

Exploring English Language Teachers' Professional Agency: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The study explores English language teachers' perceived and enacted experiences of their professional agency in the educational environment in Nepal. Employing phenomenology as a research method and subscribing to the ecological model of teacher agency, this article strives to comprehend the lived experiences of four purposively selected participants from two colleges in Chitwan through in-depth interviews. The findings reveal the evolving nature of teaching, marked by the increasing use of technology in the educational environment. English language teachers shift to interactive approaches, such as discussion, group work, and the use of videos. During times of unprecedented challenges, teachers adapted through constant learning and making real-world decisions. It also portrays teachers as role models and agents of change, who have control over their own teaching and learning activities by making self-directed decisions about lesson planning, guiding learners, and ensuring timely course completion. The article implies that institutions can create an environment that empowers teachers, fosters professional growth, and enhances language learning outcomes. Concluding, empowering teacher agency can lead to more adaptive and innovative teaching and learning practices.

Keywords: English language teacher, professional agency, ecological model, teacher agency, phenomenology

Introduction

Teacher agency has emerged as a significant area for understanding how teachers navigate the complexities of their professional roles. It enhances the autonomy and capacity of educators to make informed decisions, act constructively, and purposefully, thereby paving the way for their professional growth. Moreover, it involves thinking differently to address the requirements, current priorities, and expectations for shaping the educational environment. This risk-taking

act, incorporating criticality and collaborative power, fosters learners' and young people's educational experiences and outcomes. This study aims to explore English language teachers' perceived and enacted experiences of their professional agency in the educational environment. In the context of Nepal, the exercise of professional agency is entangled with the complexities of limited resources, administrative support, peer collaboration, and mentorship.

Reflecting on our personal experience, we have adapted our teaching and learning techniques in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students began learning from online sources, such as YouTube and Google. We also began using new digital tools, such as laptops and PowerPoint, in the classroom. To keep students engaged, we continued using ICT tools. We did not have much knowledge about handling such digital tools. At times we have learned from our colleagues and also taken trainings for AI integration. That eventually helped us grow professionally. It was the moment of introducing creative teaching and learning and advocating for the change. However, at times we feel like in the name of reforming education through curriculum reformulation and restructuring schools, we have forgotten to cherish and challenge the human heart, which is the real source of good teaching. On the one hand, teachers have to adapt to the changing situation; on the other hand, they need to become responsible for students' social and emotional development while managing technology use and meaningful interaction with students. Teacher agency plays a crucial role in such context. Teacher agency refers to providing educators with the opportunity to make informed choices with the specific context of the classroom, students, and national dialogue about educational reform.

Several studies have been conducted on teacher agency. Bandura (2001), for instance, noted that self-reflectiveness is an essential element for exercising agency. Similarly, Yang and Han (2022) revealed that teacher agency has emerged as another crucial constituent in implementing identity-oriented English language education practices. External situations, such as institutional discourses, workload, school culture, and power relations, serve as both limitations and resources for their active teaching. Likewise, Chen and Zheng (2023) argued that women English teachers struggled and reshaped themselves in a changing curricular trajectory through their teaching innovations, thereby exercising professional agency. Neupane (2024) reported that although teachers face an identity crisis with the changing educational and professional environment, they navigate and establish their identities by actively participating in learning activities and engaging with others in society. Thus, rather than seeing agency as an inherent characteristic of educators, it is an emergent phenomenon developed through the interplay of their skills, available resources, and their working environment.

Similarly, Namgung et al. (2023) highlighted that the enactment of teacher agency and their epistemological liberation from constraints can be promoted through administrative support of affordances in professional practice. In the same vein, Min et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of a supportive and collaborative school culture, one that values individual teachers' beliefs, grants instructional autonomy, and encourages learner-centered practices to address the diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom. Likewise, Reichenberg (2022) noted that enactment of teacher agency is characterized by trust, choice, voice, and risk-taking, along with good relations with students and administrators. Teachers are not merely passive knowledge transmitters; they

are the agents who make positive contributions in their classrooms (Vu, 2020; Cong-Lem, 2021). Here, stressing the holistic vision, Biesta et al. (2017) stated that, from an ecological viewpoint, agency is not just something educators hold, but rather they achieve in environmental situations involving temporal and relational aspects.

Moreover, Priestley & Drew (2019) stated that teacher agency has gained more recognition in educational discourse for playing a significant role in shaping the evolving education environment. Their study, which employed interviews and observations of teachers, has demonstrated that their capability to shape the curriculum is fostered when they feel more confident through updated professional knowledge and skills, as well as an encouraging environment. Poulton (2020) highlighted how teachers' perceptions of what is practicable in their particular setting, as well as the availability of cultural, structural, and material resources, affect their agency. As impacting factors, opportunities for cooperation, decisions, and the availability of pertinent resources support the exercise of their agency.

