NEGOTIATING ACADEMIC IDENTITY IN SUSTAINABLE HIGHER EDUCATION A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF ENGLISH PREPARATORY PROGRAMS AT STATE AND FOUNDATION UNIVERSITIES

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Problem Definition

Higher education systems are increasingly expected to align research, teaching, and community engagement with sustainability goals, including quality education. In Türkiye, however, instructors working in School of Foreign Languages preparatory programs occupy an ambiguous institutional position. Current regulations rarely require these instructors to conduct or publish research as a condition of reappointment or promotion, placing a substantial segment of the academic workforce outside their universities' research ecosystems. The literature on teacher research engagement documents this exclusion, but prior work has largely treated the outcome as an attitude toward research (e.g., Ballıdağ, 2026) rather than as a matter of professional identity and has rarely examined how graduate education and career-structural incentives shape instructors' self-positioning as researchers. This gap is more crucial given the differing employment conditions across Turkish state and foundation universities, a distinction already shown to shape instructors' broader workplace learning orientations (Altuntaş-Özben et al., 2024), which may produce distinct pathways toward, or away from, a research-oriented identity.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study aims to examine SFL instructors' inclination toward graduate education and academic research, their reasons for not conducting research, and their professional identity perceptions, comparing state and foundation universities. Thus, it is guided by three research questions:

1. What internal and external reasons do SFL instructors give for engaging in or avoiding academic research?
2. How do research and graduate-study inclinations, along with reported obstacles, differ between state and foundation contexts?
3. How does the absence of a formal research expectation in current regulations shape instructors' construction of an "academic" identity and their sense of professional sustainability?

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The study draws on two complementary frameworks. Borg's (2010, 2013) model of teacher research engagement conceptualizes the relationship between language teachers and research through systemic barriers, including time, institutional climate, and perceived professional benefit, rather than individual attitude alone. Whitchurch's (2008, 2012) concept of the "third space" professional describes how staff falling outside conventional academic and non-academic categories negotiate hybrid identities, offering a useful lens for SFL instructors positioned between "teacher" and "researcher" roles.

A recent national study (Ballıdağ, 2026) found no significant difference in general research attitudes between state and foundation university instructors. Because attitude captures how favourably research

is regarded, while identity concerns whether a person sees themselves as belonging to the researcher role, this null finding does not preclude institutional differences at the identity level, and instead motivates the present inquiry into whether such differences become visible once identity, rather than attitude, is the construct of analysis.

Method

The study employs an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The population consists of English language instructors in Türkiye, and the study group comprises 100-150 instructors purposively sampled from one state and one foundation university. In the quantitative phase, participants complete a survey measuring demographic characteristics, research and publication history, perceived barriers to research and graduate degree pursuit (workload, absence of regulatory incentive, institutional climate), and self-reported academic identity. Quantitative data will be analysed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations, to explore potential differences between state and foundation groups where appropriate. As the survey is a self-developed instrument, its internal consistency will be reported, and interpretations of institutional comparisons will remain exploratory rather than confirmatory. In the qualitative phase, 10 to 15 participants from both institutions take part in semi-structured interviews, analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because one researcher works at a state university and the other at a foundation university, each will lead data collection and coding outside their own institution, providing investigator triangulation to reduce insider bias.

Findings and Discussion

As the study is at the design stage, two theoretically grounded propositions are advanced rather than confirmed findings. It is proposed that general inclinations toward research may not differ sharply by institution type, and despite this similarity at the attitude level, the nature of reported barriers will differ structurally, with state university instructors more likely to cite the absence of a regulatory research requirement and foundation university instructors more likely to cite heavy teaching loads and contract renewal concerns. Testing these propositions against interview data, rather than assuming their confirmation, constitutes the study's central empirical contribution.

Conclusion

The findings are expected to show that achieving the 2030 vision and quality education goal requires structural reform in how SFL instructors are employed and defined. The study will offer concrete policy recommendations for the Council of Higher Education and university senates, possibly revising appointment and promotion regulations to incentivize research, optimizing teaching loads for research-active instructors, and supporting institutional academic development ecosystems.

Keywords: sustainable higher education, quality education, academic identity construction, English language instructors, teacher development

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Permanent link to the survey tool:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScqoxcv0be0JEwjmr1gRZJyHh-_taK1QsOTLUWYZhoz63jGSA/viewform?usp=header