my observation.

Meanwhile, her remarkable academic achievements in undergraduate study (as is mentioned in 3.3.3) also allude to her sufficient English proficiency. However, she feels vulnerable to inadequate language proficiency. The reason, as she explains, lies in the belief that a high level of language proficiency is "the last thing that can make me feel empowered as a professional EFL teacher" (interview 3). She insists that a teacher should be "a role model" for the students, so being unable to speak native-like English makes her feel guilty.

In a WeChat group discussion (14/01/2021), the participants analyzed myriad factors that could potentially exacerbate their experiences of language vulnerability. For instance, Joe and Peter contended that the Chinese context made it "virtually impossible" for them to develop "a native-like accent". Dora perceived "the rapid emergence of new vocabulary" as far outpacing her lexical development. Citing the concept of "interlanguage", Vivian held that the interferences of the first language made her susceptible to speaking "Chinglish" (Chinese English) with cross-linguistic references to Mandarin Chinese, their mother tongue. In addition, Fiona and Joe pointed to the long-held misbelief that "native Chinese speakers are naturally good Chinese speakers", which might be a primary hinderance to their sustained investment in Chinese learning.

4.6.2 “It’s always like looking at flowers in the fog”

The section title is a Chinese idiom, *wu li kan hua*, which refers to a state of bewilderment and vagueness. Fiona cites this idiom in order to explain how language vulnerability adds to her sense of “cultural barrier” and makes it difficult for her to understand and explain the cultural issues involved in her teaching and research practice:

Excerpt 129

Since we focus on a foreign language, which is not our mother tongue, we can never take a deep look at that culture. It’s always like looking at flowers in the fog ... I have been in this field for years, but I still feel like an outsider ... Take literature research as an example. I may not fully understand the text, even if I know the literal meaning of each word ... The language *per se* is the biggest obstacle to our consistent efforts in this field. (Fiona, interview 3)

Peter agrees with Fiona. He holds that the concept of “culture” is at the core of EFL teaching. However, language vulnerability impedes his teaching of cultures, which is predicated upon sufficient lexical knowledge in both English and Chinese:

Excerpt 130

She (Fiona) is right. I have the same feeling, that is, I can’t well explain the word meanings occasionally ... There was one lesson about the cultural differences between North America and Europe. And the first thing that confused me was the word “culture”. How to explain “culture” in English? Can we translate “culture” simply into *wen hua* in Chinese? ... You know, in Chinese, we may describe someone as a “*wen hua ren*” (which literally means a “cultured person”). However, does “*wen hua*” exactly mean the same thing as “culture” in “American culture”?

Meanwhile, “*wen hua ren*” can be used sarcastically to describe a pedant ... So the language is a barrier to understanding cultures. (Peter, interview 3)

Dora voices a similar concern. She believes that sufficient “knowledge about cultures” (interview 3) is vital for the students to enhance their intercultural competence, which is one of the primary goals of EFL teaching as stipulated in *CECR* (2020 edition). However, the perceived language vulnerability undermines her ability to understand different cultures properly and to impart cultural knowledge to her students effectively. This leads to her reduced sense of efficacy in teaching relevant EFL courses such as *Cross-cultural Communication*.

Reflecting on his rich experiences in EFL learning and teaching, Joe expresses a deeper understanding of the close relationship between language proficiency and the teaching of cultures. He points to the “Achilles heel” of the EFL teaching profession and perceives native-like proficiency as an unattainable goal for NNS EFL teachers:

Excerpt 131

Since we chose English as our majors and decided to become EFL teachers in the future, we’ve been struggling with the Achilles heel ... We can’t teach EFL learners in the same way that native-speaker teachers do. We don’t have the confidence ... Everything around us is “second-hand”: the teaching materials, the learning materials, and the language environment ... so it’s like we aren’t teaching authentic English. Then how can we expect the students to know about foreign cultures through attending our classes? ... Vulnerability has been there since we embark on our teaching careers. (Joe, interview 3)

Thus, language vulnerability seems to be a unique professional condition facing NNS EFL teachers like the participants. It constitutes part and parcel of the participants' teaching practice and is inherent in their NNS identity and the EFL context of mainland China. Therefore, it is an inescapable professional state.

4.6.3 Responding to language vulnerability

The participants do not uniformly respond to their language vulnerability. For instance, compared with Fiona and Vivian, Joe, Dora, and Peter seem less demotivated by the language vulnerability inherent in their teaching practice. They reject the idea that inadequate language proficiency leads to unsatisfactory teaching performance, arguing that their professional knowledge about language and language teaching makes them qualified for this job:

Excerpt 132

While we are vulnerable (to inadequate English proficiency), we don't necessarily have to be perfect speakers. We are qualified to teach as long as we have a good mastery of knowledge about the language system ... While some students may have native-like accents and fluency, the quality of their output in terms of accuracy and appropriateness may not be as good as mine. So I'm a qualified EFL teacher as long as I can help them improve (their language proficiency). (Joe, interview 3)

This excerpt shows that Joe has great confidence in his teaching competence, given his good knowledge about the language system and a much higher level of English proficiency than his students. Dora holds a similar view:

Excerpt 133

I'm a well-qualified language teacher. I have a larger vocabulary than most of the students. I know more about grammar. I know how to teach the language ... so my feeling of vulnerability is not so strong ... I know that I speak English with a Chinese accent, but I don't really care about it because everyone speaks more or less imperfect English. (Dora, interview 3)

Peter also experiences a low level of language vulnerability. However, he perceives the need to improve his English proficiency:

Excerpt 134

I've got the qualification in language teaching, so I don't get much pressure from the students ... Except a few, the students generally have an intermediate-low level of proficiency ... But we must be aware of our own problems. We need to consistently improve (our English). (Peter, interview 2)

As shown in the above excerpts, the three teachers seem to be open-minded about their language vulnerability. While they are well aware of their limited language proficiency, they have great confidence in their teaching ability. They willingly expose their imperfect language proficiency to the students. They hold that native-like proficiency does not account for successful language teaching. This might be attributed to their claimed expertise in EFL teaching (e.g., declarative knowledge about the language and skills in teaching the English language) and a perceived lack of language proficiency among the students. This open stance towards language vulnerability is also evidenced by what I observed in Joe's class:

Excerpt 135

Joe was teaching a lesson about the history of American Indians ... The lesson was very interesting, and it covered various topics ranging from cultures to dialects. Then, to my surprise, he asked if I could tell him how to spell the word 'indigenous' ... He explained after class, 'even native-speakers will come across unfamiliar words, let alone non-native speakers let us. So I'm not feeling ashamed about showing my weakness to the students.'" (Reflective journals, 10/13/2021)

In comparison, Fiona and Vivian hold that EFL teachers are a major source of language input for the students. They are struggling with their language vulnerability. For instance, Fiona says that she wishes to become a role model for the students in terms of her language proficiency. Failure to provide the students with quality language input increases her sense of inefficacy and anxiety. Vivian's anxiety about her language vulnerability is more obvious. She says that the existence of the student evaluation policy pressurizes her to focus on improving the accuracy of her language input:

Excerpt 136

I double-check the spelling and grammar on each slide of the PPT every night to ensure that what I'm going to teach the next day is correct ... I don't want to leave my students an impression that my English is problematic ... On my way home, I keep thinking about the errors I made in class. (Vivian, interview 3)

So Fiona and Vivian take a protective stance towards their language vulnerability. They are inclined to conceal their language vulnerability in front of the students in order to safeguard their desired identity as high-proficiency EFL teachers. Their responses to language

vulnerability allude to the influences of personal beliefs and goals: Fiona says that she seeks to avoid “making language errors in front of the students” because she believes that teachers should “display the best side of themselves” (interview 3); Vivian’s repeated checking for language errors in her teaching materials is driven by the practical goal to “score highly on students’ evaluations” (interview 3).

Despite their different attitudes towards language vulnerability, all the participants feel the need to enact their agency to grapple with the negative impact that language vulnerability has on their professional practice. As Joe notes, “improving our language proficiency is a lifelong enterprise” (interview 3). The need to cope with their language vulnerability becomes strong, particularly when their oral fluency is more valued than other facets of teaching such as linguistic knowledge by the students (Based on a WeChat discussion, 03/07/2021).

Attending professional development programs plays an important role in helping the participants cope with their language vulnerability (WeChat group discussion, 03/07/2021).

In a WeChat group discussion (03/07/2021), the participants shared their own experiences of attending the study abroad programs sponsored by the university and other social agents. For instance, Fiona and Dora applied for the scholarship awarded by the China Scholarship Council (CSC) to study in the US. They claimed that the one-year studying and living experience in the US provided them abundant opportunities to improve their oral English and familiarize themselves with “exotic cultures” (WeChat group discussion, 03/07/2021).

Sponsored by XU, Vivian, Joe, and Peter participated in the short-term EFL teacher training

program organized by a leading university in the UK. By immersing themselves in an “English-only context” (WeChat group discussion, 03/07/2021), these teachers gained more confidence in their communicative competence. In addition, Dora attended the language training workshops organized by CMoE for teachers interested in teaching Chinese abroad. While she was not selected for the program, she admitted that her Chinese proficiency (particularly in terms of tones and “cultural vocabulary”) was improved greatly after attending the Chinese language training workshops. Thus these professional development programs prove effective in helping the participants cope with their language vulnerability.

Attending professional development programs reflects the “practical-evaluative” orientation of teacher agency because it is a decision made by the participants after weighing plausible choices in light of their vulnerable situations. Meanwhile, it is also influenced by the “projective” orientation of teacher agency as it aims to help the participants achieve their career goals in the future. The following excerpt from Dora’s interview can illustrate this point well:

Excerpt 137

I had long been hoping to experience exotic cultures and improve my oral fluency abroad. So when I heard that the scholarship (provided by CSC) was open for application, I began to prepare the required materials ... I was in a dilemma: on the one hand, my daughter was only five years old. I didn’t want to leave her for one year. On the other hand, it was a great opportunity for me to improve my English proficiency. I didn’t want to give it up. I was struggling ... Finally, with the

encouragement of my family, I decided to go ... I made the right decision because all my friends said that my oral fluency was significantly improved. (Dora, interview 3)

So while Dora struggled between fulfilling her familial obligation and improving her professional competence, the desire for improved English language proficiency and strong family support eventually prompted her to participate in the study abroad program. This indicates the configuration of influences of the present (e.g., balancing between options) and the past (e.g., wishing to improve her language proficiency) on Dora's experiences of language vulnerability.

4.6.4 Summary

This section has examined the issue of language vulnerability in which the participants are vulnerable to inadequate proficiency in English and Chinese. Compared with the previously discussed aspect of vulnerability that may also be shared by teachers in other departments, vulnerability regarding inadequate language proficiency is unique to the participants. This is due to the fact that, for the participants, language is not only the subject of teaching but also the medium of teaching. The extent to which the participants are proficient in the target language may influence the quality of their instruction. And they are likely to experience professional vulnerability when they perceive a lack of confidence in their language proficiency.

The participants' experiences of language vulnerability lie in their NNS status and the EFL context of mainland China. They experience a strong sense of language vulnerability 1) when

they feel incapable of communicating naturally with native English speakers, 2) when they encounter great difficulties in academic Chinese writing and speaking, 3) when some students and non-EFL academics exhibit seemingly higher levels of language proficiency than themselves, and 4) when their perceived lack of language proficiency undermines their ability properly understand and explain cultural issues.

The participants do not uniformly respond to their language vulnerability. For instance, while Fiona and Vivian struggle with their language vulnerability, Peter, Joe, and Dora are less concerned about it. This reflects their different understandings of their teaching competence, the students' language proficiency levels, and the desired professional identities that they wish to construct. However, all the participants hold that they must enact agency to cope with their language vulnerability in order to sustain their professional development. This is achieved mainly through attending various language training programs sponsored by the university and other social agents.

Chapter 5: Discussion

While the previous chapter examines the participants' professional vulnerability as manifested in multiple aspects of their professional practice (e.g., teaching practice, research practice, university administration, social recognition, and language proficiency), this chapter discusses the findings and issues reported in the previous chapter. Different subtitles are used in this chapter in order to answer the three research questions raised in Chapter 1: (1) Do university EFL teachers experience professional vulnerability? (2) How do university EFL teachers agentively respond to their professional vulnerability? (3) What factors lead to university EFL teachers professional vulnerability?

