

Empowering English Language Teachers: Teacher Agency in Sustainable Professional Development in EFL Contexts

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Abstract: This study explains sustained professional development (PD) and the teacher agency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. From a sociocultural perspective, teacher agency is understood as a dynamic, context-dependent skill that enables educators to actively shape their professional development paths, overcome obstacles, and make informed decisions. This study employed a qualitative method and case study research design. Data collection techniques used semi-structured interviews, reflective diaries, and document analysis. It involved five EFL teachers in different senior high schools in Semarang Regency. Thematic analysis was conducted to examine how teachers participate in professional development programs. The results indicate that reflective practice, collaborative learning, and adaptive pedagogical decision-making, all of which support long-term and significant professional development, are ways that teacher agency is expressed. However, the exercise of agency is often mediated and occasionally hampered by institutional constraints, including top-down regulations and a lack of support. The study emphasizes the importance of providing context-responsive, encouraging professional development environments that enable educators to effect change actively. In addition to offering useful implications for teacher educators and policymakers in EFL contexts, this research advances our understanding of sustained professional development by emphasizing teachers' voices and experiences.

Keywords: EFL Context; Professional Development; Teacher Agency

INTRODUCTION

The importance of professional development (PD) in improving the quality of English language teaching has long been acknowledged. In English as a foreign language (EFL) context, PD is expected to provide teachers with the pedagogical knowledge, skills, and flexibility required to respond to the changing curriculum demands and to the needs of diverse learners. However, traditional PD models have been criticized for being top-down, standardized, and disconnected from teachers' lived realities, which limits their long-term impact and sustainability. There is increasing pressure from the academic community for a shift toward more teacher-centered and context-responsive approaches that recognize teachers as active agents in their own professional development. In this growing dialogue, the concept of teacher agency has become a significant construct for understanding how teachers engage in and change professional development practices (Cong-Lem, 2024;

Durmaz, 2024; Jia, Q. et al., 2025).

Teacher agency is commonly defined as the ability of teachers to purposefully make decisions, act, and influence within their professional environment. Agency is now widely conceptualized as dynamic, relational, and socially situated, shaped by interactions among personal beliefs, professional identities, and contextual conditions rather than as a fixed individual trait. Socio-culturally. Teacher agency is understood as a "mediated capacity to act" that emerges through engagement with social practices, institutional structures, and cultural norms. Agency is especially salient in EFL contexts, where teachers face complex educational reforms, policy constraints, and resource limitations. Research indicates that teachers with agency are more likely to engage in reflective practice, adapt teaching strategies, and continue long-term professional learning. Research, for example, reveals that teacher agency enables educators to navigate tensions between institutional expectations and pedagogical beliefs, thereby shaping their professional identities and career paths.

Furthermore, agency is strongly tied to collaborative practices, as teachers are increasingly embedded in professional communities to co-construct knowledge and respond to institutional pressures. Despite increasing interest in this area, several gaps remain in the literature. First, much of the research on professional development continues to portray teachers as passive recipients of training rather than active agents who shape and reinterpret their learning experiences (Hiver, P., et al., 2021; Priestley, M., et al., 2015; Yuan, R., & Burns, 2020).

Second, while some studies have explored the relationship between teacher agency and professional identity, the role of agency in sustainable professional development (i.e., continuous, meaningful, and contextually relevant learning) has been understudied. Thirdly, empirical research in EFL settings, especially in non-Western contexts, is limited, indicating the need for more context-sensitive investigations (Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, 2015; Heikonen, L., 2020; Leijen, Ä., Pedaste, M., & Lepp, 2020). Based on these gaps, this study investigates how English language teachers enact agency in their engagement with sustainable professional development. The study used a qualitative approach to explore teachers' lived experiences, decision-making, and contextual negotiations in their professional learning. This research emphasizes teachers' voices and perspectives to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of professional development as an agentic, situated, and transformative process.

