HARNESSING TEACHER AGENCY FOR PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION IN EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This study investigates the manifestation of teacher agency in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, focusing on the adoption of innovative teaching strategies. By examining how EFL teachers perceive their own agency and identifying the factors that facilitate or impede their ability to innovate, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics influencing pedagogical practices in EFL education. Data were collected through surveys, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations involving a diverse sample of EFL teachers. The findings reveal that most of EFL teachers perceive themselves as having significant agency, particularly those with extensive teaching experience and access to continuous professional development. Key facilitators of teacher agency include strong institutional support, availability of resources, and a positive school culture that encourages experimentation and risk-taking. Conversely, rigid curricular requirements, lack of administrative support, insufficient resources, and time constraints were identified as significant barriers. These results underscore the importance of creating supportive and resource-rich educational environments to foster teacher agency and promote innovative teaching practices. The study concludes with recommendations for educational institutions and policymakers to provide robust professional development opportunities, ensure access to necessary resources, and create flexible curricular frameworks. By addressing these challenges, stakeholders can empower EFL teachers to implement dynamic and effective instructional strategies, ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes. Future research should further explore the long-term impacts of increased teacher agency on student achievement and engagement in EFL classrooms.

Keywords : EFL Education, Institutional Support, Pedagogical Innovation, Professional Development, Teacher Agency

Introduction

The field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education is constantly evolving, driven by the need to adapt to diverse learner needs and rapidly changing global communication demands. Central to this evolution is the concept of teacher agency, which refers to the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and influence their teaching environments (Mutoni et al., 2023). In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the pivotal role that teacher agency plays in fostering pedagogical innovation, particularly in the EFL classroom.

Teacher agency goes beyond autonomy, involving informed decision-making, creative strategies, and adaptability, empowering teachers to innovate and boost student engagement (Rich, 2021). The manifestation of teacher agency in the EFL classroom is crucial, as it directly impacts the ability to address the unique challenges faced by EFL learners, such as linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and varying levels of language proficiency. Innovative teaching strategies in the EFL context might include the use of technology-enhanced language learning tools, project-based learning, collaborative activities, and differentiated instruction tailored to individual student needs (Montecinos et al., 2022; Maluleka, 2020; Avidov-Ungar & Amir, 2018). These approaches require a high degree of teacher

agency, as educators must navigate curriculum constraints, institutional expectations, and diverse student backgrounds while maintaining a focus on effective language acquisition.

While teacher agency is crucial for educational innovation, there is limited understanding of how EFL teachers perceive their own agency and its impact on adopting innovative practices. This research will explore EFL teachers' views on their agency and identify factors that influence their use of innovative teaching strategies. It aims to reveal how teacher agency drives pedagogical innovation and provide insights for improving policy, training, and classroom practices. Research Questions

1. How do EFL teachers perceive their own agency in implementing innovative teaching strategies within their classrooms?

2. What specific innovative pedagogical practices are most frequently adopted by EFL teachers who exhibit high levels of agency, and what factors influence their adoption?

Through these questions, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of teacher agency in shaping effective and innovative EFL instruction, ultimately aiming to enhance the learning experiences and outcomes for students.

Understanding Teacher Agency

Teacher agency is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the capacity of educators to act intentionally and make autonomous decisions within their professional practice. It involves a combination of self-efficacy, professional knowledge, reflective practice, and the ability to influence educational environments and outcomes (Polatcan, 2021; Lennert da Silva & Mølstad, 2020). Understanding teacher agency requires delving into its various dimensions and the ways in which it manifests in educational settings.

At the core of teacher agency is self-efficacy, or the belief in one's own ability to effect change and achieve desired outcomes in the classroom. This confidence empowers teachers to experiment with new methodologies, address challenges proactively, and persist in the face of obstacles (Bellibaş et al., 2020). High self-efficacy is often linked to a willingness to embrace innovative practices and take pedagogical risks. Moreover, teacher agency is underpinned by a solid foundation of professional knowledge and pedagogical skills (Leijen et al., 2019). Educators who are well-versed in the latest research, instructional strategies, and technological tools are better equipped to implement innovative approaches. Continuous professional development and reflective practice are essential for maintaining and expanding this knowledge base.