5.1 Teacher vulnerability as a dynamic, conflicted, and multidimensional state

Informed by the call for a combination of “etic” and “emic” perspectives on vulnerability in the field of nursing research (e.g., Angel & Vatne, 2017; Spiers, 2000), this study adopts an integrative approach to explore the participants' experiences of professional vulnerability. Specifically, it not only draws on my prior experience and knowledge of vulnerability but also pays great attention to the participants' own conceptualizations of professional vulnerability. Data suggests that, with the implementation of performativity at XU over the past few years, the participants have been experiencing a high level of professional vulnerability. They willingly disclose the vulnerability inherent in their professional practice and do not resist being labelled as members of a “vulnerable population” (e.g., Angel & Vatne, 2017; Brown, 2011; Fineman, 2008; Vasas, 2005). This makes it possible for me to further explore how they perceive and cope with professional vulnerability without threatening their

confidence and self-esteem. Through interviews and numerous informal talks, I find that implicit in the participants' descriptions of their professional practice is a perception of professional vulnerability as a dynamic, conflicted, and multidimensional state accompanying them throughout their career lives.

In the following parts, for the sake of clarity, I first elaborate on how the participants' experiences of professional vulnerability have changed over time to explain the dynamic nature of professional vulnerability. Then, I contrast the participants' belief systems and the professional reality to highlight the conflicted nature of professional vulnerability. Finally, to shed light upon its multidimensional nature, I present a categorization of professional vulnerability as manifested in different aspects of the participants' professional practice.

5.1.1 The shifting experiences of professional vulnerability

Corroborating previous research (e.g., Gao & Yuan, 2021; Glass & Davis, 2004; Lasky, 2005; Song, 2016; Zhu et al., 2018), this study unpacks the dynamic nature of professional vulnerability. In particular, the participants are subject to shifting experiences of professional vulnerability resulting from their continuous engagement with various institutional and sociocultural conditions.

Initial interviews with the participants suggest that they made career choices with various intrinsic (e.g., a passion for language teaching and a sense of responsibility to educate the younger generation) and extrinsic (e.g., financial stability and flexible work schedules)

motivations. Before their induction, the participants expected to gain great material and spiritual benefits from the EFL teaching profession. They had the confidence to become “qualified” EFL teachers and were optimistic about their career prospects. For those teachers who are now in their mid or late-career stages (Peter, Joe, Fiona, Dora), their early teaching experiences had led them to falsely believe that they could fulfill their obligations (most of which were germane to EFL teaching) in routinized ways throughout their career lives. While a sense of professional vulnerability emerged occasionally, it was mostly under their control. They did not pay enough attention to the issue of professional vulnerability and never anticipated that it would progress to a point where they felt powerless to negotiate their desired workplace conditions (Kelchtermans et al., 2009). Thus, there was a collective nostalgia among them for those days when professional vulnerability was not a prominent aspect of their professional practices.

However, these teachers’ sense of professional vulnerability grows in tandem with successive reform initiatives in XU. In particular, the implementation of performativity as the dominant managerial technique has generated a shift in how these teachers construe their relationship with the various conditions in their situated context (Ball, 2003; Sutton, 2017). From their point of view, this relationship entails a vulnerable state in which their professional practice is often constrained or enabled by the context. Professional vulnerability, in this case, is not a natural or dispositional construct; rather, it is manifested in how they are related to the shifting workplace environment which is beyond their sphere of control (Jackson, 2018). The participants’ initial attitudes towards professional vulnerability were largely negative, as can

be illustrated by such words as “crisis”, “bottleneck”, “inconvenience”, “pressure”, “powerless”, “fragile” and “worried about” that they constantly used to describe their feelings of the shifting workplace environment. Their statements and attitudes imply a view that professional vulnerability is a troublesome state that they must assiduously ward off, decrease, and get rid of.

With the progression of the study, the participants had undergone gradual changes in their perceptions of professional vulnerability and its impact on their professional development. Not only do they articulate a need to embrace and live with professional vulnerability (Bullough, 2005; Dale & Frye, 2009), but they also realize the constructive role that vulnerability plays in helping their professional development. For instance, while Dora struggles with getting her papers published in prestigious journals, she acknowledges that research vulnerability serves as a “driving force” behind her sustained self-improvement. In particular, through “reflection” (see excerpt 78) and “using external resources” (see excerpts 79, 80 and 81), she improved her research skills in such aspects as academic writing and data analysis. Another example has to do with Fiona’s experience of technological vulnerability. While she experiences a high degree of vulnerability in using educational technologies, she is well aware of the pivotal role that educational technology plays in helping her teaching practice. With the help of her younger colleagues and students, she significantly improved her technological literacy (see excerpt 49). These examples show that, as “agents of change” (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 191), the participants can cope with their professional vulnerability as they navigate their professional journey. Agency, in this case, is achieved through

reflective practice and other related forms of professional inquiry that enable the participants to withstand professional vulnerability and sustain professional development.

Professional vulnerability is thus a dynamic and fluctuating construct. It is contingent upon the participants' ongoing interactions with the shifting educational context (Lasky, 2005). On the one hand, the participants are likely to experience considerable professional vulnerability when they are underprepared for the dramatic changes occurring in their situated context. On the other hand, they may feel less vulnerable when they take a positive stance towards professional vulnerability and adopt effective strategies to cope with it.

5.1.2 Conflicts between belief systems and the professional reality

In this study, the participants frequently judge how to cope with their professional vulnerability properly. Their judgements are largely informed by the belief systems developed from their past learning and teaching experiences. However, a considerable gap exists between their belief systems and the actual conditions at XU. This gap serves as the root cause of their professional vulnerability. Data suggests that the participants' belief systems are made up of their self-understanding and personal values.

5.1.2.1 Self-understanding

Self-understanding refers to the participant's beliefs about themselves. It comprises their imagined selves (e.g., What kind of teacher should I become?), imagined workplace conditions (e.g., What are the ideal workplace conditions for me?), and self-efficacy (e.g.,

Am I competent enough to accomplish the task?). Vivian's story illustrates an explicit conflict between her self-understanding and the professional reality at XU. Before her induction, Vivian expected that the EFL teaching profession would bring her considerable material and spiritual benefits (see excerpt 104). However, her expectation was significantly shattered by the low salary and unmotivated students. Feeling incapable of counteracting the harsh reality, she experienced a strong sense of professional vulnerability.

Other examples also highlight such conflicts. For instance, a primary cause of some participants' research vulnerability is the conflict between their perceived lack of research capacity (self-efficacy) and the stringent institutional requirement for publications (see excerpts 57 and 59). While Fiona and Vivian express a wish to speak native-like English (imagined self), they are vulnerable to inadequate English proficiency that compromises their performances in various professional activities (see excerpt 125). While Dora, Peter, and Joe are confident in their teaching competence (self-efficacy), they may not necessarily receive positive comments from the students regarding their teaching "performance" (see excerpts 44 and 48). In addition, while the participants emphasize the paramount importance of a favorable work environment for their professional development (imagined workplace conditions), they are highly disappointed with such workplace conditions as inadequate support for conducting research (see excerpts 65 and 66), low salary (see excerpts 105 and 110), and decreased workload (see excerpt 111). Thus, the participants' self-understandings are subject to the conflicts and contestations embedded in their professional practices.

5.1.2.2 Personal values

Teachers' professional practice is value-laden because how teachers perform in a demanding educational context is mediated by their personal values (Brady, 2011; Kelchtermans, 2009; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Tirri, 2010). In this study, personal values are an essential component of the belief systems underlying individual participants' experiences of professional vulnerability. They are indicative of the participants' stances (e.g., Is this fine with me?) towards specific issues related to their professional practice.

There are many examples showcasing how the participants' personal values are contested by the discourse of performativity, a phenomenon that Ball (2003) describes as “values schizophrenia” (p. 221). For instance, the participants and the administrators diverge significantly in their perspectives about the value of research: on the one hand, Peter, Joe, Vivian, and Dora criticize the university policy that prioritizes research over teaching, maintaining that doing research brings little benefits to their instructional practice (see excerpts 60, 61, 62, and 63); on the other hand, the administrators are putting stringent requirements on the research outcomes of individual academics, believing that research is crucial for improving the teaching force and university ranking. Another example has to do with the participants' perspectives on teacher autonomy: while they maintain that they should possess a high level of professional autonomy, the excessive administrative interventions in their professional practice (e.g., the grading work and the microlecture teaching contest) lead to a diminished sense of autonomy among them. Value conflicts are also illustrated by how the participants construe their relationships with others. For instance, while the participants

lay great emphasis on the Chinese tradition of teacher-reverence, they are vulnerable to inadequate recognition of their professional competence which can be illustrated by impolite students (see excerpt 116) and the “objectification” of their teaching practice (see excerpts 98, 99, and 100).

To sum, the belief systems that the participants develop through their past learning and teaching experiences cannot fully capture or predict what actually occurs in their work context (Helsing, 2007). They are constantly negotiated and modified through the participants’ interactions with the context. To some extent, the participants’ belief systems reflect what they expect of themselves (i.e., their desired “selves”) and the context (i.e., their desired workplace conditions). The shifting nature of belief systems indicates that the participants’ professional expectations often mismatch with the reality of their workplace environment (Gray et al., 2017). This also explains in part why the participants commenced their career lives with high commitment only to find themselves in a vulnerable situation after teaching for a period of time.

5.1.3 Unraveling professional vulnerability

Previous research (e.g., Angel, 2010; Asbjornslett & Rausand, 1999; Lasky, 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2014) has shown that vulnerability is a multidimensional construct that can be properly understood in terms of its scope, source, states, and influences on human experiences.

Likewise, this study unravels the multidimensional nature of the participants’ professional vulnerability. To be specific, the findings presented in Chapter 4 allow me to identify three

interrelated dimensions of vulnerability influencing different aspects of the participants' professional practice: intrinsic vulnerability, practical vulnerability, and relational vulnerability.

5.1.3.1 Intrinsic vulnerability

Intrinsic vulnerability is an essential condition of being a university EFL teacher. It has been accompanying the participants' learning and teaching experiences since they chose EFL as their university major and committed themselves to the EFL teaching profession after graduation. For the participants, intrinsic vulnerability entails an awareness that their language proficiency is inadequate and that such inadequacy may hinder their performance in various professional tasks such as teaching and research. It is a discipline-specific state that differentiates the EFL teachers' professional practice from that of teachers in other departments.

While competent language teachers need to possess more qualities (e.g., robust knowledge about the language structure and an ability to build rapport with the students) than a high level of language proficiency (Andrews, 2003; Zhang & Watkins, 2007), the impact of intrinsic vulnerability on the participants' professional practice is apparent. For instance, intrinsic vulnerability led Fiona to question the effectiveness of the formal language training that she received in university (see excerpt 123) and shattered her confidence in fostering the students' communicative competence. As for Vivian, who appears to be a competent user of the English language, her sense of intrinsic vulnerability becomes strong when some students

and teachers in other departments demonstrate seemingly higher levels of English language proficiency than her (see excerpt 128).

Intrinsic vulnerability is also reflected in the participants' frustrating experiences of using Chinese in such situations as academic writing (Fiona, excerpt 124), teaching English vocabulary (Fiona, excerpt 125), and teaching Chinese to international students (Dora, excerpt 126). Despite their native-Chinese speaker identity, the participants are vulnerable to limited Chinese proficiency due to a lack of sustained investment in learning Chinese and the long-held belief that native Chinese speakers are necessarily competent in using Chinese for academic and pedagogical purposes. Thus, intrinsic vulnerability is bound to EFL teachers' linguistic background.

An irreconcilable conflict is inherent in the participants' intrinsic vulnerability: on the one hand, effective language teaching requires the teachers to possess adequate language proficiency (Andrews, 2003; Zhang & Watkins, 2007); on the other hand, their "Chinese teachers of English" identity makes it difficult for them to achieve native-like English proficiency and to become competent users of academic Chinese. Thus, intrinsic vulnerability entails a conflict between the participants' linguistic background and others' requirement for their language proficiency levels. Metaphorically, this seemingly irreconcilable conflict can be understood as the "Achilles heel" of Chinese tertiary EFL teachers like the participants (see excerpt 131).

5.1.3.2 Practical vulnerability

The participants experience practical vulnerability when they engage in such practices as teaching and research that can be captured by quantitative performance indicators. It involves a state where their practices are subject to the prevailing influences of performativity (Ball, 2012a, 2012b; Macfarlane, 2017; Sutton, 2017). When they experience practical vulnerability, the participants feel pressured to meet various performative standards that negatively affect their employment and job security (Gao & Yuan, 2021; Macfarlane, 2017). Thus, practical vulnerability is institutionally imposed on the participants, and compared with intrinsic vulnerability, it is more likely to engender “survival” pressure on the participants.

Practical vulnerability concerns the “core practices” that the participants need to carry out in the workplace as part of their teaching profession (Van der Schaaf et al., 2019). In this study, the participants’ “core practices” include teaching and research, the outcomes of which are reviewed by the university periodically. While the participants are all appointed on the “teaching-oriented” track, research is an equally important task they must complete. This is somewhat against their imagined professional life in which they could commit themselves wholeheartedly to the enterprise of EFL teaching without being distracted by non-teaching tasks (see excerpts 1 and 2).

