A Systematic Review of English Language Teacher Agency

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Abstract

This systematic review of literature aims to systematically investigate language teacher agency as the capacity of teachers to act purposefully to direct their professional growth, find solutions to educational challenges they face, and improve their classroom practices for the sake of effectiveness in the classroom. Four inclusion criteria were established before conducting the research. Only empirical studies published between 2000 and 2022, which were done in a context in which the instructional language is English, the articles investigating ESL/EFL student teachers’, pre-service or in-service teachers’ agency, and the ones investigating agency of teachers from non-English speaking countries were included. Piri database search engine was used for identifying published empirical articles for this systematic review. 410 studies to be eligible were identified, 67 articles were read, and 12 empirical studies met the inclusion criteria. The results showed that most of the studies have been done in a qualitative approach, and four out of 12 articles have adopted a CDST perspective, which is overwhelmed by non-CDST ones. This result demonstrates that the paradigm shift adopting a CDST perspective in applied linguistics research methods is in its infancy.

Keywords: Language teacher agency, complex dynamic systems theory, systematic review

INTRODUCTION

Scholars in teacher education are becoming more interested in teacher agency and its usefulness, yet the theoretical and empirical teacher agency studies adopting a Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) perspective is scarce. This novel inductive and dynamic perspective has recently been adopted by a growing number of studies although the majority of the studies use nonlinear, deductive, and reductionist perspective which ignore nonlinearity, focus mainly on direct cause-effect relationships, correlations, suggest hypotheses, and predict the outcomes. With this paradigm shift in consideration, the purpose of this systematic review is to foreground existing views of teacher agency and to synthesise elements that support or restrict teacher agency in English language education mainly from Complexity Theory perspective.

Language Teacher Agency

Teachers are seen more in relation to learners, but teachers are ‘agents in their own right’ (Kalaja et al., 2015). Emirbayer and Miche (1998) described the concept of agency as ‘slippery’, which causes confusion due to its multiple interpretations. Ruggles (2009) define teacher agency as teachers’ power, autonomy, or capacity in decision makings to make a real difference, to exercise leadership and to experience professional practice which could impact students’ outcomes. In addition, Wolfe (2019) defined it to be a teacher’s willingness and ability to take action and make changes. In the following years, teacher agency was defined as the ability of teachers to make informed classroom and professional development
decisions based on classroom needs, reflections, and considerations (Seipel et al., 2021). More contemporary definition of teacher agency was uttered by LaFrance and Rakes (2022). They defined it as the capacity of teachers to act purposefully to direct their professional growth, find solutions to challenges they face, and improve their practice. Additionally, Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2016) argued that critical incidents play an important role in shaping identity and making agency. They also found that the critical incidents in participant’s life capital enhance enacting agency on the way of reshaping identity. Therefore, it can be seen that, the concept of teachers’ agency has recently been a commonly studied research topic. Respecting this tendency of research, this study intends dig into the studies highlighting a paradigm shift in teacher agency research so that to add to the literature from Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) perspective. Agency is manifested in identity negotiations and active participation.

**Complex Dynamic Systems Theory/Complexity Theory**

The Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) was first introduced by Diane Larsen-Freeman in 1997. Larsen-Freeman was the first scientist to apply dynamic systems to applied linguistics, specifically second language acquisition, using a physical world analogy to focus on how components of the whole interact. Study of change is centralized in CDST, so it is a theory of change. Therefore, “change and emergence are central to any understanding of complex dynamic systems.” (Larsen-Freeman, 2015, p.11). As she adds, CDST is nonlinear, unstable and unpredictable, so it is chaotic. Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2019) argue that “Complexity Theory has ushered in a new way of thinking, challenging some basic conceptions about how scientific inquiry should be conducted” (p.1). This recent research paradigm called Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) emphasises the complexity and interdependence of language learners in their sociocultural and ecological environments. According to CDST, language acquisition occurs through self-organizing, non-linear processes in which a number of different, interacting elements interact and have an impact on language learners' behaviour. This method has been used to explore complicated phenomena in a variety of disciplines, including psychology, biology, and social sciences.

Since CDST gives a more thorough and holistic perspective on language learning and usage that goes beyond conventional approaches that consider language as a cognitive and individual phenomenon, it has becoming increasingly popular in applied linguistics. In order to fully comprehend the complexity of language learning, CDST emphasises the importance of the learner's ecosystem and social environment in language learning and usage.