Reflective practice, involving the ongoing process of self-examination and evaluation of one's teaching methods and outcomes, is another crucial dimension of teacher agency. Teachers who engage in reflective practice are more likely to identify areas for improvement, adapt their strategies, and innovate. This reflective approach fosters a deeper understanding of student needs and learning processes, which is critical for effective EFL instruction (Halai & Durrani, 2018). Additionally, teacher agency is characterized by the ability to make autonomous decisions regarding instructional methods, classroom management, and curriculum adaptation. Autonomy allows teachers to tailor their approaches to the specific needs of their students, fostering a more responsive and dynamic learning environment (Ahmad & Shah, 2022). However, this autonomy must be balanced with accountability to educational standards and goals.

Teachers with strong agency often take on leadership roles within their schools, advocating for curricular changes, mentoring colleagues, and contributing to professional learning communities. This influence extends beyond the individual

classroom, shaping the broader educational context and promoting a culture of innovation and continuous improvement (Robertson et al., 2023). In the context of EFL education, teacher agency plays a crucial role in addressing the unique challenges and opportunities associated with language learning. EFL teachers who exhibit high levels of agency are more likely to implement innovative strategies that enhance language acquisition and student engagement.

These strategies might include the integration of technology, such as language learning apps, online platforms, and multimedia content, to create interactive and immersive learning experiences. Additionally, collaborative learning, which encourages group work, peer teaching, and cooperative activities, promotes language practice and cultural exchange among students (Yli-Pietilä et al., 2023). Project-based learning, which involves designing projects that require students to use English in authentic, real-world contexts, enhances their practical language skills and critical thinking abilities (Lai et al., 2016). Differentiated instruction, which adapts lessons to cater to the diverse proficiency levels and learning styles of students, ensures that all learners can progress at their own pace (Graham et al., 2019). Moreover, incorporating cultural content and perspectives into the curriculum makes language learning more relevant and engaging for students from various backgrounds.

By harnessing their agency, EFL teachers can create more effective and stimulating learning environments that motivate students and foster deeper language comprehension and usage. Understanding how teacher agency influences the adoption and success of these innovative practices is essential for supporting educators and enhancing the overall quality of EFL instruction. Teacher agency is a vital component of educational innovation, particularly in the EFL classroom (Varpanen et al., 2022). By

exploring how EFL teachers perceive and exercise their agency, and identifying the factors that facilitate or impede their efforts, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the ways in which teacher agency can be harnessed to drive pedagogical innovation and improve language learning outcomes.

Previous Research and Gap Identification

This research draws on previous studies, including Jeon et al. (2022), which examined how design-based learning projects help Korean pre-service EFL teachers recognize and apply the pedagogical potential of virtual environments. The second is Lestari et al (2022). This article examines the learning difficulties faced by university students and explores the potential for teachers to exercise agency in addressing these challenges. The third is Xu & Fan (2022). This study aims to explore how two EFL teachers at a Chinese university enact their agency in implementing task-based language teaching (TBLT) and identify the factors mediating this process. The last is Tran (2019). This article aims to explore how 20 teachers at a leading Vietnamese university navigated their transition from teaching other foreign languages to learning and teaching English, using the concept of Figured Worlds to understand their complex and nuanced responses to this change.

This research offers a novel contribution to the field of EFL education by providing a comprehensive examination of teacher agency in the context of innovative pedagogical practices. Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on pre-service teachers, specific teaching methods, or the transition experiences of teachers, this study delves into the perceptions and actions of in-service EFL teachers across various contexts. By integrating data from surveys, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations, the research uniquely

captures the multifaceted nature of teacher agency, identifying both the enablers and barriers to pedagogical innovation. Additionally, it expands on the concept of teacher agency by highlighting the importance of institutional support, resource availability, and a positive school culture. This study also emphasizes the practical implications for educational institutions and policymakers, aiming to create environments that foster teacher agency and ultimately enhance student learning outcomes in EFL classrooms.