The data suggests that in terms of their teaching practice, the participants are vulnerable to a general lack of EFL learning motivation among the students, the pressure to use educational technologies, and the influences of course selection and student evaluation; while in terms of

their research practice, the participants are vulnerable to unfavorable research environment, ambivalent beliefs about the value of research, and inadequate research expertise. These sources of practical vulnerability induce a sense of inadequacy among the participants and make them apprehensive about their career prospects (see excerpt 18).

The participant experiences of practical vulnerability are strongly influenced by performativity: they must strive to reach excellence in their teaching and research practices because failure to do so might be interpreted by the students and administration as a sign of incompetence (see excerpt 34), which can result in such sanctions as redeployment (excerpt 5), contract termination (see excerpt 18), and allowance reduction (see excerpt 76). Thus, inherent in the participants' practical vulnerability is an urgent need to act in ways that are deemed appropriate in a performance-oriented work culture (Ball, 2003; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Sutton, 2017).

5.1.3.3 Relational vulnerability

Relational vulnerability is also salient in the participants' descriptions of their professional vulnerability. Informed by Lasky (2004), I conceptualize relational vulnerability as a condition characterizing the interactions between the participants and their significant others. To be specific, relational vulnerability suggests that how the participants establish and sustain their relationships with others is subject to various contextual factors such as reform initiatives and university management (Lasky, 2004; Wilkins et al., 2021). It signifies the fragility of educational relationships. For the participants, their authentic relationships with

the students and administrators should be based on mutual respect, which is an essential condition for maintaining their professional autonomy, self-esteem, and morale (see what is discussed in 4.5.2). However, educational relationships do not always operate in planned ways, as they are subject to the prevailing discourse of performativity in higher education that can potentially devalue teachers' work (see excerpt 100).

Firstly, relational vulnerability is salient in the way the participants interact with their students (Kelchtermans, 1996, 2005). For instance, while adopting a “fun” teaching approach, Vivian perceives herself as a “waitress” providing quality services to the students (see excerpt 43). Describing their unpleasant experiences of student evaluation and course selection, Joe and Vivian hold that they feel like “commodities” that are subject to the customers' comments (see excerpts 98 and 99). These examples indicate that under the system of performativity, the authentic teacher-student relationship characterized by love and care is reduced to “a simple service relationship in which the customer is always right” (Sutton, 2017, p. 628).

Relational vulnerability also resides in how the participants interact with the administrators. As discussed in 4.4., the participants are vulnerable to a highly bureaucratic administration system that frequently intervenes in their professional practices (see excerpts 90 and 93) and is slow in providing them with necessary support (see excerpts 88 and 89). There are few shared beliefs between the participants and the administrators about teaching the English language (see excerpt 102) and helping EFL teachers' development (see excerpts 85 and 86).

This reflects an asymmetrical power relationship in which the participants have little professional autonomy while the administration exercises considerable authority (Fox et al., 2015). For the participants, this asymmetrical relationship leads to a collective sense of being disrespected and lacking full control over their practices (see excerpts 3, 4, and 6). For some of them (e.g., Fiona and Joe), it also signifies a departure from their “imagined” identity as autonomous university academics (see excerpts 90 and 100).

The three dimensions of professional vulnerability do not operate independently from each other. For instance, the participants’ inadequate language proficiency (intrinsic vulnerability) may have a negative impact on their teaching practice and increase their pressure from student evaluation (practical vulnerability). Meanwhile, an over-emphasis on research productivity (practical vulnerability) may provoke unease among the participants, adding to their feeling of being disrespected by the administration (relational vulnerability). In addition, the students may contest and devalue their teachers’ competence (relational vulnerability) if their teachers are unable to provide standard language input to them (intrinsic vulnerability). Thus, the three dimensions of professional vulnerability are interrelated, suggesting that changes in one dimension may indeed have an effect on the two dimensions.

5.2 Responding to professional vulnerability

This section discusses how the participants agentively respond to the multiple aspects of their professional vulnerability as presented in Chapter 4. Specifically, it seeks to provide insights into the various strategies employed by the participants to mediate the influences of

vulnerability on their professional practice under the system of performativity. It includes three parts: (a) cognitive strategies (i.e., reflection-in-action and manipulation of personal belief systems), (b) behavioral strategies (i.e., proactive and passive actions), and (c) the temporality of coping strategies.

5.2.1 Cognitive strategies

As elaborated in 2.3.3.2, cognition is a significant component of teacher agency. The participants employ various cognitive strategies to cope with their professional vulnerability. Cognitive strategies can be briefly defined as the procedures and operations that the participants use to analyze their experiences of professional vulnerability and make judgements among possible trajectories of actions. An important cognitive strategy used by the participants is reflection-in-action, which refers to critically examining their professional practice and making informed pedagogical decisions (Schön, 1983). Dora is good at reflection-in-action. As an example, she keeps reflecting on her proposal writing practice when applying for a research project (see excerpt 78). This strategy has led her to conclude that she could engage in academic writing and reading simultaneously as both processes can inform each other. She also uses reflection-in-action in the process of formulating research directions. This can be seen in her description of “cross the river by touching the stones” strategy that she uses to deal with inadequate institutional support for her research practice (see excerpt 77).

Other examples also highlight the centrality of reflection-in-action in the participants' experiences of professional vulnerability. For instance, through constantly reflecting on her arduous EFL teaching practice, Vivian enhances her practical knowledge about EFL teaching, acknowledging that the student-teacher relationship in a system of performativity is "commercial" in nature (see excerpt 43). This propels her to adopt a "fun" instructional approach (see excerpt 45), which proves effective in helping her cope with vulnerability related to the unmotivated students (see excerpt 47). Through reflecting on his past professional practice, Joe develops an objective view of professional vulnerability and learns to embrace it as a powerful driving force behind his professional development (see excerpt 15). Reflection in the teaching process also allows Fiona to identify the great benefits that educational technologies bring to her instructional performance. It helps her reduce sense of professional vulnerability related to appropriating educational technologies (see excerpt 49). Furthermore, through carefully assessing their teaching competence, Joe, Peter, and Dora become less concerned about the negative influences of language vulnerability on their teaching practice (see excerpts 132, 133, and 134).

The other cognitive strategy adopted by the participants is manipulating their personal belief systems. As discussed in 5.1.2, the considerable gap between personal belief systems (i.e., self-understanding and personal values) and the professional reality at XU (i.e., the context) serves as the root cause of the participants' professional vulnerability. Whether the participants could withstand professional vulnerability largely depends on their ability to

bridge this gap. And part of their bridging effort is to manipulate personal belief systems in response to the shifting context (Ben-Peretz, 2011; Biesta et al., 2015).

By “manipulation”, I mean that the participants may adopt or modify their belief systems. For instance, adhering to the value of “*zun shi*”, which is rooted in the Chinese traditional culture, Peter openly criticized a late student who entered the classroom without asking for his permission (see excerpt 116). Informed by her knowledge about the “zigzag nature” of doing research, Fiona refuses to “publish articles for the sake of publishing” (see excerpt 76). With a belief in the importance of grammar in language learning, Dora adopts a conventional EFL teaching approach that downplays the role of “fun” elements (see excerpt 48). In addition, despite the enormous pressure to prove their teaching competence, most of the participants are reluctant to modify their long-held teaching philosophies (e.g., prominence should be given to grammar) in exchange for students’ leniency in the teaching valuations (see excerpts 52, 53, 54, and 55). All these examples suggest that, while coping with their professional vulnerability, the participants may insist on their own values and beliefs in order to construct their imagined selves (e.g., autonomous EFL teachers respected by the students and the administrators).

However, personal belief systems may also be refined by some participants to ameliorate their sense of professional vulnerability. For instance, after practicing a “balanced” teaching approach (i.e., one that combines “fun” elements with grammar teaching) for a period of time, Vivian acknowledged that being “fun” was a “direction worthy of endeavor” as it enabled her

to cope with vulnerability related to the unmotivated students and the teaching evaluation policy (see excerpt 47). This indicates that some of her preconceptions about the “fun” approach (e.g., it is a “forced choice” aimed at entertaining the students) are replaced by practical knowledge about the students’ diverse learning needs. Another example is provided by Peter, who, by taking a new perspective on the decline of CE, decided to offer the students new courses (see excerpt 121). This marks a shift in his understanding of professional vulnerability related to inadequate social recognition, which seems to entail an opportunity for personal growth and development.

Reflection can lead to changes in the participants’ belief systems, which may, in turn, facilitate reflection. By constantly reflecting on their professional practices, some participants changed their initial understandings of professional vulnerability (see excerpts 13, 14, and 15). They learned to take an open stance towards vulnerability, seeing it as a driving force behind their professional development (Lasky, 2005; Song, 2016). Meanwhile, their new perspectives on professional vulnerability may lead them to further reflect on what they can do to withstand a performance-oriented work culture. For instance, Vivian’s changed perspective on her relationship with the students allowed her to be more reflective of her vulnerable experiences and to adopt a somewhat pragmatic strategy (e.g., to be “fun” and to “bribe” the students) to grapple with the pressure caused by student evaluation and course selection (see excerpts 45 and 51). Thus, reflection and the manipulation of personal belief systems are analytically different yet closely intertwined cognitive strategies.

5.2.2 Behavioral strategies

Behavioral strategies also play an instrumental role in helping the participants withstand professional vulnerability. They are manifested in concrete actions, a sign of the participants' capacity to put their decisions into practice and act according to their own belief systems (Robinson, 2012; Rogers & Wetzel, 2013). Ten strategies used by the participants to cope with different aspects of professional vulnerability -- disengagement, compliance, fabrication, ingratiation, adjustment, experimentation, rapport-building, resource-mobilization, investment, and confrontation -- are apparent from the data. They are discussed below in the order of the most passive to the most proactive.

Disengagement. Disengagement refers to deliberately distancing oneself from specific tasks they feel incapable of completing (Ball, 2003; Gao & Yuan, 2021; Sutton, 2017). In this study, disengagement can be conceptualized as withdrawal, which entails a cynical attitude towards certain aspects of professional vulnerability. It is constantly mentioned by some participants (Joe, Peter, and Vivian) when they describe vulnerability related to conducting research and publishing (see excerpts 82 and 83). Since they have little confidence in their ability to meet the stringent requirement for publications and are disillusioned with the unfavorable academic environment, these participants adopt disengagement as a way to ameliorate their sense of research vulnerability.

Compliance. Compliance seems to be the participants' first reaction towards vulnerability related to the bureaucratic administration and its excessive interventions in their professional

practice (see excerpts 95 and 97). It is often associated with a feeling that they do not have the same degree of power that the administration possesses, and thus, they have to passively accept the decisions made by the administration (Robinson, 2012). For some participants (e.g., Peter and Dora), although compliance does not help much to ameliorate their sense of professional vulnerability, it can at least make them feel safe in an environment where they are subject to constant appraisals of their performances.

Fabrication. Fabrication is a strategy the participants unanimously employ to withstand vulnerability related to “pointless formalities” (see 4.4.1). Ball (2003) defines fabrications as “versions of an organization (or person) which does not exist” (p. 224). He contends that “acts of fabrication and the fabrications themselves become embedded in and are reproduced by systems of recording and reporting on practice” (p. 225). So the act of fabrication is not aimed at truthfully reflecting the reality. Rather, it is purposefully adopted by the participants to prove that they have done what the university requires. In this study, the use of fabrication as a coping strategy is illustrated by how Peter organized the moral construction meeting (see excerpt 85) and asked all the teachers to fabricate the content of the peer class observation format (see excerpt 86).

Ingratiation. Blasé (1988) defines ingratiation as a strategy concerned with “reciprocation (exchange of favors) and the influence of others” (p. 131). It is associated with “flattering” someone in order to achieve one’s own purposes. Vivian often uses ingratiation. For instance, she distributed chocolates to her students and gave them *hong bao* during holidays in

exchange for positive comments on her teaching performance (informal talk, 08/10/2020).

She is also lenient when grading the exam papers so that more students would select her course in the following semesters (see excerpt 51).

Adjustment. Adjustment refers to a process in which the participants actively alter their course of action in order to cope with their professional vulnerability effectively. For instance, Vivian adjusted her prior teaching approach by adding more “fun” elements to it (see excerpt 47). Another example has to do with the participants adjusting the existing EFL curriculum (by offering new courses to the students) as a way to cope with their vulnerability to the shrinking workloads (see excerpts 121 and 122).

