

Personal and Contextual Factors Influencing Teacher Agency in Overcoming Students' Learning Difficulties

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Abstract: Research demonstrates that the extent to which teacher agency is achieved is influenced by personal and contextual conditions of possibility and constraints. This study identifies personal and contextual factors that influence teacher agency in overcoming student learning difficulties. Although there are many studies showing factors influencing teacher agency in various contexts, little research, if any, has been done on personal and contextual factors influencing teacher agency in overcoming students' learning difficulties in the Indonesian higher education. This research filled the gap by examining the factors influencing teacher agency in overcoming student learning difficulties at a postgraduate English department at a government university in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. This research is a case study involving four (4) university teachers who teach at the department as the research participants who were selected purposively. Data of the study were collected through in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interview was employed in which open and close-ended questions about personal and contextual factors influencing teacher agency in helping students with learning difficulties were given. The data from the interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis. Results demonstrated that a number of personal and contextual factors enabled and constrained teacher agency enactment when overcoming student difficulties in learning. Personal factors include sound pedagogical knowledge and teaching experience. Contextual factors involve having collaborative relationships among university teachers and students, and school management. As teachers work under varying constraints even within the same institution, further research needs to be conducted to uncover more factors influencing teacher agency.

Keywords: *Personal Factor, Contextual Factor, Teacher Agency, Students' Learning Difficulty*

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INTRODUCTION

Every student needs various supports to help them with learning difficulties so that they can achieve learning goals. One effort that teachers can do to help students overcome their learning difficulties is by implementing agency. With a strong of agency, teachers are devoted to coping with educational challenges (Molla and Nola, 2020). In the discourse of teacher professional development, agency has been defined as a capacity to act and making decisions motivated by the need for self-efficacy in the working environment (Miller et al., 2020; Molla & Nola, 2020). Biesta et al. (2017) however, have claimed that agency is not a capacity that is fixed and internally possessed by individual teachers, but its is achieved through their active engagement in particular contexts. Indeed, Ali and Hamid (2018) and Lestari (2020) have shown that English teachers enact their agency even when they do not have the necessary capacity and when they are morally and professionally responsible to readjust their actions in response to the changing nature of situation to ensure students' learning.

To understand how teacher agency can be achieved, Priestley et al. (2015) formulate an ecological approach of teacher agency covering three dimensions of teacher agency namely *iterational*, *practical-evaluative* and *projective* dimensions. By *iterational dimension*, teacher agency is developed from previous teaching experiences, professional development, and past thoughts and actions. *Practical-evaluative dimension* suggests acting in the current situation using practical and evaluative judgment. *Projective dimension* suggests intentional action with a view to creating change in the future. This ecological model of teacher agency draws on the life and on professional history of teachers. It distinguishes between cultural, structural, and material aspects that influence current action, and have short and long-term potential for action. Under the ecological theory, teacher agency implies teachers' active involvement with and responsiveness to the contextual conditions and teachers' assertive, reflective and intentional action.

There is a growing body of research showing how teachers exercised agency in facilitating students' learning. Studies by Ali and Hamid (2018), Jenkin (2020), Lestari (2020) have shown that when teachers feel confident in their professional and pedagogical abilities they are able to take actions that allow them to teach in a more effective way according to students' need. Interviewing 119 faculty members in Spain universities, Morina (2019) showed that university teachers exercised their agency in helping students with disability by integrating the emotional-affective component of teaching and learning. The study reported that under this emotionally engaging curriculum, the university teachers provided a lot of actively engaging peer interactions; ongoing assessment and feedback; personal tutoring and good rapport with students. By doing so, not only were the students' learning difficulties reduced but also the students' learning progress could be easily monitored. A similar case has been found in Indonesia where English teachers used a collaborative learning strategy to help students at the secondary level develop their motivation in learning English (Muslim et al., 2020). The study also found that teachers exercised their agency to increase the student's learning motivation by making use of native cultural values and culture. Davis and Winter's (2019) study on

students' experience in an online doctoral program in a private university in the USA suggested the need for collaboration among teachers for a better agency in helping students face difficulties in learning English. In this collaboration, they can share materials and activities, and discuss various approaches to help them define and redefine the pedagogical practices that they have previously practiced.