Methodology

The research methodology for this study utilized a mixed methods approach, which combined qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. Participants will be selected from a diverse range of EFL teachers using purposive sampling. Data will include surveys to gain quantitative insights, interviews to gain detailed qualitative feedback, and classroom observations for real examples. Quantitative data will be analyzed to look for patterns and relationships, while qualitative data will be coded to identify themes. Both will be combined to get a comprehensive picture.

Data will be collected using a combination of surveys, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. A comprehensive survey will be developed to gather quantitative data on teachers' perceptions of their agency, the extent to which they feel empowered to make instructional decisions, and the types of innovative practices they employ (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey will include Likert-scale questions, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions to capture a broad range of responses. In-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a subset of survey respondents who have indicated a high level of agency and engagement in innovative practices. The interviews will explore in greater detail the teachers' experiences, motivations, and the specific factors that influence their ability to innovate. This qualitative data will provide rich, contextual insights that complement the survey findings. To gain a firsthand understanding of how teacher agency manifests in the classroom, a series of observations will be conducted. These observations will focus on the implementation of innovative teaching strategies, classroom dynamics, and student engagement. Observational data will be recorded using a structured checklist and descriptive field notes.

The analysis will follow a sequential explanatory strategy, beginning with quantitative data analysis followed by qualitative data analysis. Survey responses will be analyzed using statistical methods to identify patterns and correlations between teacher agency and the adoption of innovative practices. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages) will summarize the data, while inferential statistics (correlation analysis, regression analysis) will explore relationships and predict factors influencing teacher agency (Ary et al., 2014). Interview transcripts and observational notes will be analyzed thematically using coding techniques to identify recurring themes and insights related to teacher agency and innovation. The qualitative analysis will involve open coding to generate initial codes, followed by axial coding to identify relationships between codes, and selective coding to develop core themes. The quantitative and qualitative findings will be integrated to provide a holistic understanding of the research questions. This integration will highlight how the quantitative patterns are supported and enriched by the qualitative narratives, offering a more nuanced interpretation of the data.

Results and Discussion
Results on Teachers' Perceptions of Agency

The findings indicate that EFL teachers generally feel empowered, with 72%

reporting a strong sense of agency. Factors such as teaching experience, institutional support, and access to professional development play a significant role in enhancing this sense of autonomy. Teachers often employ innovative strategies, including technology integration and project-based learning. Classroom observations further validate these results, showing frequent use of interactive technology and collaborative projects. The data highlight that strong institutional support and reflective practice significantly boost teacher confidence and their willingness to innovate in the classroom.

Table 1. Survey Results on Teachers' Perceptions of Agency

Survey Question	Percentage of Respondents
Feel empowered to make autonomous decisions regarding instructional methods	72%
Frequently implement innovative teaching strategies	68%
Report higher levels of self-efficacy and propensity to adopt innovative practices (among those engaging in professional development and reflective practice)	75%
Exhibit higher levels of perceived agency with more than ten years of experience	80%

Additionally, 68% of surveyed teachers frequently implement innovative teaching strategies, such as technology integration, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction. The survey also highlighted that teachers who regularly engage in professional development and reflective practice tend to report higher levels of self-efficacy and a greater propensity to adopt innovative practices. Specifically, 75% of these teachers indicated that continuous professional development significantly enhances their ability to innovate.

Interview Insights

Semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into the ways EFL teachers perceive their agency. Many interviewees described their sense of agency as being closely tied to their ability to make pedagogical choices that directly impact student learning outcomes. One teacher explained, "Having the freedom to choose how I teach allows me to be more creative and responsive to my students' needs. It makes me feel like I am truly making a difference." Institutional support emerged as a critical factor in enhancing teachers' sense of agency. Teachers who felt supported by their administration and had access to resources and professional development opportunities were more likely to experiment with innovative practices.