Similarly, Sah & Li (2019) revealed additional difficulties and essential factors for teacher agency in the specific context of language instruction, particularly in English-medium instruction (EMI) classrooms, as policies have supported the use of other languages in these settings. They argue that, despite this, practice shows that translanguaging often negates the mother tongues of minorities, focusing primarily on English and a dominant national language. The socially built linguistic hierarchies and underlying language ideologies affect seemingly flexible language practices.

Thus, the teachers' capabilities and aspirations are always crucial because the achievement of agency is interconnected with the ecological conditions of their practice. However, unequal languaging practices are influenced by teacher preparedness and prevailing hierarchies. Similarly, an encouraging collaborative environment, a valued voice, and opportunities for self-reflection are essential. English language teachers navigate these empowering and constraining situations in their daily professional lives.

Research on teacher agency has been increasing. However, a notable imbalance exists in geographical differences. Fewer studies have been conducted in the context of Nepal. Therefore, there is a need to deeply comprehend the subjective lived experiences of how individuals negotiate and endorse their professional agency within their structural and sociocultural environment. This phenomenological study addresses this gap by emphasizing the essence of those lived experiences of English language teachers in Nepal.

Ecological Model of Teacher Agency as Theoretical Framework

The ecological model of teacher agency is a comprehensive approach that provides a complete view of understanding professional identity and autonomy within the context of the multiple interplay of environmental systems, ranging from personal to broader sociocultural contexts and policy levels. Mark Priestley, Gert Biesta, and Sarah Robinson developed the Ecological Model

of Teacher Agency by formally introducing it in their 2015 book, *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. This theory posits teacher agency as an evolving phenomenon that arises from the interplay of three dimensions: iterative focusing on teachers' lives and professional histories, practical-evaluative situated agency emphasizing cultural, structural, and material aspects, and projective agency, which stresses both short-term and long-term values and objectives.

Teacher agency is not an individual matter; rather, it is more connected to personal capacity, school culture, and policy constructions. Through the ecological model of teacher agency, this study assessed how ELTs negotiate agency within institutional limitations (Priestley et al., 2016). Reichaenberg (2022) also admitted that teachers have always had a significant relationship with administrators and students in their enactment of agency. Reichaenberg further focused on the role of their expertise, knowledge, and continual reflection in their capability to innovate, imagine, and adaptive power. Teacher agency refers to the actions that teachers take actively in response to the situations around them (Priestley et al., 2013).

This study, framed by the ecological model of teacher agency, explores not only the professional agency of English language teachers but also scrutinizes its implications for educational reform through teacher development. The study also contributes to the existing body of literature and unpacks the multifaceted nature of teacher agency in ever-changing educational settings. The following research question guides this study.

- How do English language teachers experience and describe their professional agency in the educational environment?
- What opportunities and challenges do teachers face in enacting their professional agency?

Phenomenology as a Research Method

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research approach, aiming to comprehend the lived experiences of participants. Phenomenology emphasizes that participants explore how they make sense of everyday life, but they do not just measure the phenomenon through the lens of its accepted reality. Phenomenological research enables researchers to immerse themselves in the experiences of participants within real-life college and classroom settings (Sohan et al., 2017). Eddles-Hirsch (2015) further focuses on hermeneutic phenomenology, as attributed to Heidegger, which is not based solely on participants' descriptions of the phenomenon; instead, the researcher attempts to make an interpretation of the data inferred from the lived experiences of participants. Gadamer was drawn to both Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenological approaches; however, he later followed Heidegger's idea by emphasizing language as a universal means of understanding phenomena and also formulated his framework for analysis. He developed a five-stage framework for data analysis, which was later refined into a step-by-step process. We employed the following nine steps in the data analysis process.

1. Selecting an appropriate open research question

2. Identification of pre-understandings
3. Gaining understanding through dialogue with participants
4. Transcribing or iterative reading or preliminary interpretation of the texts to assist coding/ identifying first-order (participant's perspective)
5. Identifying second order (the researcher's perspective)
6. Meshing those perspectives/themes are developed and confronted by the researcher-aggregation
7. Connecting the literature to the identified themes
8. Fusions of perspectives- critique of the themes/reporting final interpretation at point
9. Establishing trustworthiness

Participants

A sample size of three to ten participants is an appropriate number for a phenomenological study. We selected four English language teachers from different colleges in Chitwan, focusing on how they experience and describe their professional agency in the educational environment. All participants had more than five years of teaching experience. The following are the details of the participants, along with their pseudonyms.