As individual teachers have the potential and opportunities to exercise and reach agency within their school or educational setting, it is important to understand factors affecting teachers to achieve agency. [Gidden \(1984\)](#), with his structuralist view, identified that knowledge, expertise, influence, and structural conditions contribute to agency achievement. [Bandura \(1997\)](#), drawing on his social interactional theory mentioned that personal factors (e.g. knowledge level, self-esteem, motivation, and behavior) and contextual factors (e.g. school environment) all influence teacher agency. Confirming the structuralist view and interactional view, a study by [Molla and Nola \(2020\)](#) found that subjective conditions such as personal values, teaching experience, professional disposition, and objective contexts such as policy expectations, institutional regulations, and norms influence the achievement of teacher agency. Using the Triadic Reciprocity Framework Core Agency Concepts (TRFCAC) model, [Jenkin \(2020\)](#) found similar factors influencing teacher agency achievement (e.g. teacher rapport with leaders and colleagues, school operational, educational practices, and culture). Meanwhile, [Miller's \(2020\)](#) study in an inclusive education context, identified teachers' instructional strategies suitable to students' needs, collaboration with school personnel, and family-school community as contributing factors enabling teacher agency.

However, individuals can be activated or constrained by their environment ([Bandura, 1997](#); [Priestley et al., 2015](#)). Because this also applies to teachers, teachers are only able to achieve agency within the boundaries of the school where they work ([Giddens, 1984](#)). Thus, it can be said that personal factors such as belief, confidence, pedagogic competence, professional qualification, teaching experience, and contextual factors such as leadership in schools or institutions, education policies, collaboration with colleagues, and other institutions affect the achievement of teacher agency.

While there are many studies demonstrating factors influencing teacher agency in various contexts, there is a lack of literature related to what personal and contextual factors enable and constrain teacher agency in helping students overcome their learning difficulties in the Indonesian higher education context. The goal of the present study was to identify personal and contextual factors affecting teacher agency at a postgraduate English department at a government university in West Nusa Tenggara. As teachers work under different constraints even within the same institution, this study brings an implication that further research needs to be conducted to uncover more personal and contextual factors influencing teachers agency.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative approach is used in this study because this study aims to identify and provide detailed descriptions of both personal and contextual factors that influence the implementation of teacher agencies in helping to overcome the learning difficulties of the postgraduate students of the English Department at a government university in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. According to [Creswell and Creswell \(2018\)](#) in order to obtain a richer picture of one unit and bound system, such as learning English in the classroom, a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis needs to be used. In this way, a case will be explained more objectively from the point of view of the research subject and not from the point of view of the researcher.

Because this research intends to identify, describe and explain the factors that influence the implementation of a teacher agency in helping the 'locality' student learning difficulties inherent in them, it needs to be examined carefully. Although local in scope, teachers do not always live in the same world: they live in different contexts, situations, and problems with different teaching and learning activities and that are different every day, so the case study is applied to this research.

As [Creswell and Creswell \(2018\)](#) emphasize, a case study investigates what processes occur in a given event and what relationships exist between processes and events within a specific and limited location. A particular program or school is chosen for a particular study, according to [Merriam \(2015\)](#), because it has a system bound in that it has "distinctiveness, uniqueness, success, and so on" which deserves to be carefully scrutinized in detail as a unit. analysis. As a research design, case studies are very suitable for research in implementation and educational activities because they allow researchers to dig deeper into the object of study for a richer and more comprehensive description. In addition, it allows the researcher to evaluate, with maximum flexibility, the information gathered from the various subjects in the case study. In this case, this research focuses on the description and analysis of the factors that influence the agency of teachers in overcoming the learning difficulties of postgraduate students of English department at a government university in West Nusa Tenggara

Population and Research Sample

The population of this study was all teachers of the postgraduate English Department in a government University in West Nusa Tenggara Indonesia comprising fourteen (14) university teachers. There were four (4) teachers, Udin, Yeny, Rahman and Ahmad (pseudonyms) who were involved as the sample of the study, taken purposively. The reasons for selecting them as the research sample was due to their difference in age, length of teaching experience at the university, and rank of an academic position. The participant demographics is shown in the [table 1](#). below.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age (Approx)	Teaching experience	Rank of academic position
Udin	Male	56+	25+ years	Professor
Yeny	Female	50+	17+ years	Associate Professor
Rahman	Male	47+	10+ years	Assistant Professor
Ahmad	Male	41	7+ years	Lecturer

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with teachers to collect data to understand teacher agency in English language classrooms. As [Silverman \(2018\)](#) claims, in-depth interviews are important for gathering information about human thoughts, experiences, and perspectives unobservable through other means of data collection. For these interviews, semi-structure interview technique was used in which a prepared list of questions was followed and sequenced in a varied way depending on the interview situation. The questions used in the interview were both open and closed-ended. The interview was audio-recorded. The interview questions include what personal and contextual factors affect their agency in helping the students face their learning difficulties and how those factors can enhance teacher agency in coping with the students' learning difficulties.