Experimentation. Experimentation is the act of trying different methods or approaches (when there is insufficient external support or resources) in order to come up with proper solutions to intractable problems. Dora used this strategy when she managed to figure out how to conduct research through testing different methods, thinking about the direction, and revising her research plans (see excerpt 77).

Rapport-building. Echoing Lasky (2005), this study suggests that the participants adopt rapport-building to cope with their vulnerability related to the students’ disrespect. The examples provided by Vivian (i.e., expressing her empathy to a student struggling with his major courses) and Dora (i.e., delivering food to the students during the campus lockdown)

show that rapport-building enables them to regain trust and respect from the students (see excerpts 118 and 120).

Resource-mobilization. Angel and Vatne (2017) argue that people experience vulnerability when they do not have enough resources to protect them from risks, implying that whether a person can cope with his vulnerability effectively depends on his ability to mobilize available resources. In this study, the mobilization of available resources is frequently used by Dora to cope with her research vulnerability. For Dora, available resources include, but are not limited to, a student whose statistics background can help her solve problems related to quantitative data analysis (see excerpt 79), online courses on language research methodologies (see excerpt 80), senior researchers (see excerpt 81), and journal articles (based on informal talks). Other participants also mobilize external resources to cope with their professional vulnerability. For instance, Fiona sought advice from her younger colleagues and students on how to use educational technologies (see excerpt 49); Peter consulted technicians about the operation of the online teaching platform (see excerpt 50); all the participants attended the study abroad programs sponsored by different social agents as a way to improve their English language proficiency (see excerpt 137).

Investment. Inspired by Bourdieu (1997), I use the term *investment* here to describe the act of professional learning through which teachers acquire *capitals* that enable them to respond to future vulnerability properly. Fiona's experiences indicate the use of this strategy. For instance, pursuing a doctoral degree (a form of cultural capital) in her early career

strengthened Fiona's research capacity, making her capable of addressing research vulnerability in her mid-career (see excerpts 74 and 75).

Confrontation. Confrontation is a strategy occasionally employed by Peter to cope with his vulnerability related to the bureaucratic administration. It is a blunt strategy that entails openly reproaching and challenging the decisions made by the administrators (Blasé, 1988). In this study, Peter's quarrel with the TAO staff regarding printing the mark sheets is an example of his use of confrontation (see excerpt 96). However, due to the asymmetric power relation between him and the administrators, this strategy proves ineffective in ameliorating his sense of administrative vulnerability.

The various cognitive and behavioral strategies employed by the participants can be conceptualized as a continuum ranging from proactivity to passivity (Robinson, 2012). For instance, as a proactive strategy, investment indicates that Fiona opens herself up to research vulnerability. She is aware of the potential benefits that research vulnerability could bring to her growth as an EFL academic, and thus, she is keen to invest in her research capacity. In contrast, as a passive strategy, disengagement is indicative of a cynical and indifferent attitude held by some participants towards their research vulnerability. Such an attitude is informed by their practical knowledge about the unfavorable academic environment (e.g., the black publishing market), which is beyond their sphere of control (see excerpts 82 and 83).

While being passive to certain aspects of professional vulnerability goes against the ethos of performativity which accords primacy to teachers as self-entrepreneurs and transformative actors (Ball, 2003; Burnard & White, 2008; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Sutton, 2017), it may actually be effective in helping the participants safeguard what they perceive as essential conditions for their professional commitment such as self-esteem (see excerpt 117) and academic integrity (see excerpt 83). Thus teacher agency as manifested in a constellation of strategies to cope with their professional vulnerability should not always be conceptualized in a purely positive light (Lasky, 2005; Priestley et al, 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2015). As agentic professionals, the participants can flexibly adjust their coping strategies across situations. This is achieved by properly balancing their competence with external demands and choosing among possible trajectories for action.

It is also interesting to note that the participants do not uniformly respond to certain aspects of their professional vulnerability. To be specific, they may use different strategies to cope with a specific aspect of professional vulnerability: some of those strategies are proactive while the others are less proactive or even passive (see Table 5.1). For instance, the strategies (e.g., investment, resource mobilization, and experimentation) used by Fiona and Dora indicate that they are more proactive than the other participants in coping with research vulnerability. Hence, experiences of professional vulnerability vary across persons.

Table 5.1 Coping strategies taken by the participants

Aspects of professional vulnerability	Coping strategy	Example
Teaching practice	adjustment	Blending “fun” elements into grammar teaching (Vivian)
	reflection-in-action	Reflecting on the “commercial” nature of the student-teacher relationship (Vivian)
	adoption of belief systems	Insisting on the importance of the teaching of grammar and vocabulary (Dora, Peter, Joe)
	modification of belief systems	Acknowledging the value of educational technologies (Fiona)
	resource mobilization	Seeking help from younger colleagues, students, and technicians regarding the use of educational technologies (all participants)
	ingratiation	Distributing chocolates and <i>hong bao</i> to the students in exchange for high evaluation scores (Vivian)
	disengagement	Being indifferent to the results of student evaluation and course selection (Peter, Joe, Fiona, and Dora)
Research practice	investment	Pursuing a doctoral degree (Fiona)
	resource mobilization	Attending online research training courses; collaborating with her students on quantitative data analysis (Dora)
	adoption of belief systems	Reluctance to “publish articles for the sake of publishing” (Fiona)
	experimentation	“Cross the river by touching the stones” (Dora)
	disengagement	Withdrawing themselves from doing research (Vivian, Peter, and Joe)
Administration	compliance	Passively implementing the decisions made by the administrators (all the participants)
	fabrication	Fabricating the content of peer class observation format (all the participants)
	confrontation	Openly reproaching and quarrelling with TAO staff (Peter)
Social recognition	rapport-building	Showing sympathy to the students (Vivian, Peter, Dora)
	adjustment	Adding new courses to the existing curriculum (all the participants)
	adoption of belief systems	Insisting on personal values and beliefs (all the participants)
Language proficiency	resource mobilization	Attending externally funded study abroad programs (all participants)

5.2.3 Temporal dimensions of the coping strategies

Previous studies have shed light upon the temporal nature of teacher agency by examining it from a life-course perspective (e.g., Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2015). This study supports this view: the various cognitive and behavioral strategies adopted by the participants to cope with their professional vulnerability are informed by their past experiences, performed at present, and oriented towards the future. This indicates the interaction between the iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective orientations of agency in a given strategy (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). For instance, complying with administrative directives seems to be a practical decision made by the participants after critically evaluating their current ability to negotiate respect from the administrators (practical-evaluation). This decision is strongly influenced by their prior experiences of working with the administrators (iteration) through which they develop a clear understanding of the bureaucratic, or “*ya men*” culture of the administration (see excerpts 95 and 96). While this decision may not help them negotiate respect from the administrators and safeguard their self-esteem, it can at least protect them against potential risks (projectivity) such as being sanctioned by the administrators and losing their jobs in the future (based on interview 3 with Peter).

However, the three temporal orientations of agency are not manifested equally in each coping strategy (Emirbayer & Mische 1998). In particular, a participant may be more engaged with one orientation than the other two orientations in a given strategy. One such example is the strategy of “adjustment” (e.g., adding new courses to the existing EFL curriculum) adopted

by the participants to cope with their vulnerability related to inadequate social recognition. While it is partly driven by a need to sustain the participants' future career development (projectivity), its primary purpose is to help the participants cope with the shrinking workload (practical-evaluation) which seems to be an immediate and urgent challenge for them (see excerpts 121 and 122). Another example is provided by Fiona, who adopts "investment" to cope with her research vulnerability (see excerpt 74). While this strategy is partly influenced by her readiness to take on challenges and a keen interest in doing research (iteration), it is mainly directed towards her dream of becoming a researcher (projectivity) (see excerpt 74). Thus, the three temporal orientations do not resonate harmoniously in the "chordal triad" of the participants' agency.

The participants' coping strategies can be roughly classified into three groups in which one temporal orientation is the dominant tone in the "chordal triad" of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) (see Table 5.2). By "the dominant tone", I mean the temporal orientation which appears to be more salient than the other two in the participant's experiential accounts of a specific strategy. As Table 5.2 shows, "practical-evaluation" (the present orientation) appears to be the dominant "tone" in most of the strategies discussed in this section. This means that, in most circumstances, the participants are engaged in making situational judgements and responding to their professional vulnerability at the moment. In comparison, they are less engaged with reactivating their habitual practices (the past orientation) or projecting future trajectories (the future orientation).

Table 5.2 Temporal orientations of coping strategies

Dominant temporal orientation	Coping strategy
Iteration	Adoption of belief systems (i.e., using values and knowledge developed through past experiences)
	Disengagement (i.e., withdrawal which is influenced by past experiences of ineffectiveness in coping with professional vulnerability)
	Compliance (i.e., conforming to institutional rules due to past experiences of ineffectiveness in resisting administrative decisions)
Practical-evaluation	Reflection in action (i.e., thinking while doing)
	Modification of belief systems (i.e., refining personal beliefs and values in response to situational changes)
	Fabrication (i.e., being perfunctory with some institutional demands)
	Resource mobilization (i.e., using available resources)
	Rapport-building (i.e., developing trustful relationships with the students)
	Adjustment (i.e., altering current courses of action)
	Confrontation (i.e., to openly reproach and challenge administrative decisions)
	Experimentation (i.e., practicing different approaches in order to address a thorny problem at hand)
Projectivity	Ingratiation (i.e., to “flatter” someone in exchange for high evaluation scores)
	Investment (i.e., professional learning which aims to improve one’s future performance)

5.3 Factors leading to experiences of professional vulnerability

Previous sections have shown that 1) the participants do not uniformly respond to certain aspects of their professional vulnerability, 2) their coping strategies range from passivity to proactivity, and 3) most of their strategies are dominated by “practical-evaluation” aimed at helping them cope with their professional vulnerability at the moment. This necessitates a discussion of the myriad personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors leading to the participants’ experiences of professional vulnerability.

5.3.1 Personal factors

Four personal factors – career stage, educational background, academic position, and personality – were identified in the data which could partly explain the participants’ varied responses towards certain aspects of their professional vulnerability.

5.3.1.1 Career stage

Teachers at different career stages often carry with them particular experiences of their generation (Hargreaves, 2005). Such experiences are a clear manifestation of the “iterational” orientation of teacher agency that significantly influences how the participants respond to certain aspects of professional vulnerability. My field observation suggests that many mid and late-career EFL teachers (e.g., Joe and Peter) in XU are nostalgic for those “good old days” in their early career years when periodic evaluations of their teaching performances were absent. They were highly confident about their teaching competence and had never anticipated that they would be subject to periodic evaluations of their teaching performance in the future. So they are reluctant to accept the changes in their mid or late-career years and prefer to take a passive stance towards their teaching vulnerability related to student evaluation and course selection (see excerpts 53 and 55). The data also suggests that their reluctance to change is further complicated by their aging body and waning energy that discourage them from experiencing a new mode of professional life (see excerpt 82).

In comparison, Vivian seems to be more flexible and adaptable to her teaching vulnerability.

This might be due to the fact that she is in her early-career stage. She is passionate and

energetic and has no previous work experiences against which to compare her current teaching practice. Despite the stark contrast between her imagined and real professional identity, there is no time for which she could be nostalgic. She has to accept the reality if she wishes to survive in the demanding work environment. Thus, it is unsurprising that she employs many proactive strategies such as reflection, adjustment, and ingratiation to cope with her teaching vulnerability (see Table 5.1).

5.3.1.2 Educational background

Educational background is an important factor mediating the participants' experiences of professional vulnerability. This is because the knowledge, skills, professional credentials, and academic qualifications acquired in university serve as important "cultural capitals" underpinning the participants' professional practice in an era of performativity (Moore, 2004; Wallace, 2018). And to accumulate these "cultural capitals", the participants must continually invest time and energy in furthering their education. Here, educational background can be understood as a sign of "iterational" agency that allows teachers to become empowered professionals.

The importance of educational background is highlighted in Fiona's experiences of coping with her research vulnerability. As Table 3.4 shows, among these participants, Fiona is the only teacher who received a doctoral degree in a prestigious university. This educational background puts her in a relatively advantaged position to cope with research vulnerability. In particular, the formal research training that she received in her doctoral studies not only

makes her feel empowered to conduct research and get her work published but also strengthens her critical-thinking ability which is conducive to her development as a university academic (see excerpt 75).

In comparison, other participants who do not have doctoral studies experiences are more vulnerable to research pressure. For instance, they are subject to the long-existing bias that editors of many domestic journals have against teachers without doctoral degrees (see excerpt 68). They hold negative views about the pedagogical value of research (see excerpts 60, 61, 62, and 63). They feel disempowered to conduct research due to their lack of formal research training and research interests (see excerpt 59). In addition, with the university laying greater emphasis on teachers' educational background over the past few years, they find it increasingly difficult to get promoted (see excerpts 71 and 72). Thus, they tend to take a passive stance towards research vulnerability.