Findings will help inform the design of more sustainable and empowering PD models that recognize teachers as not merely implementers of policy but as active agents of educational change. This study, therefore, makes a timely and innovative contribution to the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) by re-conceptualizing professional development (PD) through the lens of teacher agency. While previous studies have recognized the importance of PD in improving the quality of teaching, much of the existing literature still portrays professional learning as a structured, institutionally led process in which teachers are viewed as passive recipients of externally designed training programs. By contrast, this study supports a paradigm shift from compliance-oriented models of professional development to agency-driven models where teachers are understood as active, reflective, and context-sensitive agents of their own learning. This is consistent with the goal of the current study, which is to document how teacher agency functions in particular institutional

and sociocultural contexts.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the enactment of teacher agency in sustainable professional development (PD) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. The qualitative method is especially appropriate since it allows for an in-depth understanding of teachers' lived experiences, beliefs, and decision-making processes, which are essential to explore the complex and context-dependent nature of agency. Case study research is well known for its ability to explore contemporary phenomena in real-life situations where the lines between phenomena and context are not clearly defined (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2021; Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, 2021; Patton, 2015).

This is consistent with the goal of the current study, which is to document how teacher agency functions in particular institutional and sociocultural contexts. The constructivist paradigm that underpins the study holds that knowledge is socially created by interaction and interpretation. According to sociocultural perspectives, teacher agency is a relational, emergent phenomenon shaped by circumstances. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants, with a concentration on five EFL teachers who are actively involved in professional development initiatives. They are English teachers at an Islamic boarding school in Semarang city. Purposive sampling enables the selection of examples with a wealth of information that might offer profound insights into the research problem. Purposeful sampling is acceptable in qualitative research (Farrell, 2021; Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, 2021; Patton, 2021). Teaching experience, participation in professional development programs, and a readiness to critically evaluate professional practices are among the selection criteria.

To guarantee depth and reliability, data were gathered using a variety of qualitative techniques. Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data source because they allow participants to share their professional development experiences and how they exercise agency in their educational settings. They are especially useful for examining participants' viewpoints while retaining the flexibility to delve into new issues. Reflective journals were also used to record continuous teacher reflections, which shed light on how agency changes over time. It has been demonstrated that reflective writing facilitates the investigation of teachers' identity development and professional learning. A fuller understanding of the structural context affecting teacher agency is made possible by conducting document analysis of institutional resources, such as training documents and PD policies, to supplement these data. A popular method in qualitative research for finding, examining, and developing links between themes —especially regarding the ecological dimensions of teacher agency: iteration, practical-evaluative, and projective—is to start with open coding to provide initial categories. This is followed by axial coding.

Lastly, broad themes describing how teacher agency supports long-term professional development are developed through selective coding. Constant comparative analysis is employed throughout to enhance categories and ensure analytical rigor. Several strategies are employed to ensure the accuracy of the findings. Triangulation, which increases the validity of interpretations, is achieved by merging many data sources. Member checking entailed providing participants with preliminary results in order to confirm interpretations and ensure accuracy. An extensive description also provides in-depth contextual insights

that allow readers to assess the application of the findings (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2021; Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, 2024). Overall, this analytical method enables a thorough and nuanced study of teacher agency by conceptualizing professional development as a contextual, dynamic, and agentic process shaped by the interplay of individual, social, and institutional factors in EFL contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors implement teacher agency in sustainable professional development (PD). Four overarching themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the findings: (1) agency as self-directed and reflective practice; (2) agency through professional communities and collaboration; (3) negotiating enabling conditions and constraints; and (4) agency as identity construction and transformation. These themes, which align with the projective, practical-evaluative, and iterative aspects of agency, demonstrate the multifaceted and situational nature of teacher agency.

Agency as Reflective and Self-Directed Practice

The main results of the study are that reflective practice and self-directed professional development are powerful ways for teachers to demonstrate their agency. Participants frequently mentioned reflection as a way to assess and enhance their teaching methods. Formal evaluation was not the only way reflection occurred; it also occurred informally through peer interactions, everyday classroom experiences, and introspection.

A participant observed: "I carefully consider what worked and what did not after every lesson. That aids me in determining what I should do better the following time."