Data Analysis Technique

Content analysis was employed in this study. Relevant information in the transcribed data was coded by manually and digitally highlighting them in a Stabilo with different colors: (a). personal factors: red; (b) contextual factors: blue. The codes were then cross-tabulated in a working table. The next step was classifying the codes under common categories and subcategories. After that, the categories and subcategories were described by defining them and by providing examples for each. Finally, the findings were then explained by providing a rationale why personal and contextual factors can enhance teacher agency in coping with students' learning difficulties, and by communicating the findings with those of other studies

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, findings include results of in-depth interviews with teachers. They cover a number of personal and contextual factors enabling teachers to exercise agency in helping students with learning difficulties. The result of the interviews was analyzed by qualitative content analysis.

Personal Factors

Results of the interview suggest a number of personal factors influencing teacher agency. Personal factors include sound pedagogical knowledge and teaching experience.

Pedagogical Knowledge

Participants felt that their sound pedagogical knowledge strongly contributed to their achievement of teacher agency in helping students cope with learning difficulties. Participants often related this pedagogical knowledge with classroom management, lesson planning, teaching strategies, and assessment. This specific knowledge allowed them to actively respond to some challenges facing students during the teaching and learning process. Udin perceived that his ability to achieve agency in dealing with students learning difficulties was supported by his knowledge in classroom management related to motivating the students individually or in groups in the classroom. For example, he expressed: “low learning motivation is one-factor causing students’ learning difficulties. ...making it hard for them to be active learners. Motivating them to be actively involved in learning is then very important. Providing them with individual, pair-work, and group work really works here.” While Udin confidently felt that these varied activities could be motivating, Yeny felt that her ability to build a good rapport with students as one important aspect of classroom management could enhance her teacher agency achievement in coping with students’ learning difficulties. Yeny stated: “Students like friendly teachers, and many students say that I’m one of them. Well yes, I think they’re right. That’s why I can build a good relationship with them, which is good as this makes it easier for me to identify which areas of students’ learning difficulties and to provide appropriate help.

All the participating teachers also asserted that their ability in lesson planning supported them to achieve their teacher agency. Rahman and Ahmad expressed their sense of teacher agency achievement in dealing with students’ learning difficulties. For example, most of the students’ learning difficulties are related to lack of motivation”, and anxiety as well as reading and writing. We, teachers, need to help them. I shared aspects of my lesson plan with them. I show them what topics will be covered, learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment. In so doing, they can anticipate the challenges from the very beginning (Rahman). “ I feel really good sharing what topics should be covered during the whole semester with my students and what learning objectives they need to achieve, so the students can anticipate problems that could potentially develop in learning ” (Ahmad).

Regarding assessing students, most of the teachers acknowledged that they gave both oral and written feedback to students’ written work and oral presentations. They believed that by giving comments and corrections on the areas of weaknesses, the students were better informed on how to minimize their learning problems. However, most of the teachers admitted that they had a lack of practice in giving ongoing assessments constrained them to achieve their agency in coping with their students’ learning difficulties. For example, Rahman said; “Honestly, I am not quite concerned with ongoing assessments, while I know that it’s quite useful to help students to focus on their weak areas of study. I am not really good at designing ongoing assessment tools and evaluation criteria. I’m not well-trained on this case.”

Teaching Experience

Different from the findings related to pedagogical knowledge, participants reported varying degrees of teacher agency achievement depending on their years of teaching experience. Udin, with twenty years of teaching experience, showed high degrees of teacher agency achievement in helping students' learning difficulties. He believed that this is because of the number of opportunities he had in dealing with different learners with different learning styles. Similarly, Yeny, in her seventeen years of teaching, expressed a high level of teacher agency achievement, especially when dealing with students' difficulties in academic reading and writing. She said that a lot of meetings helping students with learning difficulties enhanced her knowledge of the process of dealing with individual students' learning difficulties. Slightly different from Yeny, Rahman, who has ten years of teaching experience, felt that he had lower-level agency achievement dealing with students' difficulties. He asserted; "I need some more years to be more confident in taking appropriate teaching strategies help to reduce students' learning difficulties. Even sometimes I still set the learning goals which did not with what I felt the students required. So I need more years of teaching experience." Similarly, Ahmad, the one with the fewest years of teaching experience expressed his low level of agency achievement in dealing with students' learning difficulties due to fewer amounts of meetings with students. He even felt disempowered when deciding on anticipated learning problems in his lesson plan.

