HOW INDONESIAN NOVICE EFL TEACHERS BUILD AGENCY:
INSIGHTS FROM A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Teacher agency has become an essential focus in understanding how teachers navigate instructional demands and professional challenges. This study investigates the agency of Indonesian novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers by examining four core properties of human agency as proposed by Bandura: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and scenario-based vignettes involving three novice English teachers in Banyumas. The data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) interactive model, which involved data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing. These findings demonstrate that Indonesian novice EFL teachers exhibit all four core agency properties, intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness, which are reflected in their classroom practices in varying degrees. While all participants expressed strong intentionality, their enactments of the other properties were predominantly reactive, shaped by immediate classroom challenges such as limited resources and low students' motivation. The findings contribute to developing contextually informed teacher education by highlighting the complex interaction between personal goals and external demands in shaping agency. The study highlights the need for structured support and professional mentoring to help novice teachers strengthen their agency and transition toward more proactive and sustainable teaching practices.

Keywords: *Case Study, EFL, Novice Teacher, Teacher Agency*

INTRODUCTION

The early stages of a teaching career play a crucial role in shaping teachers' future self-efficacy, retention, and performance (Feryok, 2012). Given this impact, teacher educators need to develop a deep understanding of novice teachers' agency and how they navigate classroom challenges (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014). Teacher's agency is a concept that emphasizes the importance of teachers being proactive and flexible in their approach, which can significantly impact their overall success in the classroom (Nezhad & Stolz, 2024)It is often seen as a critical element influencing how well teachers can adjust to new environments, tackle challenges that arise in their work, and meet their goals and expectations. (Keiler, 2018). The concept of teachers' agency derives from social constructivism, which asserts that

it develops through teachers' simultaneous practices and social interactions within their environment (Aljohani, 2017). As note, professional agency involves individuals or groups influencing their work, making decisions, and taking stances that shape their professional activities and identities. When teachers truly exhibit agency, they are empowered, having the voice and autonomy to navigate and direct their daily professional practices effectively (Eteläpelto et al., 2014).

In recent years, teachers' agency has become increasingly recognized as a crucial education component. Since it involves a wide range of aspects related to a teacher's job, multiple researchers have examined it from various perspectives, resulting in a wide range of interpretations found in the literature. Several studies indicate that teacher's agency in relation to language policy reflects a complex interplay between educational frameworks and teachers' professional autonomy. Dhammarungruang (2020), Landim (2024), Putri & Budiharjo (2024) highlighted how teacher's agency within language policy frameworks in Indonesia, Brazil, and Thailand is shaped by contextual factors such as curriculum adaptation, critical perspectives, and institutional culture, underscoring the need for broader research participation and a deeper understanding of these influences. Additionally, studies by Banegas et al., (2024), Cong-Lem (2024), González & Calle-Díaz (2023) demonstrated that a teacher's agency, influenced by personal beliefs and institutional support, significantly shapes curriculum development, highlighting the importance of professional development in fostering effective educational practices.