5.3.1.3 Academic position

The academic position held by a teacher pertains to his or her professional title and employment status. A teacher with a “tenure-track” full professorship or associate professorship is generally regarded as holding a higher position than those non-tenured teaching staff in the academic hierarchy.

In this study, however, a high academic position seems to be a “double-edged” sword for the participants as they cope with their professional vulnerability. On the one hand, the

considerable benefits (e.g., salary increase, job security, and sense of honor) that high academic positions bring to individual participants can help enhance their resilience to professional vulnerability. For instance, while all the participants experience professional vulnerability in their teaching practice, Vivian seems to be more vulnerable due to her non-tenured status. She is under enormous pressure to improve her teaching performance because failure to do so might lead to termination of her contract. Thus, it is unsurprising that she adopts more proactive strategies than the other tenured participants to cope with teaching vulnerability (see Table 5.1). On the other hand, a high academic position may lead to professional stagnation, that is, some teachers may lose their ambitions and motivations to cope with certain aspects of professional vulnerability at the moment and to promote their future professional development after obtaining higher academic positions. For instance, Joe and Vivian have lost their motivation to engage with research vulnerability after they were promoted to associate professorship (see excerpts 70 and 73). They adopt “disengagement”, not only because they have little confidence in their research ability but also because they will not lose their jobs even if they do not do any research at all. This explains why “projectivity” (e.g., sustaining their future development through doing research) is largely absent in their descriptions of experiences of research vulnerability.

The risk of professional stagnation is also captured in the “fish in the bowl” metaphor used by Fiona to explain her perception of how tenure-related stability can restrain a teacher from taking risks and planning for future development (see excerpt 74). However, as a tenured professor, Fiona appears to be agentive in coping with her research vulnerability. Unlike Joe

and Vivian, she is keen to improve herself through doing research. This attitudinal difference among the three teachers might be attributed to their different personalities, which constitute the foci of the next section.

5.3.1.4 Personality

Personality is “the unique psychological qualities that influence individuals’ behaviors, thoughts, and feelings across situations and times” (Kim et al., 2019, p. 164). The data implies a number of personality traits (e.g., “passionate”, “empathetic”, “flexible”, “resourceful”) that seem to be responsible for the participants’ different responses towards specific aspects of their professional vulnerability. For instance, “passion” is a word most frequently used by Fiona to describe her initial career choice (see excerpts 1 and 75). Her sustained commitment to EFL teaching and research is driven by a passion for language. Being passionate about language issues, she perceives EFL teaching as a “pleasure-seeking process”. She takes a proactive stance towards using educational technologies and the research work (see Table 5.1), because she knows clearly that attending to these aspects of professional vulnerability may have a transformative effect on herself as an EFL academic. Meanwhile, Fiona’s proactivity may also be attributed to her “entrepreneurial” personality. Being “entrepreneurial” means she is keen to add value to herself and willingly takes up challenges (Ball, 2003; Sutton, 2017). This explains why she was unsatisfied with the “fishbowl” life and sought to invest in her research competence by pursuing a doctoral degree (Table 5.1).

Other participants' responses towards professional vulnerability are also mediated by their personalities. For instance, while Vivian's proactive stance towards her teaching vulnerability seems to be influenced by her non-tenured teacher identity, it is also likely to be mediated by her "resourceful", "creative", and "flexible" personality traits that propel her to become an agentive EFL teacher. The rapport-building strategy adopted by Dora to cope with her relational vulnerability (see Table 5.1) might also be attributed to an "empathetic" personality that enables her to imagine and make sense of other people's emotions. In addition, Peter's seemingly "good-tempered" personality (as suggested by his colleagues) can partly explain his overt compliance with most of the administrative decisions. Thus, personality predisposes the participants to view and grapple with their professional vulnerability in particular ways.

5.3.2 Institutional factors

Professional vulnerability not only varies across persons but also varies across institutions. In this study, four institutional factors – managerial technique, power relation, collegiality, and university attribute – are found to be particularly relevant to participants' experiences of professional vulnerability.

5.3.2.1 Managerial technique

Throughout the study, performativity is constantly referred to as the dominant managerial technique adopted by XU administrators to regulate academic activities. It is "justified through a rhetoric emphasizing improving standards and increasing teachers' accountability" (Wilkins et al., 2012, p. 67). Thus the implementation of performativity, in an ideal sense, can

result in improved teacher performance and institutional operation (Avis, 2005; Jeffrey, 2002; Leathwood & Read, 2013; Perryman, 2006; Roberts, 2007).

However, the considerable changes that performativity brings about in institutional cultures and values can have a negative impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work (Kenny, 2017). This is captured in the participants' experiential accounts of professional vulnerability. For most of the participants, although they have always felt vulnerable since they entered the EFL teaching profession, their sense of vulnerability is significantly exacerbated by various institutional changes such as intensified teaching evaluation and position appointment as a result of the implementation of performativity (see 3.3.2) in their mid and late-career years. Given their performative nature, these changes render the participants vulnerable to growing stress and job insecurity. If not appropriately addressed, such vulnerability can have a demoralizing effect on the participants and their ongoing professional development (Sutton, 2017).

5.3.2.2 Power relations

The data suggests that the participants are in a lack of power to cope with their administrative vulnerability. This asymmetrical power relation between teachers and administrators provides the basis upon which performativity is exercised to control and regulate teacher behavior. For the participants, this is a working condition beyond their sphere of control, making them feel disempowered to negotiate the content and direction of their professional work with

significant others. Thus, power relations are central to understanding professional vulnerability in a system of performativity (Cutri & Whiting, 2015; Kelchtermans, 2005).

The issue of power relations enables us to discuss the micropolitical nature of professional vulnerability. Blasé (1988) posits that teachers take “political” orientations towards the exercise of power by others. This entails exercising their own power to counteract the power of others. Data suggests that some strategies taken by the participants to cope with their administrative vulnerability are “micropolitical” (i.e., intra-organizational politics) in nature. For instance, their overt “compliance” with many administrative decisions is premised upon their “micropolitical literacy” (i.e., knowledge about the asymmetry of teacher-administrator power relations and their lack of competence to cope with it) (Kelchtermans, 2005; Zhu et al., 2018). This power imbalance is partly responsible for the participants’ failure to safeguard their professional interests through using radical “micropolitical actions” such as “confrontation” (see excerpt 96). Hence, a discussion of power relations contributes to an understanding of the participants’ passive stance towards their administrative vulnerability.

5.3.2.3 Collegiality

It can be assumed that collegiality is essential for teachers to cope with their professional vulnerability because teachers in a collegial environment can support each other and draw on the valuable feedback from their colleagues concerning the effectiveness of their coping strategies (Löfgren, & Karlsson, 2016). However, data indicates the lack of a collegial atmosphere in the participants’ situated context. Except for a few cases, such as joint lesson

preparation and consultation with technicians concerning using educational technologies (see excerpt 50), collegiality is largely absent in the participants' experiences of collective professional activities. For instance, the statements by Fiona and Dora (see 4.3.1) and what I observed during the fieldwork (see excerpt 56) indicate an explicit lack of research motivation among the EFL teachers. This problem hinders the establishment of a collegial environment where teachers could collaborate on shared research projects. Without collegiality, teachers are unlikely to seek help from their peers as they engage in research activities. Thus, the participants' sense of research vulnerability is significantly exacerbated by a lack of collegiality within their workplace.

5.3.2.4 University attribute

University attribute also mediates the participant experiences of professional vulnerability. As mentioned in 3.3.1, XU is a polytechnic university with a traditional strength in engineering education and research. So it is plausible to assume that teachers in humanities and social sciences (e.g., EFL teachers) may be more vulnerable to academic marginalization and inadequate institutional support than those in hard sciences. This is confirmed by Dora who mentioned a lack of “mentoring” and “hands-on research experiences” from experienced teachers (see excerpt 65), my field observation of a faculty meeting about the National Social Science Grant (see excerpt 66), and some participants' critique of the income disparity between language teachers and engineering teachers (see excerpts 106, 107, 108, and 109). Meanwhile, XU is a national “second-tier” university. This attribute means that it is more likely to enroll students with “low-intermediate” English language proficiency than those

“first-tier” (or top) universities in mainland China. This can potentially exacerbate the participants’ sense of teaching vulnerability because students with inadequate English language proficiency might be more unwilling to speak in class. Such a view is not only echoed by the participants in a WeChat group discussion (30/09/2020), but also evidenced by my field observation (excerpt 21).

5.3.3 Sociocultural factors

Teachers’ experience of professional vulnerability is also mediated by the sociocultural context surrounding them (Gao, 2008; Kelchtermans, 2005; Lasky, 2005). Analysis of the data generates several sociocultural factors – educational reform, the “publish-or-perish” mantra, the cultural tradition of teacher-reverence, and face – that seem to play a role in the participants’ experiences of professional vulnerability.

5.3.3.1 Educational policies

Educational policies catalyze changes in higher education. They are constantly shaping the content and direction of teacher professionalism (Simons & Kelchtermans, 2008). While educational policies are not a salient issue in the participants’ accounts of their career lives, they seem to play an invisible yet powerful role in mediating the participants’ experiences of professional vulnerability. In particular, the participants are likely to experience a stronger sense of vulnerability when they feel pressurized to meet the new requirements that educational policies place on them. For instance, in response to the national “Double World-Class” project, XU requires the teachers to provide many high-quality online courses

(see 4.2.2). This policy raises considerable confusion among the participants regarding the role that educational technologies play in their teaching practice (see excerpts 23, 24, 25, 26). Another example is the official issuance of the CECR, which allows individual universities to have more autonomy in adjusting EFL curricula based on their own needs (see 3.3.1). This policy augments the participants' vulnerability related to shrinking workloads (see 4.5.4).

5.3.3.2 “Publish-or-perish” mantra

Data suggests that the participants' research vulnerability is significantly exacerbated by the “publish-or-perish” mantra prevailing in higher education (Lee, 2014; Yuan et al., 2020). For one thing, in the reign of performativity, academics' abilities to publish in high-ranking journals are what tenure, contract renewal, promotion, and other rewards hinge upon.

However, given the disproportionately small number of journals in EFL education and other related fields (Peng & Gao, 2019), some participants who are eager to secure their contracts may manage to get their work published in unconventional ways (e.g., resorting to publishing agencies). Vivian's bitter publishing experience illustrates this phenomenon (see excerpt 69).

For another, the participants are vulnerable to the “hidden rules” in the publishing market.

Those who do not hold senior professional titles or doctoral degrees tend to be rejected by the editors due to their “unqualified” academic background (see excerpts 67 and 68). Given that the very existence of the “publish-or-perish” mantra is beyond their sphere of control, some participants (e.g., Vivian, Peter, and Joe) resort to disengagement as a way to withdraw from their research vulnerability (see Table 5.1).

5.3.3.3 Teacher-reverence

The strong influence of the Chinese cultural tradition of teacher-reverence may partly explain why some participants feel so vulnerable to inadequate social recognition and language proficiency (Gao, 2008; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). For one thing, Chinese cultural tradition emphasizes showing respect to teachers who are expected to act as knowledge transmitters and moral cultivators (Hui, 2005). This tradition imposes high expectations on some participants to demonstrate their “best side” because failure to do so might be interpreted by other people as a sign of incompetence. Thus, it is unsurprising that Fiona and Vivian experience a stronger sense of language vulnerability when they could not provide ideal (i.e., native-like) language input to their students (see excerpts 125 and 128). For another, some participants may incorporate this cultural tradition into their personal belief systems and use it to guide their behavior. They may experience a strong sense of vulnerability when they feel that their self-esteem and authority do not receive due respect from others. Peter’s emotional reaction (i.e., publicly reproaching) towards the late student is a fine example of the influence of the teacher-reverence tradition (see excerpt 116).

5.3.3.4 Face

In traditional Chinese culture, face is one of the priorities one cannot afford to lose (Tan, 2007). It is the way in which individuals seek to present themselves in social interactions (Walker & Dimmock, 2000). While the notion of “face” is not clearly mentioned in the participant’s accounts of their professional vulnerability, it is implied in how they describe unsatisfactory performances. As an example, Joe feels “shameful” about getting a low score

in the student evaluation (see excerpt 98). From his point of view, the evaluation result indicates that the students do not recognize his legitimacy and authority as a university EFL teacher. This undermines his claim to “face”, which is based on his thirty-year EFL learning and teaching experience. Meanwhile, face is also linked to the cultural tradition of teacher-reverence. A teacher’s face is likely to be undermined if he or she does not receive due respect from others. Peter’s anger with the late student (see excerpt 116) might be explained by the fact that he perceived the student’s impolite behavior, of showing no respect to him, as a threat to his “face”. These examples show that the erosion or loss of “face” may exacerbate the participants’ sense of professional vulnerability.