The practical-evaluative aspect of agency, in which educators make context-sensitive choices based on continuing classroom interactions, is consistent with this reflective approach. By actively seeking learning opportunities outside institutional professional development programs, such as attending webinars, using online resources, and engaging in individual study, teachers also exhibited agency. These behaviors show a move away from reliance on formal education and toward independent, long-term professional development. The repetitive nature of agency was further highlighted by the fact that participants' reflections were frequently shaped by their prior experiences. Teachers' current approaches were informed by their earlier knowledge, training, and cumulative teaching experience. This suggests that instructors' capacity to link what they have learned in the past with what they are doing now is a fundamental component of sustainable professional development.

These results bolster the idea that teacher agency is essential to attaining sustainable professional development in EFL environments and offer empirical support for the study's conceptual framework. In their professional development activities, EFL instructors exercise teacher agency. The results show that self-directed learning, reflective practice, and pedagogical adaptability are the main ways that EFL teachers enact agency. Reflection is a regular part of teaching, according to teachers, who use it to assess the efficacy of their classes and make decisions going forward. This reflection demonstrated continuous dedication to progress, as it was both immediate (after classes) and longitudinal (across

semesters). Teachers also demonstrated agency by taking advantage of opportunities for self-initiated professional development, including webinars, online teaching resources, and informal learning networks. These activities were frequently conducted outside institutional professional development programs, indicating that instructors actively constructed their own learning paths rather than relying solely on official training. Even within strict curriculum frameworks, teachers adjusted instructional methods, resources, and evaluation techniques to meet the needs of their pupils better. This suggests that agency is exercised through regular instructional decision-making and engagement in professional development.

Agency Through Collaboration and Professional Communities

The role of professional learning communities (PLCs) and collaboration in promoting teacher agency is another important subject. According to the participants, interaction with co-workers offered opportunities for idea sharing, knowledge co-construction, and emotional support. These cooperative activities boosted teachers' self-esteem and inspired them to try out novel teaching techniques.

As one teacher clarified, "Talking with co-workers opens my eyes to new ideas. "I occasionally implement their suggestions, and my class responds better to them."

The emergence of collective agency, in which educators collaborated to tackle common issues, was also made possible by collaboration. Common behaviors that supported ongoing professional learning included casual conversations, peer observations, and collaborative lesson planning. These results imply that agency is relational and socially mediated, arising through interaction with others, rather than being exclusively an individual phenomenon.

However, the degree of cooperation varied by the institution's culture. Teachers cited possibilities for meaningful engagement and excellent collegial relationships in supportive environments. On the other hand, collaboration was more restricted in more hierarchical environments, hindering the growth of agency.

Negotiating Constraints and Enabling Conditions

The results show that the interplay between enabling and restricting factors continuously shapes teacher agency. Participants noted several institutional limitations, such as strict curricula, top-down PD policies, uniform assessment systems, and little time for professional development. These constraints frequently hampered teachers' ability to exercise their agency fully.

A participant said, "The curriculum is very strict, so I have to follow it, but sometimes I want to try new methods."

Teachers showed adaptability and perseverance in the face of these difficulties by finding ways to overcome limitations. For instance, some participants incorporated cutting-edge teaching techniques into the required curriculum, while others sought external learning opportunities to compensate for a lack of institutional support. The practical-evaluative aspect of agency, in which educators make strategic choices under constraints, is reflected in these behaviors. The supporting agency was also greatly aided by enabling elements. Participants emphasized the value of a positive school culture, resource accessibility, and supportive leadership. Schools that valued teacher feedback and

promoted experimentation were more likely to promote agency and long-term professional development. Teachers felt empowered to take charge and participate in worthwhile professional learning in these situations.

Agency as Identity Construction and Transformation

Additionally, the study discovered a strong connection between professional identity development and teacher agency. Participants discussed how their participation in professional development shaped their objectives, values, and sense of self as educators. In addition to taking action, the agency involved developing into a particular type of educator.

One participant thought: "I see myself as someone who can create my own teaching approach, but I used just to follow the textbook."