Bandura (2001) also highlighted that acting as an agent affects not only one's actions but also their surroundings. Essentially, agency concerns the inherent human capability to take meaningful action in their lives and environments. Several experts have also discussed the interplay of environmental, personal, and behavioral contextual factors in-depth, providing valuable insights into their roles (Vasquez et al., 2019; Whittington, 2015; Zheng, 2021). There is a reciprocal and dynamic relationship between an individual's personal factors, their behavior, and the environment in which they operate. The influence and intensity of these contextual factors continuously shift over time. In this interplay, teachers are not only shaped by change but can also act as active agents in driving it (Jenkins, 2020b).
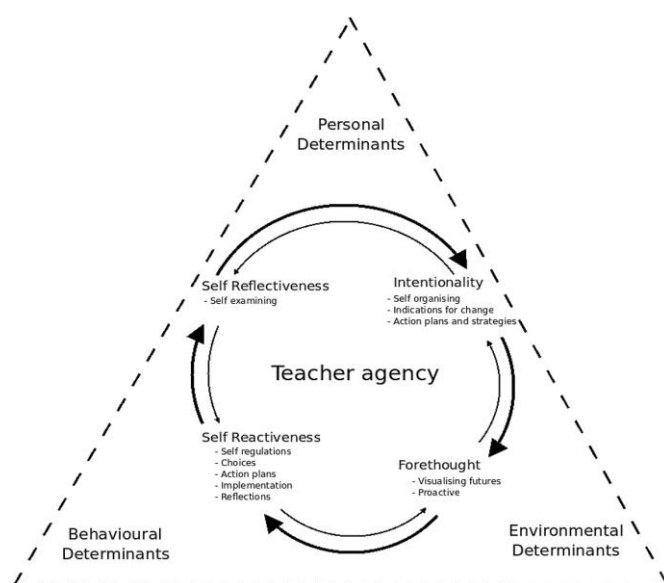
Figure 1 The Triadic Reciprocal Framework
Core Agency Concept (TRFCAC)

The relationship between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors in individuals' lives and workplaces is dynamic and interconnected, with contextual factors continuously evolving in their influence (Jenkins, 2020b). However, limited scholarly attention has been given to how Indonesian novice EFL teachers enact the core properties of agency during the initial stages of their professional practice, as existing studies predominantly focus on experienced teachers or broader policy frameworks. This study addresses this gap by examining how beginning teachers negotiate intentionality, planning, responsiveness, and reflection within authentic classroom contexts. Its novelty lies in revealing the subtle variations in agency development among early-career teachers, underscoring the importance of understanding these early trajectories to inform the design of supportive professional environments.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

The data for this study were gathered from three primary sources: informants, events, and documents. The informants were novice EFL teachers selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of participants who could offer relevant insights into the research problem (Creswell, 2014). These participants, representing different educational institutions and backgrounds,

volunteered to share their experiences and perspectives. While the use of pseudonyms helps protect participants' identities, it has also been critiqued as potentially paternalistic and ethically complex (Itzik & Walsh, 2023). In addition to interviews with these teachers, events such as classroom teaching sessions were observed to obtain a contextual understanding of their agency in practice. These events, bounded by time and activity, were explored in depth using sustained observation and multiple data collection methods (Creswell, 2014). The final source of data was documents. The documents in this study consist of teachers' vignettes. These vignettes serve as brief narrative descriptions written by the teachers to illustrate specific teaching experiences, classroom events, or instructional decisions they have encountered

Method

Using a case study design, this study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the agency of novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesia. A case study was deemed suitable as it allows for an in-depth investigation of the "how" and "why" questions in a real-life setting (Yin, 1994, 2015). The focus was on understanding the variations of agency properties expressed by novice teachers, particularly in schools located in Banyumas, Indonesia. The study involved three novice EFL teachers with varying levels of experience: two females and one male, aged 24-25. Their teaching experiences ranged from 10 months to over a year. The participants were selected purposefully based on their teaching environments, which included secondary and senior high schools, to offer diverse insights into novice teachers' agency. The selection process ensured that the participants' experiences would provide a rich understanding of the research objectives.

Table. Participant Demographics

Participants (pseudonyms)	Gender	Teachers' Age	Teaching Experience	Teaching hours/ week	Educational background	Teaching Level
Nadia	Female	25	2 Years 4 Months	9 Hours	EED Bachelor	Highschool
Martin	Male	24	1 Year 8 Months	21 Hours	EED Bachelor	Highschool

Rani	Female	25	1 Year 2 Months	12 Hours	EED Bachelor	Highschool

RESULTS

Intentionality

All three novice English teachers' stated goals in teaching reflect their intentionality and become the source of their motivation to engage in classroom practices. The findings from interviews and vignettes revealed that all participants demonstrated intentionality, as reflected in several core teaching goals: transferring their knowledge to students, shaping students' character and developing their potential, and increasing their knowledge through the teaching process. These goals motivate the teachers to keep teaching enthusiastically, especially when students' progress from not understanding to understanding, which they consider a meaningful and rewarding outcome. Thus, supporting students' understanding of the material is a significant source of their intrinsic motivation.