The idea of emergence, which contends that the patterns and structures that appear throughout the learning process are a result of interactions between the system's components, is one of CDST's most significant contributions to applied linguistics. In their 2008 essay, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron stated that interactions between people, which are entwined with their sociocultural and ecological contexts, are where language learning arises. According to CDST, learning includes the interaction of many different elements and cannot be boiled down to a single cognitive level.

The CDST also contradicts the conventional wisdom that language acquisition proceeds in predictable stages by arguing that language learning is non-linear and unpredictable. According to a study by Lantolf and Thorne (2006) that examined the impact of sociocultural and ecological factors on language learning, the non-linearity of language learning emphasises that learning is dynamic and can change over time depending on the learner's sociocultural and ecological context.

By emphasising the complexity of the learning process and the creation of language structures and patterns, CDST provides a more thorough view on language acquisition and
use. This method makes an important contribution to the field of applied linguistics by highlighting the role that the learner's social environment and ecology have in language acquisition.

A Paradigm Shift of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics

In the past, primarily quantitative research methods such as controlled experiments, surveys, and statistical analysis were the mainstays of applied linguistics research methodologies. The emphasis was earlier on the formal and structural components of language. Those deductive and reductionist studies first put the theory on the stage and then do the research. During the analysis of the data, grounded theory and thematic analysis is adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Also, the outcomes of those studies were generalizable and predictable as they suggest hypotheses in the early stages of the research. But in recent years, the field has undergone a paradigm shift in favour of more qualitative and mixed-methods research approaches. These studies adopt CDST principles, which are inductive, open, adaptive, dynamic, but not static, sensitive to initial conditions. The dynamic processes, emergent outcomes, and the attractor states in the specific timescales are more considered. (Larsen-Freeman, 2017). Respecting these principles, there has been a sizable shift in favour of qualitative research methodology. In applied linguistics, the utilisation of complex experiences and observations has become more prominent. Additionally, researchers use more collaborative and participatory research techniques, benefiting from the insights of groups and people who are directly impacted by language use. The rising use of techniques like ethnography, case studies, and action research, which enable researchers to better comprehend the complex social and linguistic circumstances in which language usage occurs, is a reflection of this transition. It is also claimed that a number of factors, including a growing understanding of the significance of context in understanding language use, the increasing influence of critical and poststructuralist theory in applied linguistics, and a growing interest in mixed-methods research, have contributed to the shift towards more qualitative research. Before Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) asserted that there was a complexity revolution in applied linguistics, some examples of paradigm shift in language teaching had been given (van Lier, 2000; Kramsch, 2006). With the introduction of CDST to the literature by Larsen-Freeman (2017), the paradigm change became more visible.

As teacher agency is also complex, dynamic and the development of it is nonlinear, we adopt complex dynamic system principles in this study.

Overall, the paradigm shift towards a more inclusive and qualitative approach to research methods has improved our comprehension of language use across a range of contexts and populations. In line with the literature, the study aims to find answers to the research questions given below:

RQ1: How has teacher agency been theorised in the ESL/EFL education literature?
RQ2: What aspects of language teacher agency have been examined in empirical study articles, and how the number of studies are distributed between 2000 and 2022?

METHOD

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Prior to conducting a systematic search, four inclusion criteria were established to make sure that the identified articles were related to the objectives of this study. The first inclusion criterion was that the articles had to be empirical studies published between 2000 and 2022. So, the theoretical papers drawing on phenomenology, other systematic reviews, meta-analyses, master's dissertations and doctoral theses were excluded. There are two reasons for deciding this time period. One of them is for pragmatic reasons. Teacher agency studies date back to a long history, but language teacher agency studies have around a three-
decade background. Therefore, it would be more practical and situated to focus on the later years of the research. The other reason to decide this time period is academic. That is, in early 2000s, Borg’s (2003) synthesis of teacher cognition, Bandura’s (2009) comprehensive study done in early 2000s on the concept of agency determined the time period of this review. The second inclusion criterion was that it had to be a research done in a context in which the instructional language is English. Therefore, the articles aiming to investigate languages, except for English, were all excluded. As the third inclusion criterion, we included articles investigating ESL/EFL student teachers’, pre-service or in-service teachers’ agency.