5.4 Summary

Informed by the three research questions and the tentative conceptual framework of vulnerability (e.g., Kelchtermans, 2005; Lasky, 2004; Mische & Emirbayer, 1998; Priestley et al., 2012) and based on data presented in the previous chapter, this chapter has discussed the participants’ perceptions of professional vulnerability, the strategies adopted by them to cope with professional vulnerability, and the multiple factors mediating their experiences of professional vulnerability.

The data suggests that the participants unanimously perceive vulnerability as an integral part of their professional lives, and they perceive vulnerability as a dynamic, conflicted, and multidimensional state characterizing their professional practice. Meanwhile, as “agents of change” (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 191), the participants adopt various cognitive and

behavioral strategies to cope with their professional vulnerability. Their coping strategies range from passivity to proactivity and are simultaneously influenced by the “past”, the “present”, and the “future” orientations of their agency. In addition, how the participants perceive and cope with professional vulnerability is mediated by various personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors. This detailed discussion contributes to our knowledge of the complexity of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability.



Chapter 6 Conclusion and Implications

This chapter first presents a refined conceptual framework of professional vulnerability based on the discussion of the research findings in order to 1) modify the tentative conceptual framework of professional vulnerability presented in Chapter 2 and 2) answer the three questions guiding me throughout the research process. Then, it elaborates on the major contributions of the study, followed by several practical implications for both university EFL teachers and policy makers in Chinese higher education. Finally, limitations and suggestions for further research are provided to conclude the study.

6.1 Towards a refined conceptual framework of professional vulnerability

The tentative conceptual framework (Figure 1) defines vulnerability as a professional state in which teachers are subject to multiple challenges and risks in their situated context. This definition is informed by Kelchtermans (2005), who posits that vulnerability is a “structural condition teachers (or educators in general) find themselves in” (p. 998). Based on this definition, I argue that vulnerability is integral to being a teacher. While it is not an emotional state, it triggers intense emotions on the teachers. Meanwhile, informed by a “relational” view of vulnerability (Jackson, 2018), I argue that teachers do not naturally experience vulnerability. Indeed, their vulnerability hinges upon their relationship with the context. Thus, it is essential to develop a contextualized understanding of teacher vulnerability. Finally, informed by the view that teachers act as “agents of change” (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 192), I argue that teachers may adopt various strategies (actions and cognition) to cope with their

professional vulnerability, and their strategies are influenced by the “past”, “present”, and “future” orientations of their agency (Mische & Emirbayer, 1998).

It should be noted that the tentative conceptual framework played a constructive role in guiding me to collect rich data on the participants’ experiences of professional vulnerability. However, it seems deficient and overly simplistic. For one thing, it leaves no space for “emic” perspectives on professional vulnerability and its impact on the participants’ professional practice (Spiers, 2000). For another, it fails to capture the complexity and specificity of professional vulnerability in a context dominated by a performative discourse of management. Below, I present and explain the refined conceptual framework of professional vulnerability (see Figure 2) in order to answer the three research questions guiding this study:

RQ1: Do university EFL teachers experience professional vulnerability?

The answer is yes. Data suggests that the participants do not resist being labelled as members of a “vulnerable population” (Fineman, 2008; Vasas, 2005). Instead, they showed a great interest in this concept and unreservedly shared their vulnerable stories with me. Echoing Kelchtermans (2005), they all agree that professional vulnerability serves as an integral part of the teaching profession.

However, vulnerability is more than being a part of the teaching profession. Implicit in the participants’ experiential accounts is a perception of vulnerability as a dynamic, conflicted, and multidimensional state accompanying their professional development. First, as shown in

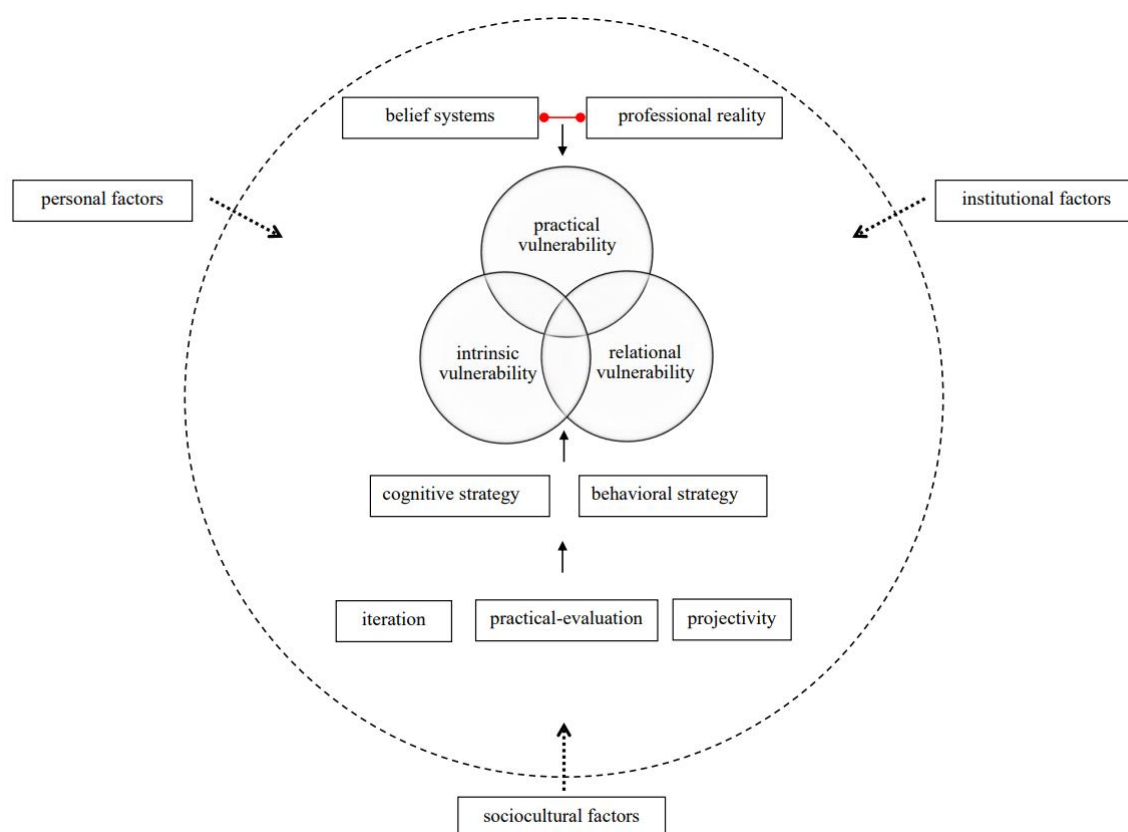


Figure 2. Refined conceptual framework

Figure 2, professional vulnerability is circumscribed by a dotted circle, suggesting that it is a dynamic construct that can be ameliorated or exacerbated. Indeed, data shows that the participants' sense of professional vulnerability increased in tandem with the emergence of performativity in Chinese higher education over the past decade and their attitudes towards vulnerability shifted from negative to positive throughout the study. Hence, professional vulnerability is a dynamic state. Second, professional vulnerability stems from the conflicts between the participants' personal belief systems (self-understanding and personal values) and the professional reality at XU. Whereas belief systems provide the intellectual base upon which the participants make informed professional decisions, they are often contested or even

overthrown by the shifting workplace conditions, provoking disillusion, anxiety, and confusion among them. Hence, professional vulnerability is conflicted in nature. Third, the three interrelated circles in Figure 2 represent the three dimensions of professional vulnerability: intrinsic vulnerability refers to a state in which the participants are subject to inadequate language proficiency; practical vulnerability is experienced by the participants when they engage in “core practices” such as teaching and research that are subject to quantitative measurements by the university; relational vulnerability is experienced by the participants when their “ideal” relationships (which is based on mutual trust and equality) with significant others are put at stake by the changing educational context. Hence, professional vulnerability is a multidimensional state.

RQ2: How do university EFL teachers agentively respond to their professional vulnerability?

Corroborating Priestley et al. (2012), the data suggests that the participants are “agents of change” (p.192) who are capable of coping with their professional vulnerability. As Figure 2 shows, the participants adopt both cognitive and behavioral strategies to cope with their professional vulnerability. Their cognitive strategies include “reflection-in-action” and manipulation of personal belief systems, while behavioral strategies encapsulate concrete actions such as disengagement, compliance, fabrication, ingratiation, adjustment, experimentation, rapport-building, resource-mobilization, investment, and confrontation. These strategies, ranging from passivity to proactivity, indicate that the participants may flexibly cope with their professional vulnerability across situations (Robinson, 2012).

However, the participants do not uniformly respond to their professional vulnerability. Some participants are more proactive than others in coping with professional vulnerability. And they might be more proactive in coping with specific aspects of their professional vulnerability (e.g., teaching vulnerability) than with other aspects (e.g., research vulnerability). Meanwhile, these coping strategies are influenced by “temporality”, which includes “iteration” (the past), “practical-evaluation” (the present), and “projectivity” (the future) (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Figure 2 shows that the participants are mainly engaged with “practical-evaluation” (i.e., addressing their professional vulnerability at the moment) while less engaged with “iteration” (i.e., drawing on their past experiences and knowledge) and “projectivity” (i.e., making long-term plans). This temporal orientation and the participants’ diverse experiences of professional vulnerability are mediated by a constellation of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors.

RQ3: What factors lead to university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability?

As Figure 2 shows, the participants’ experiences of professional vulnerability are caused by various personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors. Personal factors include career stage, educational background, academic position, and personality. Institutional factors include managerial technique, power relation, collegiality, and university attribute. Sociocultural factors include educational reform, the “publish-or-perish” mantra, the cultural tradition of teacher-reverence, and the value of the face.

Among the three types of factors, personal factors are essential to understanding of the participants' diverse responses towards professional vulnerability (see Table 5.1). Take "academic position" as an example: while Joe has disengaged entirely from research vulnerability after he was promoted to associate professorship, Fiona, with a full professorship, is proactive in doing research. Her proactivity might be attributed to an "entrepreneurial" personality that enables her to retain openness to research vulnerability. Another example pertains to "educational background": without doctoral degrees and sufficient research training, Joe, Peter, and Vivian resort to "disengagement" as a way to cope with their research vulnerability. In comparison, Dora, who does not hold a doctoral degree, adopts "experimentation" and "resource mobilization" to cope with her research vulnerability, and this is because she has not been promoted to associate professorship and is struggling with the pressure to "survive". Thus, examination of personal factors may shed light upon the idiosyncrasies of individual participants' professional vulnerability.

Meanwhile, the constellation of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors might well explain the dominant position of "practical-evaluation" in the participants' experiences of vulnerability (see Table 5.2). For one thing, the weak role of "projectivity" indicates a general lack of competence or motivation among many participants to set and act towards long-term professional goals. This is attributable to such factors as performativity, asymmetrical power relation, and the "publish-or-perish" mantra, which make the participants disempowered to change their status quo. Career stage, academic positions, and a lack of collegiality also create a culture of inertia in which the participants are unmotivated to continuously invest in

professional learning. For another, the weak role of “iteration” indicates that some participants lack solid knowledge base upon which they could tactfully address professional vulnerability. And “educational background” as manifested in their lack of doctoral-level learning experiences and research training might be the most significant factor behind this phenomenon. Without solid knowledge bases to draw on and long-term professional goals, the participants are likely to be more responsive to their professional vulnerability at present.

Thus, compared with the tentative conceptual framework, the refined conceptual framework more accurately reflects the complexity of the ways university EFL teachers experience professional vulnerability. Specifically, it provides a holistic depiction of the dynamic interaction between professional vulnerability and teacher agency, which entails temporality and is mediated by various personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors.

6.2 Contributions of the study

Before discussing the contributions this study makes to relevant fields, it is necessary to remind the readers of the limitations of the study. First of all, in terms of sample size, while the participants vary significantly in their demographic information, the relatively small sample size may negatively influence my efforts to draw a holistic picture of the professional vulnerability of university EFL teachers in mainland China. For some readers, the five participants may not be representative of the EFL teaching community in XU. Secondly, in terms of the study duration, while the study was conducted over fifteen months, it may not be long enough to generate insights into the dynamic nature of professional vulnerability. For

instance, there is a lack of observational data about how mid and late-career participants experienced professional vulnerability in their early career years, although this was fully probed through individual interviews. Thirdly, in terms of my positionality, while being “a PhD student” put me at a relatively advantaged position to explore the participants’ professional vulnerability with an objective (yet still personal) outlook, my role as “a former university EFL teacher” may negatively affect the neutrality of my views about the phenomena that took place in the research site. In addition, my “outsider” identity might undermine the validity of the study due to my limited knowledge of the work culture, particularly the organizational system, at XU (especially at the outset of the study).