One of the stated purposes expressed by the novice English teachers in this study is the intention to deliver knowledge to their students. This theme relates to intentionality, which refers to a teacher's conscious aim in carrying out professional tasks. In the interview data, all participants mentioned teaching goals centered around sharing or conveying the knowledge they have acquired. This recurring theme indicates that the participants see teaching as a process of passing on information. Their statements suggest that transferring knowledge is one of their primary considerations when planning or carrying out instruction. The data did not show significant variation among the participants in this regard; all three highlighted the same instructional aim.

Another intention mentioned by two participants is the goal of shaping students' character and developing their potential. This theme also reflects the element of intentionality, as it involves a deliberate purpose beyond academic instruction. In this context, the teachers associated their role with content delivery and moral and personal development. They referred to their desire for students to become competent individuals who can contribute positively to society. This theme

did not appear in all participants' responses; only two explicitly mentioned this aspect.

One participant identified another purpose in teaching, which is increasing personal knowledge. This reflects intentionality directed toward the teacher's own professional growth. The teacher reported that teaching provides opportunities to update knowledge, primarily through students' inquiries and peer interaction. This theme also emerged in the participant's vignette, where she described building professional networks and learning through discussion with other English teachers. The other participants did not share this intention, suggesting a variation in how intentionality is directed, some focusing on student-centered outcomes, others also include personal development.

The findings indicate that while all participants expressed intentions related to knowledge delivery and student comprehension, there were differences in additional intentions such as shaping students' character or pursuing personal knowledge development. These differences suggest variations in how intentionality is manifested in early teaching experiences. Based on Huang (2021) framework, the participants in the study demonstrate different intentionality variations. Rani displays proactive intentionality, characterized by self-initiated learning and professional engagement through peer collaboration. The other two participants, Martin and Nadia exhibit reactive intentionality, as their actions are primarily driven by contextual demands and students' needs, without clear evidence of self-directed change. None of the participants showed signs of passivity, indicating that all maintained some motivation and purposeful engagement in their teaching practice.

Forethought

All three novice English teachers in this study expressed clear anticipations about what they hoped to achieve in their teaching, particularly related to student learning. These anticipations reflect the property of forethought, which involves setting goals and anticipating the outcomes of one's actions.

The participants in this study demonstrated forethought with varying expressions of reactive agency. Their hopes focused on ensuring students understand what is being taught, encouraging students to apply knowledge and read

English texts correctly, and discovering students' interests and talents. Furthermore, these hopes guided their lesson planning, which involved designing varied lesson plans with appropriate materials and methods and creating a positive and supportive learning environment. This shows how their forward-looking mindset shapes their teaching goals and their strategies to achieve them.

One of the most frequently mentioned is their hope that students fully understand the material. This theme appeared across the interviews of all three participants. Their comments indicate that their teaching is guided by the intention to make learning meaningful and to ensure that students genuinely grasp the lesson content. This reflects their forward-thinking mindset, as they plan and deliver lessons to enhance students' comprehension. In addition to comprehension, the teachers also hoped their students could apply the knowledge in authentic contexts. They emphasized the importance of students accurately reading English texts. and using the knowledge they gained in practical ways. This indicates a long-term vision of students' development, aiming for academic success and functional language use.

Another theme, mentioned by Martin, is the hope that students will discover their interests and talents through the learning process. This suggests the teacher thinks beyond immediate instructional goals and is concerned with students' broader personal development. Although this theme appeared less frequently, it shows an awareness of the role of education in supporting students' individual growth.