Contextual Factors Influencing Teacher Agency

The findings revealed the data regarding contextual factors affecting teacher agency. The teachers suggested that their teacher agency is affected by collaborative relationships with teacher colleagues and school management.

Collaboration With Teacher Colleagues

All teachers in this study perceived that they could collaborate with most of the other teachers in the department which enabled them to achieve agency in coping with their students' learning difficulties. For example, Yeny expressed: "We really support each other. Communication between teachers here is really good. We don't feel reluctant to be criticized related to teaching material, activities, and assessment". Ahmad also highlighted that there was a good collaboration in team teaching, including in planning lessons among teachers, which led to professional learning and enhanced the level of teacher agency. Rahman confirmed this by stating that during communication with other teachers, he received support from his senior in the form of advice or suggestions and new ideas dealing with the teaching and learning process including dealing with students' learning problems.

This type of collaboration and support enabled these teachers to achieve agency within the teaching and learning process.

School Management

School management also supported the achievement of teacher agency in dealing with students' learning difficulties. Udin said; "this department has

supportive school management...they're really open. The management also regularly provided teachers with a number of workshops and training related to contemporary English language teaching and methods to encourage teachers to implement innovative teaching. The teachers viewed this as support to enhance their teacher agency in helping students with learning difficulties.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to identify the personal and contextual factors that affect teacher agency in dealing with students' learning difficulties. The personal factors influencing teachers to achieve agency included pedagogical knowledge and teaching experience. The contextual factors that the teachers perceived to influence teacher agency in this study were collaborative relationships among teacher colleagues and school management.

The teachers expressed a high degree of teacher agency in coping with students' learning difficulties. They believe they have sufficient pedagogical knowledge to help students with learning difficulties. For example, one teacher was capable of providing engaging and varied group activities so that the students could have effective and meaningful learning. Another teacher showed a good rapport with the students to enable students to feel good when being informed what to do to cope with their learning difficulties. This study then echoes [Miller's et al. \(2020\)](#) study which demonstrated that teachers' knowledge in providing pedagogical practices suitable to students' needs enhanced teacher agency.

Length of teaching experience also influences teacher agency in dealing with students' learning difficulties. This study found that teachers with longer teaching experience were more capable and confident in helping students with learning difficulties. The teachers' abilities and confidence in providing effective teaching strategies and material increase through the length of teaching experience. This study is, therefore, in line with [Molla and Nolan's \(2020\)](#) study demonstrating that teaching experience is an important factor contributing to developing teacher agency. This study highlights the importance of providing more teaching experience if teacher agency in coping with students' learning difficulties is to be enhanced.

The findings of the study also demonstrated that teacher agency increased through collaboration with other teachers. This study is in line with other studies ([Davis and Winter, 2019](#); [Miller's et al., 2020](#)) which found that teachers' agentic action would be more effective when teachers collaboratively plan and design teaching material and activities with other teachers. Teachers would be more confident in teaching and dealing with students' learning problems as they have received ideas, advice, and suggestions from other teachers. This study also in line with other studies ([Molla & Nola, 2020](#); [jenkin, 2020](#)) that supportive school management is another crucial contextual factor enabling agency found in this study. This study showed that the school management provided teachers with relative autonomy over the planning and implementation of lessons and learning activities that accommodate students' learning. This study highlights that teachers experience a higher level of agency when supported by school administrators and management.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the personal and contextual factors affecting the achievement of teacher agency in helping students with learning difficulties. Based on the findings of this study, personal factors (pedagogical knowledge, teaching experience) and contextual factors (collaboration with other teachers, and support from school management) influence teachers to engage in pedagogical and collaborative efforts to better facilitate students to cope with learning difficulties in the higher education context. Despite teachers' varying levels of teacher agency due to the difference in academic position and lengths of years of teaching experience, their agentic actions were aimed at helping students with learning difficulties. This study would therefore argue that teacher agency would be better understood as actionable, individual, and collective. In order to achieve high levels of teacher agency, this study suggests that teachers need to be actively involved in professional development training and programs, collaborating with other teachers and sharing ideas for better teaching to accommodate individual students' needs

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