To this end, the research on agency of teaching branches such as class teachers, early childhood, music, and inclusive education teachers were not included in the review. The final criterion was that the articles had to include investigating agency of teachers from non-English speaking countries. Therefore, the English teachers who are native English language speakers were also excluded. The process of inclusion and exclusion is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Data extraction**

With the aim of identifying published empirical articles for this systematic review, I thoroughly searched the databases over the period from April to June, 2022. 410 studies to be eligible were identified through Piri database search engine (Müngen, 2020). Using “teacher agency”, “language teacher agency”, and “professional agency” keywords, literature search was conducted through Piri. Müngen (2020) identifies Piri as stated: “Piri is an enterprise-specific discovery tool focused on search. Piri analyses and lists the results by scanning many databases on the researched topic for academics, researchers and students. It aims to find content related to modern search algorithms supported by artificial intelligence. Thanks to the databases that your institution subscribes to and wide open access content, your users meet all their needs and encourage research with their user-friendly screens.”

![Figure 1. Flowchart of Study Selection Process](image-url)
Piri Discovery Tool, an academic search engine, is not only connected to digital databases, it is also integrated with university library catalogue, and it displays the results of university library’s printed publications. As the reviewer, I am one of the university academics, so the registration and log in to the platform is guaranteed automatically with the email provided by the university, such that it was possible to reach all articles in a well-organised web page. As this platform makes the research and review globally easier, it is probable that this web tool will become a practical place for researchers looking for research papers and other intellectual materials from all over the world. Although Piri’s interface is in Turkish, its index contains research papers in English as well as all other languages as long as the key words are searched accordingly. The rationale behind this preference is that this platform allows me to save my search list and come back to it later, as well as set up my own workplace so that the publications can easily be analysed, cited and shared. At the end of the selection process given in Figure 1, I excluded 398 articles that did not meet four determined inclusion criteria. Figure 2 highlights the process of data extraction.

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2. The Linear Process of Data Screening.**

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Considering the research foci, 12 articles were included based on the research perspective they adopted. So, the articles were classified into two categories: whether they adopt a Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) or one of the non-CDST perspective. A description of the articles is given in Table 1 and Table 2. I used Microsoft Excel to create a self-developed data extraction instrument that includes the author(s) of the study, the sample, the country in which the study was done, the method as well as the data collection tool, analyses, results, the database that hosts, and the journal that published the study. Finally, as the primary target of the analysis, the research perspective of the articles was included. 4 out of 12 articles were reported to adopt a CDST perspective although some of them did not explicitly mentioned the CDST perspective. Note that, as aforementioned, only empirical studies are included in this review. The distribution of CDST and non-CDST studies is given in Figure 3.
Figure 3. The Distribution of CDST and Non-CDST Perspective Studies Based on Years (2000-2022)

Results with Studies Adopting Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) Perspective
In the study, 12 empirical articles that investigated language teacher agency were identified (see Table 1). Analysing the results of the studies chronologically, Hiver and Whitehead (2018), first of all, targeted to investigate what role the phenomenological expressions of teacher agency in instructional practices have in the construction of a teacher's identity. They stated that their main goal was to see if and how the manner in which teachers exerted agency in their pedagogical practice could provide insight into their ongoing professional identity development. They reported their findings in two developmental pathways. In the first pathway, as they claimed, “autobiographical reasoning primes a transformation narrative” (p.75). In the second pathway, they pointed out that “autobiographical reasoning reinforces a contamination narrative” (p.75). In the final stage, they concluded that teacher agency and teacher identity requires new ways of conceptualizing, and CDST is an appropriate method for challenging the existing assumptions. Another article included in the review was published by Wallen and Tormey (2019). This collaborative action research one in Ireland with six English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) aimed to understand how the participants' perceptions of agency changed over the course of the dialogic investigation by applying a collaborative action research. Consequently, they concluded that, within the context of a certain ecological and dynamic setting, teachers recognised their own agency. Finally, Rostami and HosseinYousefi (2020) and Ruan et al. (2020), endeavoured to investigate the dynamic entanglement between teachers' self-perceptions and their agency in educating English major students, and how they enact agency in their teaching environment. As a result, they found that teachers tend to exercise their agency in an environment where they can enhance their teaching effectiveness. Quite similar to Hiver and Whitehead's (2018) results, they concluded that teachers develop their professional agency through dialogic feedback and the critical incidents they have experienced.