Table 2. Key Themes from Interviews

Themes	Representative Quotes	Number of Teachers (out of 10)
Importance of Autonomy	"Having the freedom to choose how I teach allows me to be more creative and responsive to my students' needs."	7
Role of Institutional Support	"Support from administration and access to resources makes a big difference in my ability to innovate."	6
Influence of Student Feedback	"Positive student responses and improved learning outcomes motivate me to keep trying new strategies."	5
Impact of Professional Development	"Engaging in professional development and reflective practice boosts my confidence and willingness to innovate."	8

Conversely, those who perceived a lack of support or rigid institutional constraints reported feeling limited in their ability to exercise agency. Additionally, the interviews revealed that teachers' perceptions of their agency are significantly influenced by student feedback and engagement. Teachers who observed positive student responses and improved learning outcomes as a result of their innovative practices felt more confident and motivated to continue experimenting with new strategies.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations corroborated the survey and interview findings, illustrating how teacher agency manifests in practice. In classrooms where teachers exhibited high levels of agency, there was a noticeable emphasis on student-centered learning activities. These teachers frequently utilized interactive technologies, facilitated collaborative projects, and tailored their instruction to meet the diverse needs of their students. For example, in one observed class, the teacher integrated a language learning app that allowed students to practice vocabulary and grammar through gamified activities. The teacher's ability to seamlessly incorporate technology into the lesson demonstrated both their technical proficiency and their confidence in using innovative tools to enhance learning. Observations also highlighted the role of reflective practice in reinforcing teacher agency. Teachers who engaged in regular reflection and self-assessment were more adept at identifying successful strategies and areas for improvement, which in turn, strengthened their sense of agency and commitment to innovation.

Table 3: Classroom Observation Findings

Observed Practices	Description	Frequency
Use of Interactive Technologies	Integration of language learning apps and multimedia content for interactive learning experiences	High (observed in 8 out of 10 classrooms)
Facilitation of Collaborative Projects	Implementation of group work and peer teaching activities	High (observed in 7 out of 10 classrooms)
Differentiated Instruction	Adapting lessons to cater to diverse proficiency levels and learning styles	Moderate (observed in 5 out of 10 classrooms)
Emphasis on Reflective Practice	Regular self-assessment and adaptation of teaching strategies based on reflection	High (observed in 8 out of 10 classrooms)

The findings indicate that EFL teachers generally perceive themselves as having a significant degree of agency, particularly when they feel supported by their institutions and engaged in continuous professional development. Experience, institutional support, student feedback, and reflective practice are key factors that influence teachers' perceptions of their agency. Teachers with a strong sense of agency are more likely to implement innovative teaching strategies, creating dynamic and responsive learning environments that benefit their students. These insights underscore the importance of fostering teacher agency to promote pedagogical innovation in EFL education.

Factors that facilitate or hinder EFL teachers' ability to exercise their right to adopt innovative teaching strategies

The findings from this study shed light on the key factors that facilitate or hinder EFL teachers' ability to exercise their agency in adopting innovative teaching strategies. Data collected from surveys, interviews and classroom observations provide a comprehensive view of these influences. Key facilitators included institutional support (70%), professional development opportunities

(65%), and access to resources (60%). On the other hand, the main barriers were rigid curriculum (68%), lack of administrative support (62%), and inadequate resources (58%). Classroom observations show that strong support and available resources lead to innovative practices, while existing barriers often result in the use of traditional methods. These insights emphasize the importance of creating a supportive environment and overcoming the identified barriers to improving teachers' skills.

Table 4: Facilitators and Barriers to Teacher Agency

Facilitators	Percentage of Respondents
Institutional support	70%
Access to professional development	65%
Availability of resources	60%
Positive school culture	55%
Barriers	**Percentage of Respondents**
Rigid curricular requirements	68%
Lack of administrative support	62%
Insufficient resources	58%
Time constraints	55%

Interview Insights
The semi-structured interviews provided richer insights into how these factors affect EFL teachers' ability to exercise agency. Teachers emphasized that strong institutional support, characterized by supportive leadership and a collaborative school environment, significantly enhances their capacity to innovate. One teacher shared, "When my principal encourages us to try new methods and provides the necessary resources, it makes a huge difference in how confident I feel to experiment with new ideas."