Teachers' forethought, characterized by anticipatory thinking, also manifests in their planning of instructional strategies. All participants described how their hopes influenced their selected materials, methods, and media. For example, they designed varied and communicative lessons, used storytelling, and adapted materials to match the students' proficiency. This strategic planning was also evident in the vignette data. Martin, for instance, wrote about studying curriculum modules, identifying integration opportunities, and maintaining open communication to improve instruction. Similarly, Nadia simplified materials to ensure they were more accessible to students. These actions suggest deliberate efforts to align lesson planning with anticipated learning outcomes.

Finally, forethought was reflected in the way the teachers considered the classroom environment. One participant expressed the goal of being a good role model and fostering a positive and supportive learning atmosphere. This indicates that their anticipations also include emotional and social aspects of student learning, not just academic goals.

Based on Goller's (2017) framework, the participants in this study demonstrated forethought with varying expressions of reactive agency. All three novice teachers hoped students would understand the material, apply their knowledge, and engage meaningfully with English texts. These intentions shaped their lesson planning, use of varied teaching methods, and adaptation of materials to meet students' needs. For instance, Rani emphasized designing communicative lessons using relevant media and storytelling to enhance understanding. Nadia modified curriculum content to suit students' English proficiency, while Martin emphasized integrating available modules. Although Martin also mentioned helping students discover their interests and talents, and both Martin and Nadia emphasized the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment, these actions essentially responded to the students' conditions and institutional demands rather than self-initiated professional goals. As such, none of the participants demonstrated proactive forethought characterized by self-directed innovation or long-term strategic planning. Instead, their anticipatory actions reflect reactive agency, grounded in their commitment to students' learning but shaped primarily by contextual demands.

Self-Reactiveness

All three novice English teachers in this study demonstrated self-reactiveness as an essential component of their agency. This property reflects their ability to monitor and regulate their actions, particularly in anticipating and responding to disruptions or changes in classroom conditions. It highlights their preparedness to make deliberate instructional adjustments during planning to ensure effective teaching despite potential challenges.

All participants demonstrated self-reactiveness as an essential component of their agency. This property reflects their ability to adjust their actions thoughtfully in response to anticipated classroom challenges or changing

conditions. The participants' responses, drawn from interviews and vignettes, revealed their capacity to stay flexible, modify teaching strategies, and collaborate with others, when necessary, even before these challenges occurred.

One common characteristic observed across the participants was their tendency to remain flexible and responsive when anticipating disruptions or student disengagement. This theme appeared in both interview and vignette data, indicating that adaptability is a recurring aspect of how they will respond to classroom situations. For example, in interviews, Martin and Nadia described trying to remain calm and flexible when students lost focus or became disruptive. In the vignette data, both also explained how they handled continued behavioral issues by collaborating with homeroom teachers, guidance counsellors, or principals, and involving parents when necessary.

The participants also described their intention to adjust teaching methods and learning media to maintain a productive classroom atmosphere. This strategy was the second most commonly mentioned way teachers respond to classroom dynamics, following their flexibility and responsiveness. In interviews, Nadia mentioned shifting from lecturing to discussion or using pictures and videos to regain students' attention and support a conducive atmosphere. Similarly, Martin discussed using available materials like textbooks or PowerPoint slides when standard resources were unavailable. These responses showed their preparedness and capacity to adapt flexibly by using alternative strategies or resources when facing difficulties, demonstrating self-regulation and problem-solving skills. These actions highlight the teachers' active self-regulation and thoughtful adjustments to their plans, emphasizing their commitment to maintaining effective instruction despite classroom challenges.

In addition, one participant, Rani, mentioned engaging in continuous reflection to determine the most appropriate strategy to influence students' mindset. This showed a deliberate and continuous effort to evaluate and act on those evaluations by selecting and adjusting pedagogical strategies. Such responsiveness demonstrated proactive self-reactiveness, as the teacher took initiative to improve student outcomes through planned instructional changes.

Based on the analysis of the interview and vignette data, the participants demonstrated reactive self-reactiveness as an agency property. All three novice teachers described how they would adjust their actions in response to anticipated classroom challenges, such as student misbehavior, limited resources, or students' lack of focus. Although Rani mentioned a desire to find better strategies to change students' mindsets, her plan reflected a situational adjustment rather than a long-term, self-directed initiative. Therefore, the participants' self-reactiveness can be categorized as reactive, as their planned responses were more about reacting to possible situations rather than initiating sustained change.