The projective aspect of agency, in which educators envisage and strive toward their future professional identities, is reflected in this metamorphosis. Participants stated that they wanted to develop into more creative, student-centered, and thoughtful professionals. These forward-thinking objectives drove their ongoing commitment to professional growth. Contextual elements such as cultural norms and institutional expectations also influence identity construction. Teachers' agentic behavior was formed by the conflicts they frequently had to resolve between their personal convictions and outside expectations. This demonstrates how agency and identity interact dynamically, always influencing and reshaping one another.

The present study aimed to explore the enactment of teacher agency in sustainable PD in EFL contexts. The findings reveal that teacher agency is central to professional learning and, consequently, the motivation behind ongoing, meaningful, and contextually responsive development. The results, viewed from sociocultural and ecological perspectives, contribute to current debates in ELT by indicating that professional development is most effective when teachers are not seen as passive recipients but as active agents. First, the results confirm the enactment of teacher agency via reflective and self-directed practices, adding support to the existing literature that highlights reflection as a foundation of professional development (Farrell, 2021; Liu, Y., Xu, Y., & Zhang, 2023; Tao, J., & Gao, 2022).

All things considered, the results show that teacher agency in sustained professional development is a complex and situation-specific phenomenon. While being mediated by institutional and social variables, agency is implemented through reflective practice, teamwork, and flexible decision-making. The findings also demonstrate how agency is temporal, incorporating previous experiences, current behaviors, and future goals.

Crucially, sustainable professional development arises as a continuous, self-directed, and socially rooted process rather than as a result of formal training alone. Even in the face of limitations, teachers who actively exercise agency are more likely to engage in meaningful, ongoing professional growth. On the other hand, settings that restrict teacher autonomy and involvement may impede the development of agency and reduce the effectiveness of professional development programs.

The results show that teacher agency is very temporal, influenced by prior experiences, current circumstances, and future objectives. Teachers' current methods were guided by their personal ideas, cumulative classroom experience, and earlier training (past-oriented dimension). These encounters provided a basis for professional judgment and decision-

making. In the current setting, institutional realities such as workload, curriculum requirements, and resource availability affected the agency. Teachers demonstrated they could make context-specific decisions, frequently striking a balance between institutional requirements and their educational convictions. This illustrates how teachers actively negotiate limitations in real time, reflecting the practical-evaluative aspect of agency.

Aspirations for the future were equally important. Teachers stated that they wanted to grow professionally, become more creative, and increase student involvement. These goals influenced their career decisions and drove their ongoing participation in professional development. This emphasizes the projective dimension, in which imagined career futures motivate agency.

This implies that the degree to which teachers feel empowered to guide their own learning is directly related to sustainability. The results demonstrate the tight relationship between professional identity development and teacher agency. Teachers' sense of self as introspective, flexible, and independent professionals grew through their participation in professional development. Teachers were able to take a more active role in developing their teaching methods thanks to agency. Participants talked about changes in their identities, such as growing more self-assured when trying out new techniques or taking the effort to learn professionally. These shifts were frequently gradual and impacted by both individual experiences and external circumstances. Teachers who demonstrated agency were more likely to see themselves as change agents with the power to impact their classes and, in some situations, their institutions. Concurrently, identity creation entailed resolving conflicts between individual convictions and societal norms. Teachers frequently had to strike a compromise between their obligation to adhere to institutional rules and their desire for innovation. This dynamic process demonstrates how identity and agency are mutually reinforcing, both influencing and being influenced by one another (Liu, D., & Xu, 2021; Tao, J., & Gao, 2022; Van der Heijden, H. R. M. A., 2021).

The results show that teacher agency is a multifaceted, contextually mediated, and temporal process. It is shaped by a complex interaction of social, structural, and human elements and is implemented through reflective practice, teamwork, and flexible decision-making. Teachers' active participation, rather than external directives, drives the emergence of sustainable professional development as an agentic, continuous process. These findings support the main claim that, to achieve significant and long-lasting professional development in EFL contexts, instructors must be empowered through agency.