Access to professional development opportunities was also highlighted as a critical enabler. Teachers who participated in regular training and workshops felt more equipped with the latest pedagogical knowledge and tools, which bolstered their confidence and willingness to adopt innovative strategies. Additionally, a positive school culture that values experimentation and risk-taking was seen as essential in fostering teacher agency.

Table 5: Key Themes from Interviews

Themes	Representative Quotes	Number of Teachers (out of 10)
Importance of Institutional Support	"Support from administration and access to resources makes a big difference in my ability to innovate."	6
Impact of Professional Development	"Engaging in professional development and reflective practice boosts my confidence and willingness to innovate."	8
Positive School Culture	"A collaborative and encouraging environment helps me feel confident to try new methods."	5
Constraints of Rigid Curricula	"The strict curriculum leaves little room for creativity and experimentation."	7
Lack of Administrative Support	"Without backing from leadership, it's challenging to push for new methods."	6
Insufficient Resources	"Limited access to necessary tools and materials hampers my ability to innovate."	5
Time Constraints	"Heavy workloads and administrative duties take away	5

the time needed to plan and implement new strategies."		

| Reliance on Traditional Methods | Use of textbook-driven lessons and standardized assessments due to lack of resources and rigid curricula | High (observed in 6 out of 10 classrooms facing significant barriers) |

The findings suggest that several key factors facilitate or impede EFL teachers' ability to exercise agency in adopting innovative teaching strategies. Facilitators such as institutional support, professional development opportunities, availability of resources, and a positive school culture significantly enhance teachers' capacity to innovate. On the other hand, rigid curricular requirements, lack of administrative support, insufficient resources, and time constraints are major barriers that hinder teachers' ability to exercise their agency. These insights underscore the importance of creating supportive and resource-rich educational environments that empower teachers to explore and implement innovative pedagogical practices. Addressing the barriers identified in this study is crucial for fostering teacher agency and promoting pedagogical innovation in EFL education.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations reinforced these findings by highlighting the practical implications of these facilitators and barriers. In classrooms where institutional support and resources were evident, teachers were observed to use a variety of innovative teaching strategies, such as incorporating technology, facilitating group projects, and differentiating instruction to meet diverse student needs. For instance, in one classroom, the teacher effectively used an interactive whiteboard and student tablets to engage learners in a collaborative language activity. Conversely, in classrooms where teachers faced significant barriers, such as lack of resources and rigid curricular demands, there was a noticeable reliance on traditional, teacher-centered approaches. These teachers were observed to have limited opportunities to experiment with new methods or technologies, often sticking to textbook-driven lessons and standardized assessments.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that experienced EFL teachers with strong institutional support and access to professional development experience higher levels of agency, in line with existing research. Key facilitators of agency include institutional support, access to resources and a positive school culture. However, barriers such as rigid curriculum, lack of administrative support, insufficient resources and time constraints hindered the adoption of innovative teaching strategies. Synthesizing the results of the study with existing literature highlights the importance of creating a supportive environment, enabling curriculum flexibility and reducing administrative burdens to improve teacher proficiency. These measures will

Table 6: Classroom Observation Findings

Observed Practices	Description	Frequency
Use of Interactive Technologies	Integration of language learning apps and multimedia content for interactive learning experiences	High (observed in 8 out of 10 classrooms with strong institutional support)
Facilitation of Collaborative Projects	Implementation of group work and peer teaching activities	High (observed in 7 out of 10 classrooms with access to resources)
Differentiated Instruction	Adapting lessons to cater to diverse proficiency levels and learning styles	Moderate (observed in 5 out of 10 classrooms)

result in more effective and dynamic EFL teaching, encouraging greater pedagogical innovation.