Self-Reflectiveness

This section explores self-reflectiveness as a key property of agency demonstrated by novice teachers. It focuses on how they will assess the effectiveness of their teaching methods and how they will respond if the outcomes do not meet their expectations. These reflections illustrate their capacity to make informed judgments about their practice and to pursue continuous improvement.

All participants demonstrated self-reflectiveness as an agency property by critically examining their instructional decisions, student outcomes, and personal teaching experiences. This finding highlights their tendency to assess the effectiveness of their teaching through various forms of students' assessment, their awareness of the importance of adapting instruction to students' diversity, and their capacity to analyze the underlying causes of underperformance. Instead of simply reacting to outcomes, these teachers showed a disposition toward thoughtful reflection to evaluate the accuracy and impact of their actions. This reflective capacity fostered their ongoing professional growth, encouraged adaptive teaching practices, and enhanced their understanding of how to improve learning experiences for their students.

A frequently mentioned approach reflected the participants' tendency to use student assessment data to reflect on teaching effectiveness thoughtfully. All three participants stated that they would evaluate the success of their methods by observing how well students understood the material. Rani stated that if students can answer her questions correctly at the end of the lesson, she will consider the session effective. Martin explained that he will use practice exercises, daily tests,

and semester exams to assess learning. At the same time, Nadia said she will use various evaluation types, including portfolios and project-based tasks. Nadia notably emphasized the importance of evaluating performance, specifically whether students will be able to explain, apply, and relate the material to their own experiences. This indicates a reflective orientation toward interpreting learning indicators beyond simple test scores.

Another approach that emerged in the data reflected the participants' intention to analyze the causes of underperformance. Nadia mentioned that when student outcomes are poor, she will try to identify whether the issue lies in the difficulty of the content or her explanation. In the vignette, Rani expressed that she will use moments of self-doubt, especially when students perform poorly, as opportunities to reflect on her teaching and seek improvement. These statements illustrate the teachers' tendency to use reflective thinking to analyze instructional challenges and guide future decisions. Additionally, Nadia explicitly mentioned that she will use differentiated instruction when needed to meet individual student needs. This shows a reflective attitude toward student diversity, where instructional adjustments are made thoughtfully based on students' different levels of understanding.

Based on the interview and vignette data analysis, the participants demonstrated reactive self-reflectiveness as an agency property. All three novice teachers described how they would reflect on their teaching when faced with student-related challenges. Martin stated that he would reflect based on daily and semester test outcomes, particularly when students fail to meet expectations. Nadia said she would begin reflecting when students struggle to understand the material, leading her to adjust her teaching. Rani mentioned that she would reflect especially when students' performance raises concern or when she experiences emotional self-doubt. In all cases, reflection was triggered by classroom situations rather than initiated as part of a long-term, proactive improvement plan.

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that all three participants exhibited the four core properties of agency, though in varied ways influenced by internal motivations, school contexts, and available support. Intentionality emerged as the most

prominent agency property. All participants expressed clear teaching goals, including transferring knowledge, shaping students' character, enhancing their own professional competence, and ensuring student understanding. These intentions reflect Bandura's (2001) view that intentionality is a future-directed, purposeful state that guides human action. The participants' goals also align with Campbell's (2004) concept of moral agency, which emphasizes teachers' ethical and personal commitment to student well-being and societal contribution. This finding is similar to Teng's (2019) study, which found that teacher agency, autonomy, and identity are interconnected. Like Teng's participants, the teachers in this study viewed teaching as not only a professional responsibility but also a personal and moral mission. The participants also showed a desire for personal learning and development, for example, gaining new insights from student questions or professional conversations. This adds depth to the concept of intentionality by emphasizing its developmental and self-reflective aspects, in line with Priestley, M. et.al (2015), who explain that teacher agency is shaped by interaction between personal goals and institutional contexts.