Results with Studies Adopting a Non-CDST Perspective
In our study, eight out of 12 articles were found to take a different research perspective from CDST one. Also, all but one of the studies (Prošić-Santovac, & Radović, 2018) used a qualitative method. This only study adopted a mixed method approach. All other included ones were done in a qualitative approach. To begin, Feryok’s (2012) study targeted to find out how experiences and actions outside the classroom affect language teacher agency, so they concluded that individual agentive can have a positive effect on local
social activity. Additionally, the study conducted by Rudolph (2013) tried to investigate the challenges of one of the EFL student, scholar and teacher trainer’s trajectories in agency construction. Also, the study done by Tao and Gao (2017) aimed to find out how teacher agency functioned during the fundamental curricular change in China. Another similar study done by FengTeng (2019) investigated how student teachers enact agentic behaviour in an EFL context. The results of these last three mentioned studies have a lot in common, and propose similar propositions: these three studies pointed out that teachers’ agency is situated in their trajectories during teaching as well as advocating an interaction between agency and teacher identity. The other four studies (Gao & Cui, 2022; Namgung, 2020; Prošić-Santovac, & Radović, 2018; YangınEkşi et al., 2019) received individual results, such that they found that there is a complex relationship between teachers’ educational perceptions and their online teaching practices (Gao & Cui, 2022); they limit their pedagogical behaviours as they feel inadequate and overwhelmed (Namgung, 2020); teachers took advantage of every opportunity to influence students (Prošić-Santovac, & Radović, 2018); and three issues, self-related, mentor-related, student-related, supported or distracted teachers’ agency. Table 2 gives the final set of included studies that empirically analyse language teacher agency based on non-CDST perspective. To conclude, 67 articles were read, and 12 empirical studies met the inclusion criteria aforementioned. The results showed that most of the studies have been done in a qualitative approach, which utilize interviews, reflection reports, narrative inquiry, reports, lesson plans, and classroom observation notes. Additionally, four out of 12 articles have adopted a CDST perspective, which is overwhelmed by non-CDST ones.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this systematic review show that the majority of studies constitute the non-CDST perspectives and qualitative methodologies in language teacher agency research. The experiences and behaviours outside of the classroom, teacher identity, as well as the difficulties and trajectories of teaching, have all been highlighted as factors that affect teacher agency in these research. It’s worth noting that these studies also discovered that critical episodes and dialogic feedback might increase teacher agency, which can be constrained by teachers’ emotions of inadequacy in their practices and overload by teaching labour.

A small number of studies, however, have chosen a CDST viewpoint, which emphasises the complex and dynamic character of teacher agency and how it relates to teacher identity. According to these studies, collaborative action research and autobiographical reasoning seem to be crucial tools for comprehending how teacher agency and identity emerge. They also promote new conceptualizations of teacher agency and identity.

Overall, these results indicate that a more dynamic and complex definition of teacher agency is required, one that considers both the personal and environmental aspects that influence it in some way. A CDST viewpoint might offer a practical foundation for improving our comprehension of this complex phenomenon. However, more investigation is required to examine the connection between CDST and language teacher agency in various settings and with various audiences.

Implications and Future Research

This systematic literature review proposes two primary implications for language teacher education and all the stakeholders. First, teacher education programs at universities can commence teacher agency development implications and practices not later than during practicum process since agency development could be more challenging during in-service period. Because this in this period, teachers have to deal with emotional and professional
challenges of teaching in their first years of practice. Secondly, teaching is an emotion-laden profession, which is complex and dynamic (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Language teachers are not exceptional in this point. Therefore, investigating the factors influencing agency, the importance of agency in language teaching communities, and the role of an agentic EFL teacher requires a complex and dynamic research perspective. In line with this, more studies can be done by adopting complex dynamic systems theory perspective.

Limitation

In order to search for the studies done on language teacher agency, Piri search engine was used. Although it can retrieve millions of academic works from global databases, it might have missed some studies. A manual search or a search on a similar or more benefitted platform can also be utilised to ensure the inclusion of all related studies. Secondly, an exclusive selection of articles that explicitly use the term teacher agency might have also limited the scope of works identified in this review. Including theses, books, and related sources that include agency might have narrowed the scope.