The study identified a variety of enabling and limiting elements that affect the implementation of teacher agency. Collaborative environments were among the most important enabling factors. Higher levels of professional development (PD) involvement were reported by teachers who had access to professional learning communities (PLCs) and supportive peers. Working together made it easier to share ideas, solve problems, and provide emotional support—all of which enhanced agency. Another important enabling aspect that surfaced was supportive leadership. Schools that promoted teacher autonomy, creativity, and input fostered an environment where agency could thrive. Teachers' capacity to participate in ongoing development was further aided by their access to resources, such as instructional materials and chances for professional growth. (Huang, J., & Benson, 2022; Li, 2022; Teng, 2021).

On the other hand, several limitations were identified. Restrictive curricula, top-down

professional development plans, and standardized evaluation systems restricted teachers' flexibility and autonomy. Time restraints and demanding workloads also diminished opportunities for significant professional learning. Despite these difficulties, many educators showed resilience by coming up with different ways to exercise agency, such as adjusting to limitations or seeking external learning opportunities.

Instead of viewing sustainable professional development as a sequence of discrete training sessions, teachers in this study saw it as an ongoing, self-directed, and contextually relevant activity. They stressed that real professional development happens when it is sensitive to students' needs and closely related to classroom practice. In this structure, agency was crucial. PD was more likely to be continuing and transformative for teachers who actively participated in reflection, teamwork, and autonomous learning. Instead of adhering to institutional rules, sustainable PD was defined by consistency, relevance, and personal ownership. The participants also emphasized the significance of intrinsic motivation in maintaining professional learning. Over time, teachers who believed that they were in charge of their own development were more dedicated to participating in professional development.

In this study, teachers engaged in ongoing critical reflection to assess their teaching and inform future practice. This is consistent with the practical-evaluative dimension of agency (Cross, R., & Hong, 2022; Wang, T., & Zhang, 2021; Xu, Y., & Long, 2020), which pertains to teachers' decisions within their immediate classroom realities. Contrary to traditional PD models that focus on knowledge transmission, these findings show that sustainable professional learning results from continuous cycles of reflection, action, and adaptation. This supports the argument that PD needs to be embedded in the day-to-day practices of teachers, rather than being limited to formal training sessions. Second, the study underscores the significance of collaboration and social interaction for teacher agency.

Teachers participating in professional learning communities and collegial networks were more involved in PD, supporting the notion that agency is not just individual but relational and socially mediated. This finding aligns with sociocultural perspectives in which learning is understood as participation in shared practices (Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, 2020). In collaborative environments, teachers could share experiences, co-construct knowledge, and get emotional support, leading to increased individual and collective agency. However, the uneven access to such environments at institutions points to the importance of schools actively fostering collaborative cultures that facilitate ongoing professional learning. Thirdly, the findings indicate that teacher agency is constantly negotiated in enabling and constraining conditions. Institutional factors, such as rigid curricula, top-down policies, and limited resources, frequently constrained teachers' agency. This is consistent with the ecological perspective of agency proposed by (Burns, A., & Lawrie, 2020; Li, M., & De Costa, 2021; Miller, E. R., & Gkonou, 2021; Zhang, L. J., & Zhang, 2022; Zheng, Y., & Gao, 2022), who underline that agency is actualized through engagement with structural and cultural contexts. Crucially, the study demonstrates that teachers are not simply constrained by these factors, but negotiate and adapt to them. For example, teachers adapted their practices within curricular boundaries or sought learning opportunities beyond, demonstrating resilience and strategic action. This finding challenges deterministic views of structure and highlights the transformative potential of teacher agency even in restrictive settings. Fourth, the study adds to the literature by linking

teacher agency with sustainable professional development. Participants experienced PD as a continuous, self-directed, and contextually embedded process rather than as discrete training events.