Forethought was evident in how teachers expressed their hopes and expectations for student learning. Teachers wished for students to understand lessons, apply knowledge appropriately, and discover their talents. These anticipations guided lesson preparation and media selection. However, similar to what Nguyen (2022) observed, their forethought appeared short-term, primarily focused on immediate comprehension and lesson success rather than long-term curriculum goals. This reflects the typical thinking patterns of novice teachers, who often emphasize daily survival and effectiveness rather than broader educational trajectories. This short-term focus also aligns with Jenkins (2020), who found that early-career teachers frequently exhibit reactive agency, adjusting to situational demands rather than initiating broader, visionary changes. While the teachers in this study showed concern for their students' learning, they were not yet consistently translating forethought into proactive instructional planning.

Self-reactiveness was reflected in teachers stated flexibility and readiness to adjust plans based on real-time classroom conditions. In their vignettes and interviews, teachers discussed revising teaching strategies when students did not

respond as expected or when materials were unavailable. Bandura (2001) emphasizes that self-reactiveness involves regulating actions and making real-time decisions to stay aligned with goals. However, the evidence from this study suggests that their responses were often instinctive and unstructured, supporting Goller & Harteis (2017) concept of reactive agency, where teachers respond to challenges but do not necessarily implement changes strategically. This mirrors Eteläpelto et al (2015), who found that novice teachers often feel limited in social and structural domains despite having strong pedagogical intentions. In this study, limitations such as a lack of resources, unpredictable student behavior, and minimal institutional support restricted the teachers' ability to exercise agency proactively.

Self-reflectiveness was also found in how teachers evaluated their teaching performance and sought improvement. Teachers described moments of reviewing lesson outcomes and identifying weaknesses, which motivated them to seek new strategies, consult colleagues, or consider alternative methods. These reflections correspond to Bandura (2001) idea that agency includes evaluating the success of one's actions and adjusting future behavior accordingly. However, the depth of reflection varied. While one teacher provided examples of learning from feedback and applying it to improve instruction, others acknowledged the need to change but lacked confidence or clarity about how to do so. This finding is consistent with Wang (2022), who noted that novice teachers often operate at descriptive or surface levels of reflection. The findings also align with Philp-Clark & Grieshaber (2024), who argue that reflection becomes more transformative when supported by mentoring and aligned with teacher identity.

In summary, the interview and vignette data reveal that novice English teachers in Indonesia display all four essential aspects of agency. Nevertheless, their agency often remains reactive and is constrained by contextual difficulties, a shortage of professional experience, and inadequate support. Significantly, none of the participants exhibited passive agency; each one manifested a robust sense of professional responsibility and a willingness to develop.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the properties of agency among novice English teachers in Indonesian primary schools and how these properties are reflected in their teaching practices. The findings reveal that all four key properties of agency, intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness are present, though expressed in varying degrees and forms. Teachers consistently demonstrated strong intentionality through their stated teaching goals, including delivering knowledge, shaping students' character, and improving their own competence. Forethought appeared as short-term goal setting focused on student understanding and engagement, while self-reactiveness was evident in spontaneous adaptations made in response to classroom challenges. Self-reflectiveness was observed in their efforts to evaluate teaching outcomes and seek improvement, although the depth of reflection varied.

Overall, the findings show that novice teachers' agency is often shaped by external constraints such as limited resources, lack of mentoring, and challenging school conditions. As a result, all the participants, consisting of three teachers, exhibited a form of agency that tends to be reactive. This type of agency is characterized by teachers responding to situational demands and external constraints, rather than initiating deliberate, long-term pedagogical change. However, their strong personal motivation, flexibility, and desire for growth suggest a foundation upon which more strategic and empowered agency can be built. These results emphasize the importance of supporting novice teachers with structured professional development, reflective opportunities, and collaborative environments to help them strengthen their agency and become more confident, autonomous educators in the Indonesian educational context.

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