REFERENCES


## Appendix 1. Final set of included studies that empirically analyse language teacher agency (CDST).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample (N)</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Method/Tool</th>
<th>Analyses</th>
<th>Principal Results</th>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Journal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruan, X., Zheng, X., &amp; Toom, A. (2020)</td>
<td>3 EFL instructors</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Qualitative-semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and journal entries</td>
<td>Thematic analysis- MAXQDA</td>
<td>Teachers tend to exercise their agency in various meaning-making efforts, such as analysing, planning, acting, and reflecting, to enhance their teaching effectiveness in the classroom.</td>
<td>Science Direct</td>
<td>Teaching and Teacher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallen, M., &amp; Tormey, R. (2019)</td>
<td>6 English as an additional language (EAL) teachers</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Collaborative action research</td>
<td>Inductive and deductive analysis (NVivo 7, 9)</td>
<td>Teachers recognised their own agency within the context of a specific ecological and temporal setting</td>
<td>Science Direct</td>
<td>Teaching and Teacher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rostami, F., &amp; HosseiniYoosefi, M. (2020)</td>
<td>15 novice English teachers</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Qualitative-structured and focus group interviews</td>
<td>Thematic analysis- Open, axial, selective coding</td>
<td>Teachers practice agency employing dialogic feedback, positioning, and critical incidents. Teachers made a learning community to make the right decision, predict future incidents, and develop their professional agency.</td>
<td>Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)</td>
<td>Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiver, P., &amp; E.K. Whitehead, G. (2011)</td>
<td>4 Korean English Language Teachers</td>
<td>Sought Korea</td>
<td>Qualitative data of classroom observations, reflective journal entries, one in-depth interview</td>
<td>Thematic analysis- NVivo 11</td>
<td>Teachers exercised agency in their classroom practice as a way of deliberately enacting their individual values, beliefs, and goals.</td>
<td>Science Direct</td>
<td>System</td>
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</table>
Appendix 2. Final set of included studies that empirically analyse language teacher agency (non-CDST).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample (N)</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Method/Tool</th>
<th>Analyses</th>
<th>Principal Results</th>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Research Perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oba, Y., &amp; So, Y. (2022)</td>
<td>4 EFL teachers</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Qualitative semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Inductive and deductive reasoning, Nvivo6</td>
<td>The data revealed a complex relationship between teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and their online teaching practices</td>
<td>SAGE</td>
<td>BEC Journal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam, H., Moon, J., &amp; Paek, H. (2020)</td>
<td>15 secondary English teachers</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Qualitative-LI semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
<td>Teachers exercised their own pedagogical behaviours due to their own sense of mission, and in response to structural requirements, and test scores</td>
<td>Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)</td>
<td>Asian Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yüksel, G., Yılmaz, E., Akyürek, A., &amp; Çavuş, D. (2019)</td>
<td>11 ELT Teachers</td>
<td>Turkey, Portugal and Poland</td>
<td>Qualitative reflection reports</td>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>The reflection reports displayed supporting and detracting factors about professional agency as self-related, context-related, and classroom and student-related issues</td>
<td>Taylor and Francis</td>
<td>Teachers' and Teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feng, T. &amp; (2015)</td>
<td>4 ESL student teachers</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Qualitative-interviews, school documents, participants’ narratives, in-depth interviews, and lesson plans</td>
<td>Thematic analysis, Grounded theory analysis</td>
<td>The different development trajectories during the teaching practices were found to be related to teacher autonomy, teacher agency, and teacher identity</td>
<td>SpringerLink</td>
<td>English Teaching &amp; Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prodić, Šturtar, D., &amp; Radović, D. (2018)</td>
<td>2 EFL teachers at kindergarten</td>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>Mixed-methods study, life-history interviews, re-interviewing</td>
<td>Statistics, Coding</td>
<td>Teachers used any opportunity to influence the learners</td>
<td>Taylor and Francis</td>
<td>Language, Culture and Curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tso, J., &amp; Yen, X. (2017)</td>
<td>5 ESP teachers</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Qualitative-ethnographic study, life-history interviews, re-interviewing</td>
<td>Initial thematic analysis, cross-case analysis</td>
<td>Teachers used any opportunity to influence the learners</td>
<td>ScienceDirect</td>
<td>Teaching and Teacher Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raudphn, Y. (2012)</td>
<td>1 English-speaking graduate student, scholar, and teacher trainer</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Qualitative-narrative inquiry</td>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>By situating teachers’ agency in their individual professional trajectories, this study conceptualizes interaction of teacher agency and identity commitment to professional development during curriculum reform.</td>
<td>Taylor and Francis</td>
<td>Critical Inquiry in Language Studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feryok, A. (2012)</td>
<td>1 Armenian EFL teacher</td>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>Qualitative-email interviews, oral interviews, and classroom observations</td>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>The article concludes by suggesting that individual agency actions can contribute to local social activity.</td>
<td>Wiley Online Library</td>
<td>The Modern Language Journal</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>