This is in line with emerging views of sustainable PD as sustained engagement, relevance, and teacher ownership (Darling-Hammond, L., et al., 2020; Nguyen, H. T. M., & Bui, 2022; Yazan, B., & Rudolph, 2021). The results show that sustainability is more about how empowered teachers are to take ownership of their learning than the length of PD programs. In this sense, agency is the key mechanism for transforming PD from a compliance-based activity into an effective and lasting practice. Finally, the study highlights the close relationship between teachers' agency and professional identity. Teachers who participated in PD noted changes in their perceptions of themselves as reflective practitioners, innovators, and agents of change.

This is consistent with identity-based perspectives that view professional development as a process of becoming rather than merely acquiring skills. The findings also indicate that identity construction is influenced by both individual aspirations and contextual constraints, further supporting the notion that agency and identity are mutually constitutive. The teachers' projective dimension (future-oriented goals) was essential to their engagement in PD, indicating that promoting positive professional identities can lead to long-term development. Overall, this study contributes to knowledge of professional development in ELT from an agency-centered and contextually situated perspective. It challenges traditional top-down models and points to the need for PD approaches that are flexible, collaborative, and responsive to teachers' lived realities. These results have important policy and practice implications.

To facilitate teacher agency, institutions should go beyond standardized training and implement measures such as granting autonomy, promoting teamwork, and acknowledging teachers' knowledge. PD activities are unlikely to have a long-lasting effect without such assistance. In summary, this study shows that teachers voluntarily create sustained professional growth through their agentic involvement with practice, context, and community rather than having it imposed from the outside. This study advances a more complex and empowering understanding of professional learning in EFL contexts by emphasizing teacher agency.

CONCLUSION

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology, drawing on sociocultural and ecological perspectives, to investigate how teacher agency is enacted in sustained professional development (PD) within EFL contexts. The results show that meaningful and long-lasting professional learning is greatly influenced by teacher agency. Teachers in this study actively advanced their professional growth through reflection, self-directed learning, collaboration, and adaptable pedagogical methods, rather than being passive recipients of externally designed training. The study's main finding is that agency is a fundamental component of sustainable professional development. It results from teachers' continuous interaction with their practice, peers, and institutional environments, rather than from one-time workshops or top-down initiatives.

Teachers who exercised agency were more likely to maintain a long-term commitment to professional development, participate in ongoing learning, and adapt to classroom

obstacles. This result highlights the significance of moving away from compliance-driven professional development methods and toward teacher-centered, context-responsive strategies that acknowledge educators as active decision-makers. Additionally, the study emphasizes how teacher agency is dynamically negotiated and mediated by circumstance. Curriculum policies, leadership styles, and resource availability are examples of institutional frameworks that can either facilitate or impede the exercise of agency. Nonetheless, educators demonstrated the ability to overcome limitations and provide learning opportunities even in restrictive settings. This emphasizes how agency is ecological, with social and structural factors interacting with personal intentions.

As a result, supportive workplaces that encourage independence, teamwork, and creativity are just as important to sustainable professional development as motivated educators. The connection between professional identity and teacher agency is another significant finding. The results show that instructors start to regard themselves as reflective practitioners and change agents when they participate in agentic activities. Their dedication to professional growth is further strengthened by this identity change, which establishes a cycle in which identity and agency constantly influence one another. Thus, maintaining long-term involvement in PD requires cultivating positive professional identities. By offering a comprehensive, context-based explanation of how teacher agency functions within sustainable professional development, this study contributes to the field of ELT.

By combining sociocultural theory, ecological models of agency, and qualitative insights into teachers' lived experiences, this study fills theoretical and empirical gaps. The study highlights the importance of creating professional development programs that are adaptable, collaborative, and responsive to teachers' needs and circumstances. It also provides useful implications for policymakers and educators. This study has certain drawbacks, however. The results' applicability may be limited by the study's concentration on a small sample size and certain institutional contexts. To better investigate the connection between teacher agency and professional development, future research could build on this study by using diverse contexts, longitudinal designs, or mixed-methods approaches. This study concludes by confirming that achieving lasting, transformative professional growth requires empowering English language instructors to exercise agency. ELT can advance toward more inclusive, flexible, and meaningful forms of professional development by placing teachers at the center of their own learning.

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