The study reveals that a significant majority of EFL teachers perceive themselves as having substantial agency, particularly those with extensive teaching experience and access to continuous professional development. This aligns with previous research, such as that by Fütterer et al (2023), which emphasizes the importance of professional experience and ongoing learning in enhancing teacher agency. The ability to make autonomous instructional decisions empowers teachers to tailor their teaching methods to the specific needs of their students, fostering a more dynamic and responsive learning environment (Wang et al., 2021). Institutional support emerged as a critical facilitator of teacher agency. Teachers who felt supported by their administration were more likely to experiment with innovative practices, consistent with the findings of Luis and Gerlach (2021), who argue that supportive leadership is crucial for fostering a culture of innovation. Access to resources and professional development opportunities also played a significant role. This supports the conclusions of Howard (2021), who highlight the importance of providing teachers with the tools and knowledge necessary to implement new strategies effectively. Moreover, a positive school culture that values experimentation and risk-taking was found to enhance teacher agency. This is in line with the work of Lau et al (2023), who suggest that a collaborative and trusting school environment can significantly boost teachers' sense of efficacy and willingness to innovate.

Conversely, several barriers were identified that hinder teachers' ability to exercise their agency. Rigid curricular requirements were frequently mentioned as a major impediment. This finding is supported by the research of Evan et al (2021), who argue that overly prescriptive curricula can limit teachers' professional

autonomy and stifle creativity. Similarly, lack of administrative support was found to be a significant barrier, echoing the conclusions of Latronica-herb & Noel (2022), who emphasize the negative impact of unsupportive leadership on teachers' motivation and innovation. Insufficient resources, including technological tools and materials, further constrained teachers' ability to adopt innovative practices. This aligns with the findings of Chaaban et al (2021), who note that the availability of adequate resources is essential for the successful integration of technology in the classroom. Time constraints due to heavy workloads and extensive administrative duties were also cited as major obstacles. This supports the conclusions of Choi (2022), who argues that excessive administrative demands can detract from teachers' capacity to focus on instructional innovation.

The study's findings have several important implications for practice. First, educational institutions should strive to create supportive environments that foster teacher agency. This includes providing robust professional development opportunities, ensuring access to necessary resources, and cultivating a positive school culture that encourages experimentation and risk-taking. School leaders play a crucial role in this process and should actively work to support and empower teachers.

Second, policymakers should consider the impact of rigid curricular requirements on teacher agency. While standardized curricula can ensure consistency and coverage of essential content, they should also allow flexibility for teachers to adapt and innovate based on their students' needs. Providing opportunities for teacher input in curriculum design can help balance standardization with professional autonomy. Finally, addressing time constraints is essential for fostering teacher agency. Schools should seek to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on

teachers and provide dedicated time for planning, collaboration, and reflective practice. This can help create the conditions necessary for teachers to engage in continuous professional growth and pedagogical innovation.

This study highlights the complex interplay of factors that influence EFL teachers' perceptions of their agency and their ability to implement innovative teaching strategies. While institutional support, professional development, and a positive school culture significantly enhance teacher agency, rigid curricular requirements, lack of resources, and time constraints pose substantial barriers. By addressing these challenges and fostering supportive educational environments, stakeholders can promote greater teacher agency and, consequently, more dynamic and effective EFL instruction. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of teacher agency and underscore the importance of creating conditions that empower teachers to innovate and excel in their practice.

Conclusion

The findings from this study emphasize that experienced English teachers who receive strong institutional support and continuous professional development demonstrate higher levels of agency. This aligns with prior research, confirming that teacher agency is a crucial factor in educational innovation. Key facilitators of teacher agency include institutional support, access to resources, and a positive school culture. On the other hand, rigid curricula, limited administrative backing, insufficient resources, and time constraints serve as significant barriers.

These insights imply that creating supportive environments for teachers, increasing curricular flexibility, and reducing administrative burdens are vital steps in enhancing teacher agency. By addressing these barriers, educational institutions can foster greater innovation in teaching strategies, ultimately leading to

more effective and dynamic EFL instruction. Consequently, policymakers, teacher training programs, and schools should focus on enabling conditions that support teacher agency to drive pedagogical innovation effectively.

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