Despite these limitations, this multiple case study on five university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability in the context of mainland China has made several contributions to current teacher vulnerability research, which has gained increased attention over the past two decades (e.g., Curti & Whiting, 2015; Gao, 2008, 2011; Gao & Yuan, 2021; Jackson, 2018; Kelchtermans, 2005, 2007, 2009; Lasky, 2005; Song, 2016, 2022; Yuan et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2018). A major contribution of this study is the refined conceptual framework of professional vulnerability. While a plethora of existing studies point to the dynamic nature of teacher vulnerability which is contingent upon the dynamic interplay between educational changes and teacher beliefs and values (e.g., Lasky, 2005; Gao, 2008, 2011; Gao & Yuan, 2021), this study goes a step further, arguing that teacher vulnerability is also a conflicted and multidimensional state of being. As shown in the study, vulnerability experienced by individual participants in different aspects of their professional practice is indicative of the

conflicts between their personal belief systems and professional reality, in which the former tends to be contested or overturned by the latter. While such conflicts might be reconciled through the participants' enactment of agency, they can never be eradicated. Thus, professional vulnerability stems from conflicts. Meanwhile, this study adds to current teacher vulnerability research by bringing to the forefront three types of vulnerability, namely intrinsic vulnerability, practical vulnerability, and relational vulnerability, inherent in different dimensions of the participants' professional practice. Among the three types of vulnerability, relational vulnerability is particularly new to the field of EFL teacher education and development. While this notion is firstly put forward by Lasky (2004) in her efforts to describe how secondary school teachers build and develop trustful relationship with their students, this study expands the scope of relational vulnerability by discussing how university EFL teachers struggle with their untrustful relationships with multiple parties including the students, the administrators, teachers in other departments, and even other professions. Given that the participants are vulnerable to inadequate social recognition of their professional values and competence, unpacking relational vulnerability can help raise an awareness among different stakeholders, particularly university administrators, of the constructive role that EFL teachers play in providing quality higher education so that favorable policies and mechanisms can be put in place to support their professional development.

In addition, as few studies have adequately addressed the interplay between teacher vulnerability and teacher agency, this study, drawing on an integrated conceptualization of teacher agency (Blasé, 1988; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et

al., 2012; Schön, 1983), explored in more detail the concrete strategies adopted by the participants to cope with their professional vulnerability. For instance, this study identifies two cognitive strategies (reflection-in-action and manipulation of personal belief systems) and ten behavioral strategies (disengagement, compliance, fabrication, ingratiation, adjustment, experimentation, rapport-building, resource-mobilization, investment, and confrontation) adopted by the participants to cope with their professional vulnerability. It also unpacks a myriad of personal (career stage, educational background, academic position, and personality), institutional (managerial technique, power relation, collegiality, and university attribute), and sociocultural (educational reform, “publish-or-perish” mantra, the cultural tradition of teacher-reverence, and face) factors mediating the participants’ agentic actions. These findings are of particular importance in shedding light upon the pivotal role that agency plays in fortifying teacher resilience and adaptability amidst rapid educational changes.

Apart from its theoretical contribution, this study adds to our limited knowledge of the vulnerable experiences of EFL teachers in higher education. Differing from most of the existing research that has explicitly or implicitly examined a single aspect of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability, such as teaching (e.g., Chen & Goh, 2011; Habibi et al., 2019; Morris & King, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020), research (e.g., Bai, 2018; Bai & Hudson, 2011; Bai & Millwater, 2011; Borg & Liu, 2013; Yuan, 2017, 2021), and experiences of power relations and cultural stereotypes (e.g., Cowie, 2011; Murray, 2013; Stanley, 2013; Tsui, 2007), this study depicts a fuller picture of university EFL teachers’ professional

vulnerability based on data collected from multiple sources. For instance, in terms of teaching practice, the study shows that the participants are vulnerable to unmotivated students, the pressure to use educational technologies, and the student evaluation and course selection mechanisms. Regarding their research practice, the participants are vulnerable to a lack of research motivation, inadequate research expertise, ambivalent beliefs about the value of research, and an unfavorable research environment. Furthermore, the study reveals several aspects of professional vulnerability that have not been mentioned or fully explored in the existing literature. For instance, it shows that the participants experience administrative vulnerability, which is related to “pointless formalities”, administrators’ low work efficiency, and excessive interventions. They also experience vulnerability in gaining social recognition, and this vulnerability is manifested in “objectification” of EFL teaching, lack of respect from significant others, low salaries, and shrinking workload. In addition, as university EFL teachers, the participants experience vulnerability resulted from their inadequate language proficiency. The latter two aspects of professional vulnerability might be unique to the participants, given their disciplinary background and the marginality of EFL education at a polytechnic university. Moreover, this study is one of the few (Gao & Yuan, 2021; Huang, 2018) that provide a valuable insight into how performativity influences university EFL teachers’ professional lives. It shows that the participants’ views about performativity are largely negative as it significantly intensifies their sense of professional vulnerability and reinforces their marginality in the academic hierarchy.

This study also has methodological contributions. While previous studies (e.g., Bullough, 2005; Lasky, 2005; Song, 2016; Zhu et al., 2018) sought to examine teacher vulnerability through self-reported data (e.g., interviews) or secondary data (e.g., institutional documents), this multiple case study draws on data collected from multiple sources including interviews, field observation (mainly professional activities such as teaching and office meetings), reflective journals (my field observation and “insider” experiences), social media (WeChat messages), and documents (work contracts, curriculum, and institutional rules) over fifteen months. The use of multiple data sources enhanced the trustworthiness of the research findings. In particular, as I was allowed to work as a part-time teacher at XU, I could immerse myself in the field, observe various professional activities, experience the performative work culture, and gain first-hand experiences of professional vulnerability. Through comparing my field experiences with those self-reported data, I could develop a better understanding of the participants’ professional vulnerability.

6.3 Implications

The study contributes to our knowledge of teacher vulnerability by demonstrating how it is experienced by five full-time EFL teachers at a university in mainland China. While the participants’ experiences are not necessarily representative of university EFL teachers worldwide, they are relevant to EFL teachers undergoing similar higher educational changes characterized by the adoption of performativity (Ball, 2003; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Sutton, 2017). Particularly, for universities in mainland China and other similar contexts (e.g., Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the UK), the participants’ experiences provide valuable insights

into the complexity of professional vulnerability and how it interplays with the system of performativity (Gao & Yuan, 2021; Kelchtermans et al., 2009). Throughout the study, the participants constantly referred to performativity as the most important institutional condition mediating their professional vulnerability. In particular, the performative measures adopted by the administrators, such as teaching evaluation, course selection, redeployment, and personnel agency create an environment wherein the participants are vulnerable to diminished autonomy, periodic reviews of their productivity, and academic marginalization. At the same time, the participants are disempowered by the asymmetrical teacher-administrator relationship to negotiate what they assume as favorable workplace conditions. The result then is increased compliance rather than creativity among the participants. This is further complicated by a lack of collegiality and institutional support that may undermine their resilience and adaptability. Therefore, the work culture at XU is arguably unfavorable as it significantly exacerbates the participants' experiences of professional vulnerability.

Despite shared workplace conditions, the participants vary significantly regarding how they perceive and cope with specific aspects of professional vulnerability. This is attributable to myriad personal factors that influence the extent to which the participants could withstand professional vulnerability, remain work commitment, and sustain professional development. Therefore, the findings of this study raise two difficult yet critical questions: 1) what could be done on the part of higher institutions to help EFL teachers withstand their professional vulnerability? 2) what can university EFL teachers do to enhance their resilience in an era of

intensified performativity in higher education? Although the two questions are beyond the scope of this study, some recommendations can be made for university EFL teachers and managers in light of the research findings.

First, given that teacher vulnerability is closely related to the dominant performative discourse in higher education, the onus is on university managers to reconsider the rationale behind their adoption of performativity. Specifically, instead of following suit in the trend towards performativity, higher institutions might need to critically examine the appropriateness and applicability of those performance-control measures: do they really meet the institutional targets by enabling the teachers to work more effectively in their local contexts? Indeed, the participants' professional experiences provide compelling evidence that performativity does not necessarily lead to improved teacher performance, and in many cases, it can demoralize teacher practice and make them feel less committed to their work (Sutton, 2017). Therefore, higher institutions might consider attuning some managerial policies to local situations. For instance, they should acknowledge that the "publish-or-perish" ethos is inherently problematic and use multiple indexes rather than relying on a single index such as impact factors to gauge EFL teachers' research output (Lee, 2014). This can be done by placing greater emphasis on the quality of publications in terms of their contribution to the research field. Meanwhile, given the power imbalance between teachers and administrators as an important factor mediating professional vulnerability, higher institutions might need to engage in authentic and open dialogues with teachers regularly to align the latter's professional needs with institutional goals (Stewart, 2012). Reducing administrative

interventions and involving EFL teachers in decision-making may help increase their sense of autonomy and job satisfaction. Continuous and adequate institutional support (e.g., teaching seminars, research training workshops, and study-abroad programs) should also be provided to teachers to improve their professional knowledge and skills. Meanwhile, it might be of great significance to incorporate vulnerability-related content into EFL teacher education programs to prepare student teachers for the demanding workplace environment.

Second, it is vital for university EFL teachers to develop an objective view of professional vulnerability and the role it plays in their professional development. On the one hand, given its association with passivity and weakness, professional vulnerability evokes a myriad of negative emotions among teachers, making them feel less committed to their professional tasks. On the other hand, by embracing vulnerability as a “positive learning disposition” (Jackson, 2018, p. 239), teachers are expected to grow personally and professionally.

However, “to teach is to be vulnerable ... to be vulnerable to be capable of being hurt” (Bullough, 2005, p. 23). So vulnerability is an integral part of the teaching profession. Thus, instead of seeking to escape vulnerability, university EFL teachers might learn to live with it. This necessitates ameliorating the negative influences that vulnerability has on their professional development. However, in an era of intensified performativity in higher education, EFL teachers should take proactive actions (e.g., adjustment) rather than passive actions (e.g., disengagement) to cope with their professional vulnerability, because being passive can lead to inertia and professional stagnation which may lead to some teachers being phased out of the academia over time. Teachers who lack the experience to cope with

vulnerability might refer to the experiences of “role model” teachers to promote new visions of professional development (Lunenberg et al., 2007). As an example, Fiona’s adoption of “investment” to cope with her research vulnerability suggests that university EFL teachers should develop a long-term perspective on professional development, that is, they might activate the “projective” dimension of their agency to anticipate and prepare for the changes that would take place in their situated context in the future (Mische & Emirbayer, 1998). They should also learn to embrace “epistemic vulnerability” and augment their knowledge base (including both pedagogical content knowledge and practical knowledge) through attending various formal (e.g., pursuing a doctoral degree) and informal (e.g., reading academic papers) learning activities (Jackson, 2018). The improved knowledge base then becomes an integral part of “iterational” agency that they can draw on to cope with professional vulnerability (Mische & Emirbayer, 1998). For teachers with ambiguous beliefs about the practical value of doing research, they might engage in action research that would make an impact on student learning and deepen their understanding of classroom issues that are puzzling and intriguing (Burns & Westmacott, 2018).

Given the asymmetry of the teacher-administrator relationship, university EFL teachers in contexts similar to that of XU might consider taking “micropolitical actions” to cope with their vulnerability to institutional rules and norms that do not align with their belief systems (Blasé, 1988). While “compliance” can put teachers in a relatively safe position by protecting them against sanctions by faculty leaders and administrators, it can reinforce their marginality in the institution and hinder creativity and self-transformation (Burnard & White, 2008).

Therefore, they need to develop a willingness to be daring, courageous, and critical of the administrative decisions that they perceive as irrational and inappropriate. For instance, they might adopt “negotiation” as a way to enact and construct a meaningful teacher-administrator relationship. This involves seeking opportunities to have face-to-face discussions with administrators and openly voice their concerns. Given that many early-career or non-tenured teachers do not have the bargaining power, “negotiation” could be done collectively. Teachers with higher academic positions (e.g., professors with doctoral degrees) might play a leading role in uniting their colleagues and bringing critical issues to the bargaining table. With their agentive and collaborative work, university EFL teachers might be able to withstand professional vulnerability and sustain professional development in an educational context of unrelenting changes.