Table 1: General Information of Participants

Bimala	Padam	Rabindra	Anu
38 years college lecturer has been teaching since 2067 BS with full dedication.	45 years old teacher has been teaching in college for two decades. In beginning five years he taught in private boarding school.	52 years old experienced teacher has been teaching in bachelor and master level for 26 years.	She is 36 years old who has been teaching in college for ten years. In beginning phase of her teaching career she taught in school level too.

Data Collection

We conducted interviews, obtaining consent from the college principals and all participants personally. They were interviewed at their convenience in a natural environment. While we were interviewing them, we recorded all the information on our smartphones. We interviewed each participant, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. This procedure was designed to confirm complete data collection and to capture any nuances in their responses. We also observed

the participants' language use during the interviews. Then we transcribed the data, preserving the originality of the lived experiences they shared. Similarly, we were aware of the information we gathered and analyzed to maintain quality standards, which is the process of evaluating the quality of the research work. This study addressed ethical issues related to participant consent, confidentiality, and transparency. To protect the identities of participants, we kept all required information about them highly confidential.

Data Analysis

Data analysis process was informed by the Gadamar's nine steps process. We maintained phenomenological rigor in collecting and interpreting qualitative data, ensuring the quality of the Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenological research. We analyzed the lived experiences of English language teachers regarding their professional agency through coding and categorizing similar patterns and characters. After that, we created themes from the research questions and the categories of participant responses. Then we linked those themes to relevant literature and the ecological model of teacher agency theory. The following sections discuss the perceived and enacted experiences of English language teachers' professional agency in an educational environment.

Findings and Discussion

Ecological Agency in Classroom Management and Adaptive Instruction

Teachers exercise their agency in the classroom through various methods, including interaction, reflective practices, and instant planning. Primarily, teacher reflection supports them to gain control of the classroom. Similarly, adaptive instruction is regarded as fundamental to teaching quality and student learning, where teachers adjust their instruction according to students' needs, interests, and levels of understanding (Hardy et al., 2022). One of the participants, Rabindra, stated:

I adopt teaching methods based on time, content, and context. I find that the Bachelor of Education course still follows a conventional pattern. However, Students wanted me to teach through videos and other interesting ways because students at the bachelor's level are accustomed to using modern gadgets. They even started their education with those gadgets. Now, in the class, they want to learn from the screen, but the syllabus is in the conventional pattern. That's why I often engage them in the class through the screen.

In many situations, teachers must make decisions independently, as they are fully responsible for all classroom activities. Teaching itself is a series of decisions that help students understand the lesson (Alonzo et al., 2023). Here, learners today want to "learn through screen" in the classroom, and such mindful use of screen leads to interaction and creativity. Teacher agency is shaped by the purpose of education, working environment, and professional competence (Leijen

et al., 2020). He is adopting teaching methods based on the time, content, and context, even through screen-based learning, although the syllabus remains conventional. This is an indication of the enactment of strong teacher agency. In the same line, Padam shared his experiences:

I often discuss solutions with students. For example, I talked about the nature of the course syllabus with master's and bachelor's level students and let them decide how we can handle it. Primarily, I create lesson plans and then, based on my experience, determine which option is best suited for the student level.

The teaching approach is connected to the iterational dimension of the ecological model of teacher agency in terms of professional competence, where the teacher selects 'the best fitted' teaching strategies for student level based on experiences, and also creates lesson plans. Furthermore, emphasizing the adaptive learning strategies, Bimala expressed:

Sometimes I am unable to manage my class according to the plan due to students' distractions. In such classes, I employ interactive methods. I often use videos from YouTube to present the topic, allowing learners to engage through such additions. Once I remembered I was physically ill when I entered the classroom, I asked them to write whatever they saw, felt in the class, and outside the class. They described it so well that it was the most effective class. I couldn't believe my eyes that they had such good writing. Even while I was teaching at the bachelor's level, I couldn't prepare properly for the subject New Direction. I was thinking of revising topics and entered the classroom, but all the students asked me to begin a new lesson. I did not even go through the vocabulary of the new topics; it was a matter of 2067. Mobile was not in excessive use. Immediately, I decided to engage them differently by asking them complex and unfamiliar keywords. Then, I wrote them on the board. Later, I assigned them as a reading assignment. I described some of them based on their contextual meaning.

According to the ecological model of teacher agency, teachers adapt their strategies to interact with students through the use of videos and other engaging activities. Although teachers face the problem of unprecedented illness and unpreparedness, the teacher acts within real-world problems and makes informed teaching decisions. Such a sense-making process is tailored according to the situation, which is the agentic role of teachers (Emans et al., 2024).

Professional Development as Situated Agency through Experience and Contextual Engagement

Professional development is an ongoing process that fosters individual knowledge, skills, and expertise in the educational field (Wallin et al., 2018). Learning from real-world challenges, adapting to new situations, and training are strong means of professional development. Bimala shared her experience:

As an English language teacher, experience has taught me a great deal. I often make an interactive class through discussion. The most important thing is my use of a sense of humor related to the context and content, which can really attract the students a lot. I engage students in many pair works. Over the years, my vocabulary has become strong. I have been more confident. I learned from my colleagues and students. Teaching various subjects across different faculties, I feel that my knowledge horizon is expanding.

Along with experience through the effective use of ‘sense of humor’ for teaching learning purposes, the teacher can enhance classroom climate and student engagement. Focusing on the personal factor of the ecological model of teacher agency theory, Bimala’s previous experiences have shaped her ability to engage in professional growth. In the same vein, Padam stated:

Mostly, I create lesson plans and enter the classroom. However, sometimes it doesn’t work. In such a condition, based on my experience, I choose the best-fitted option for students at their level and interest. As I become more experienced, I find it easier to handle a variety of situations in the classroom.

Based on the quotes, the teaching profession is learned through doing and gaining experience, which develops basic competencies (Kilic et al., 2021). Related to this, another participant, Anu, stated:

Teaching is influenced by experience. Handling new content and interacting with students comes quite easily to me. Now, either to lead them to the subject matter or to attract them to the lesson, Teaching is a good platform for learning itself. As a teacher, I learn from my students, college training sessions, and workshops. The most important part is that we are compelled to keep ourselves updated to exist in the teaching field for long time. Moreover, I believe I need to prioritize my students’ well-being and the advancement of my teaching profession.

In this regard, teachers learn the profession more effectively by experiencing it firsthand, which requires dedication and effort. Rabindra reinforced:

Teaching is influenced by experience. Handling new content and interacting with students comes quite easily to me. Now, either leading them to the subject matter or attracting them to the lesson is not new to me. Moreover, I remain friendly with students, focusing on both content and their interests. I always encourage students to speak up. I learn from pairs, colleagues, students, and the internet. To upgrade myself, I never miss the chance to attend training, conferences, and workshops whenever possible.

According to the ecological model of teacher agency theory, teachers who upgrade their skills through training, workshops, and conferences are associated with personal agency. Similarly,

maintaining friendly relations with students and colleagues demonstrates a collaborative approach to learning (Hagenauer et al., 2024). Such collaborative practice is related to social interaction. Teacher agency emerges in interaction with the environment rather than in seclusion.

Ecology of Teaching Amid Societal Expectations and Institutional Constraints

Society has always had high expectations of teachers, regarding them as role models and sources of knowledge. Bimala shared her experience:

Societal people believe that I, as a teacher, can motivate their children. I am often requested to counsel their daughter and sons in my surroundings. And in the institution where I work, there are projectors. However, sometimes students ask me, “Madam please let’s see the related videos of this topic” but there is no internet access. Even if I run it through hotspot it’s not always possible.

Limited resources are hindering the quality of education for stakeholders (Zickafoose et al., 2024). Many educational institutions still lack basic facilities, especially internet access, in this digital era, which hinders the creation of a conducive learning environment. Rabindra expressed similar thoughts:

Students are also social members. They should learn content and mannerisms; they should be responsive, and teachers are role models for their students; they are responsible for helping students become good citizens. Parents, the most responsible stakeholders in the education field, always expect teachers to prepare their children for the global market. However, our curriculum is not market-oriented. We must follow the curriculum and institutional guidelines to ensure timely course completion.

Teachers who have been engaged in the profession for a long time reflect on their agency in relation to past experiences, explaining how the curriculum has both prospects and limitations. Parents’ expectations, along with global needs, demand a curriculum that produces children for the global market. Focusing on professional responsibilities and external constraints, Padam stated:

According to the curriculum, I have decided to complete it on time by presenting myself with guidance in both group work and individual work. I prioritize my teaching itself. I create lesson plans to teach effectively in the class. My regular priority is my students, class, content, and curriculum. I have to meet society’s expectations that teachers are a source of knowledge and a role model for their children. After all, teachers are also members of society itself.