6.4 Directions for future research

This thesis reports on a study that looks into the professional vulnerability of five EFL teachers at a university in mainland China. Drawing on data from interviews, field observations, documents, social media, and reflective journals, this research enriches our limited understanding of university EFL teachers’ professional vulnerability with theoretical, practical, and methodological contributions to the field of teacher education and development. Given the pivotal role of university EFL teachers in nurturing “critical thinkers imbued with a global outlook” (Teo, 2017, p. 1), it is high time that we paid great attention to their professional needs and status through continuous research and helped them become agentive professionals in the complex process of coping with their professional vulnerability.

Future research can continue to explore the dynamic nature of university EFL teachers' professional vulnerability, with particular attention paid to how their perceptions of professional vulnerability and coping strategies change over time and across different career stages. So a longitudinal study on the dynamic interplay between professional vulnerability and various mediating factors (personal, institutional, and sociocultural) would be of great value. It might also be interesting to recruit teachers of different subject areas (e.g., Special education, Music, and Math) and capture the specificity of professional vulnerability within their own disciplines. Given that this study has a relatively small sample size which could undermine its credibility, future research might consider expanding the sample size by recruiting more participants from XU to examine whether there are any shared patterns of professional vulnerability among teachers with similar demographic background or by recruiting participants from different institutions to gain deeper insights into the role of institutional factors in mediating experiences of professional vulnerability.

With the rapid internationalization of higher education characterized by cooperation and mobility of talents (de Wit & Altbach, 2021), it is also interesting to probe the vulnerability of university EFL teachers across different sociocultural contexts. For instance, it would be helpful to probe the vulnerability of NS EFL teachers working in expanding-circle countries (e.g., mainland China, Japan, and South Korea) or EFL teachers with border-crossing experiences, with particular attention paid to the dynamic interplay between their professional vulnerability and the conditions afforded by local cultures. It would also be meaningful to conduct comparative studies on the vulnerability of university EFL teachers in different

national contexts, allowing policymakers and institutional leaders to borrow experiences from each other to help EFL teachers withstand their professional vulnerability.

To conclude, this study looks into the professional vulnerability of five EFL teachers at a mainland Chinese university dominated by a performative work culture. It sheds light upon the dynamic, conflicted, and multidimensional nature of teacher vulnerability by unveiling how the five EFL teachers perceived and coped with their professional vulnerability and the various personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors mediating their experiences of professional vulnerability. In order to provide quality tertiary-level EFL education, there is a need for more research endeavors and institutional support for university EFL teachers' professional practice and development in our field.



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Appendices

Appendix 1: EFL Teacher interview protocols

Interview 1

- (1) 能否简单地介绍一下您自己，比如您的学历背景，工作经历等等？
Could you please tell me something about yourself, like your educational background and work experience?
- (2) 当您听到“职业脆弱性”这个术语的时候，首先想到了什么？
What comes to your mind when you hear the term “professional vulnerability”?
- (3) 您如何理解“脆弱群体”这个术语？您是否认为高校英语教师是一个“脆弱群体”？为什么？
How do you perceive the notion of “vulnerable population”? Do you believe that university EFL teachers are a “vulnerable population”? Why?
- (4) 您觉得“脆弱性”是高校英语教师独有的一种职业状态，还是所有专业老师都有的的一种职业状态？
Do you believe that vulnerability is a professional state unique to university EFL teachers or shared by teachers of all disciplines?
- (5) 您选择做高校英语教师的动机是什么？工作这些年以来，您对这份职业的整体感受是什么？您是否对这份职业感到满意？有没有考虑过跳槽或者离开这个职业？
What are the motivations behind your career choice? What are your general feelings about this profession? Are you satisfied with this profession? Have you ever thought about going to another university or leave the EFL teaching profession forever?
- (6) 您觉得这份职业的哪些方面比较脆弱？有没有哪件事情让您觉得非常脆弱？您是如何应对它的？
What are the vulnerable aspects of the university EFL teaching profession? Can you share with me some incidents where you feel particularly vulnerable? How did you cope with it?
- (7) 您能否描述一下理想的职业生活是什么样子？
Can you describe your ideal professional life?

Interview 2

- (1) 您如何看待绩效制度？学校的各种考核，尤其是对教学和科研的考核，是否加强了您的脆弱感？能举例说明一下吗？

How do you think about the system of performativity? Do various institutional evaluations of your performance, particularly in teaching and research, add to your sense of professional vulnerability? Can you give me some examples?

- (2) 在过去的几个月里，我发现了一些情况，这些情况（教学，科研，行政工作等）似乎暗示着您的职业是脆弱的，您是如何看待这些情况的？这些情况为什么会发生？

Over the past few months, I've noticed a few situations (probes: teaching, research, and administration) that seem to indicate that your profession is vulnerable. How do you think about these situations? Why did they happen?

- (3) 您是如何应对这些情况的？能否分享一些例子？

How did you cope with these situations? Can you give me some examples?

- (4) 您是否对科研感兴趣？您觉得科研是否应该成为你的专业实践的一部分？有没有申请过项目或者在权威期刊上发表过学术论文？您觉得大学的科研环境如何？

Do you have an interest in doing research? Do you believe research should become integral to your professional practice? Have you ever applied for any research projects or get your articles published in prestigious journals? How do you think about the research environment at the university?

- (5) 您觉得您的英语语言能力如何？是否满意？有没有参加过一些语言培训项目？

How do you perceive your English language proficiency? Are you satisfied with it? Have you ever attended any English language training programs?

- (6) 您如何看待学校目前大力推行的混合式教学？在疫情期间开展网络教学是否遇到一些麻烦？您是如何应对的？

How do you perceive the hybrid teaching mode which is being promulgated by the university? Did you encounter any difficulties in conducting online teaching during the pandemic? How did you cope with those difficulties?

- (7) 过去这几个月，我发现老师们的专业实践经常被行政部门干涉，比如分级教学那件事，您觉得能否完全掌控自己的专业实践？大学是否保护了你的专业自主性？您觉得自主性和职业脆弱性有什么关系？

Over the past few months, I have found that your professional practice is subject to administrative interventions, as is illustrated by the graded-teaching practice. Do you believe that you have full control over your professional practice? Does the university protect your professional autonomy? Do you believe that your professional autonomy has anything to do with your sense of professional vulnerability?

- (8) 你觉得你的工作得到他人的认可了吗？他人的认可是否会影响你的职业脆弱感？

Is your work recognized by significant others? Does their recognition influence your sense of professional vulnerability?

- (9) 你觉得合适的英语教学方法是什么？你如何评价你的教学水平？

What do you believe is the appropriate EFL teaching methodology? How do you assess your teaching competence?

Interview 3

- (1) 您现在对于“职业脆弱性”如何理解？与最初的理解有什么不同吗？

How do you perceive the term “professional vulnerability” now? Is your current perception different from your initial one?

- (2) 您觉得职业脆弱性的根源是什么？它能从您的职业生涯中消除吗？

What do you believe are the root causes of your professional vulnerability? Will it be eliminated from your career lives?

- (3) 您如何评价您应对职业脆弱性的措施？

How do you evaluate the strategies that you’ve taken to cope with vulnerability?

- (4) 您对未来的职业发展有何打算？有没有考虑过攻读博士学位或者参加更多的职业发展项目？

What are your plans for professional development in the future? Have you ever considered pursuing a doctoral degree or attending more professional development programs?

Appendix 2: Snow and Shawn interview protocol

- (1) 你们对于高校英语教师和教育定位是什么？

How do you position EFL teachers and teaching in higher education?

- (2) 您觉得大学是否真的有必要开设大学英语课？

Do you believe that it is really necessary to provide EFL courses to the students?

- (3) 你觉得英语教师在教学方面的整体表现如何？你们是否满意？

How do you think about the overall teaching performance of EFL teachers? Are you satisfied with it?

- (4) 在我与英语教师的日常交流中，我发现他们对于评教和选课制度不是很满意，你们开展评教和选课的初衷是什么？这两项制度是在促进英语教师教学表现方面是否有效？

During my daily communication with EFL teachers, I noticed that many of them were unsatisfied with the student evaluation and course selection policies? What is the rationale behind your implementation of both policies? Do you believe that they are effective in helping EFL teaching improve their teaching performance?

- (5) 你们有没有和英语老师讨论过一些教学方面的安排？有没有听到过他们的建议和看法？你们在做有关英语教学的决策时是否参考了英语老师给出的专业意见？

Have you ever discussed any teaching plans with EFL teachers? Have you ever listened to their views and suggestions? Have you ever considered the perspectives of EFL teachers when you make decisions about EFL teaching?

- (6) 你如何理解教务处和英语老师之间的关系？

How do you perceive the relationship between TAO and EFL teachers?

- (7) 你们对英语老师未来有何期待？

What do you expect of EFL teachers in the future?

Appendix 3: Lucy interview protocol

- (1) 您听过这么多英语老师的课，您觉得他们的整体教学水平如何？

Since you have observed so many classes, I wonder how you evaluate the overall teaching performance of EFL teachers?

- (2) 您觉得目前英语教学存在哪些问题？

What you believe are the major problems facing EFL teachers' instructional practice?

- (3) 您是否有向学校和教务处反映这些问题？

Have you ever talked with TAO about these difficulties?

- (4) 您觉得评教、选课、同行听课这些制度有意义吗？

Do you believe that such as policies as student evaluation, course selection, and peer classroom observation are meaningful?

- (5) 您对于英语老师的职业发展有什么建议吗？

What are your suggestions for EFL teachers about their professional development?

Appendix 4: Student interview protocol

- (1) 上完两年的大学英语课，你们觉得这门课程怎么样？你觉得大学是否有开设英语课的必要？

How do you think about CE after learning it for entirely two years? Do you believe that it is necessary to learn English in university?

- (2) 你们觉得以往教过你们的英语老师水平如何？是否满意他们的教学？请举例说明。

How do you think about your CE teachers? Are you satisfied with their teaching performance? Please give me some examples.

- (3) 很多英语老师说学生在英语学习方面缺少动力？你同意这种观点吗？为什么？

Many EFL teachers argue that the students lack the motivation to learn English. Do you agree with this view? Why?

- (4) 你们觉得是否有必要开展选课和评教？你的评教和选课标准是什么？

Do you believe that it is necessary for you to evaluate teachers and select their courses? What are your criteria for teaching evaluation and course selection?

- (5) 我听说有些学生在网上找枪手来帮他写作业，你是否了解这件事，你如何看待这件事？

I heard that some students purchased ghostwriting services to help them do the online assignments. Have you heard about it? How do you think about it?

- (6) 你喜欢混合式(线上线下)英语教学模式还是传统的(线下)英语教学模式？为什么？

Do you prefer a hybrid EFL teaching mode or the traditional teaching mode? Why?

- (7) 你觉得大学英语课能对你以后的学习和工作带来多少用处吗？

Do you believe that CE can bring any benefits to your study and employment in the future?

- (8) 你们觉得目前的大学英语教学模式如何？你希望英语老师怎样教你们？

How do you perceive the CE teaching mode at present? How do you expect your CE teachers to teach you?

Appendix 5: Lynn interview protocol

- (1) 作为文学院的副院长，你是如何看待高校英语教师在本科教育中所扮演的角色的？您觉得他们在学校处于怎样的地位？

As deputy dean of FH, how do you perceive the role that EFL teachers play in undergraduate education? What are their positions in the university?

- (2) 您如何理解“职业脆弱性”这个术语？您是否觉得高校英语教师是一个“脆弱群体”？

How do you perceive the term “professional vulnerability”? Do you believe that university EFL teachers are a “vulnerable population”?

- (3) 您觉得高校英语教师的脆弱性主要体现在哪些方面？原因是什么？

What do you believe are the vulnerable aspects of EFL teachers’ professional practice? What are the reasons behind their vulnerability?

- (4) 您觉得科研是否应该成为大学英语老师专业实践的一部分？

Do you believe that research should become an integral part of university EFL teachers’ professional practice?

- (5) 您是否帮助过英语教师应对职业脆弱性？能否举一些例子？您的帮助是否有效？学院是否给予英语教师足够的支持？

Have you ever helped EFL teachers cope with their professional vulnerability? Can you give me some examples? Is your help effective? Has FH provided EFL teachers with sufficient support for their professional development?

- (6) 老师们似乎都在抱怨班级容量太大了，而且听说您之前也为此和教务处理论过，您可否提供一些细节？

It seems that all the teachers are complaining about the large class size, and I heard that you had argued with TAO about this issue before. Can you provide some details of it?

- (7) 您觉得高校英语教师这个职业是否有前途？未来高校英语教师应该如何实现职业发展？

Do you believe that university EFL teaching is a promising profession? How should university EFL teachers sustain their professional development in the future?