Teachers claim control over their own teaching and learning activities by making selfdecisions about lesson planning, guiding learners through group and individual work, and ensuring timely course completion. This shows teachers' exercise of personal agency. Another aspect of professional agency is influenced by the context in which teachers enact agency by prioritizing class, students, content, and curriculum. From the projective dimension of the ecological model of teacher agency, constant negotiation between autonomy and external constraints, as directed by institutional guidelines, is necessary to maintain effective teaching and learning activities. Teachers have exercised societal agency by ensuring that they are not just individuals, but active agents in the broader cultural and educational environment.

Technology Integration and Digital Preparedness in Ecological Agency

Educators need to integrate technology to achieve goals and engage learners effectively. Technology integration has become a fundamental part of the teaching and non-teaching practices of educators than ever before. Highlighting technology integration and coping with its hurdles in teaching, Bimala shared her experiences:

There are many challenges, especially regarding digital literacy, such as creating PowerPoint presentations in the early stages of their use. During the online class, I found it very difficult to use Zoom. Even the PowerPoint use was tough for me. I was "not updated" about using online and digital tools. I often asked seniors and even searched the internet about how to use it. However, the challenge and prospect of AI have now become dominant. I have been incorporating this in my teaching and learning activities.

Teachers must continually upgrade their skills and act as change agents, creating technology mediated learning environments that require digital literacy (Pathiranage & Karunaratne, 2023). Through the lens of the ecological model of teacher agency, Bimala attempted to enhance digital capacity through the support from seniors and surfing the internet. She has upgraded herself and been able to incorporate AI, which influences her agency. Similarly, Anu shared her lived experience:

I often use the mix method, but nowadays I prefer to use discussions and presentations through PowerPoint, sometimes incorporating videos and images, so that the classroom becomes more interactive and engaging. I try to incorporate videos from YouTube so that I can make my students more creative and engaged. I often incorporate new techniques into my lesson plans and encourage students to share their stories as well.

Like Bimala, Anu exercised her personal agency by managing a technology-driven learning environment using PowerPoint and videos from YouTube. Moreover, she employs reflective practices, sharing her own stories with others in the teaching and learning process. Such writing practices encourage teachers and learners to establish a significant connection between their real life experiences and theoretical knowledge (Suphasri & Chinokul, 2021). Rabindra reinforced what Anu shared when he narrated:

Sometimes I use GT method, mostly lecture method. At the same time, there is pressure, of course, to complete the curriculum on time. I often teach through videos and other interesting ways. In past years, obtaining information for students as well as teachers was too tough. Teacher was there to provide the information, but now resources of information are available anywhere. Information technology has made it easy for them to access a wide range of knowledge and ideas. I sometimes wonder what and how I taught at the beginning of my teaching years. Now I realize so many lacunas in those years. Every moment of my teaching career is changing.

From the situated agency of the ecological model, it is evident that teacher decision-making is adaptive in a digital environment. It has demonstrated the shift from the conventional Grammar-translation method to more dynamic techniques, including the use of videos and other engaging methods. There has been a sudden technological advancement, emphasizing collaborative learning to optimize educational outcome. Likewise, reflecting on past teaching experiences, the teacher realizes that lacunas show personal and professional growth and agency. Moreover, the expression “every moment of my teaching career is changing” indicates the lifelong learning process of education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, examining how English language teachers navigate agency within institutional constraints, this phenomenological study has demonstrated the dynamic and multidimensional nature of English language teacher agency. Along with opportunities of the growing emphasis on learner-centered pedagogy and encouraging environment of professional development, challenges such as societal expectation of ideal teachers and classroom, curriculum rigidity and variable access to digital resources affect in enacting teacher agency. Framed within the ecological model of teacher agency, the study clarifies that teacher agency is not merely an individual characteristic but is shaped by personal capability, sociocultural structures, and temporal conditions. Teachers’ strategies in classroom management and adaptive instruction reveal the active role of teachers in navigating pedagogical challenges by making moment-to-moment, meaningful teaching decisions. It replicates reflexive autonomy and context-driven strategic practices. Similarly, professional growth occurs through experiential learning and contextual engagement, which involve iterative negotiations between past experiences, present needs, and future goals. Likewise, teaching amid societal expectation and institutional constraints projects teachers’ agentic resilience. Additionally, technology integration appears as a compelling aspect of agentic engagement, where teachers navigate digital tools as a great support for differentiating instruction and reimagining classroom management by responding to learners’ changing needs. It implies that institutions can create an environment that empowers teachers, fosters professional growth, and enhances language learning outcomes. Empowering teacher agency can lead to more adaptive and innovative teaching and learning practices.

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